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Youths in non-military roles in an armed  
opposition group on the Burmese-Thai  
border

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2012

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of Development Studies, School of Oriental and  
African Studies, University of London

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how and why youths participate in non-military roles in the KNU, an armed opposition group along the Burmese-Thai border which has been in conflict with the Burmese state for over sixty years. It analyses the ways in which the group's internal youth policies and programmes, as well as external factors influence the construction of a youth category and the particular roles youths take on in the group. It also examines how youth participation redefines youth roles and influences inter-generational relations and hierarchies. Finally, it considers how the KNU's changing political and strategic goals affect and are in turn affected by youth activities.

This thesis addresses three main questions. First, how is 'youth' defined and understood in the KNU and why are they so defined? Second, why do youths take on non-military roles in the KNU and what factors influence their career trajectory within the movement? Third, what is the purpose of youth non-military roles in the KNU and how are these roles shaped by the KNU's political and strategic goals?

Whilst most writing on youth and conflict is concerned with the role of youth as armed belligerents, this study focuses on their non military roles. It adopts an actor oriented approach to show the interaction between the micro-level processes influencing youth mobilisation and participation, and wider contextual factors that shape and constrain individual decision making. These include the changing nature of the conflict, processes of state formation, violent non state resistance, and evolving organisational adaptation by the KNU and its leadership, all of which frame youth political action. A fine grained analysis of youth roles and activities provides a lens to examine broader changes in the armed group's non-military operations and strategies as it adapts to changes in external geopolitical and local conditions and seeks to replace declining black market revenues with external INGO funding. This study aims to contribute to the emerging literature on youths' engagement in armed opposition groups and the changing operations and political strategies of armed groups from the perspective of the youth cohort.

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# Map of Burma



Map 1 Administrative Map of States and Divisions in Burma (TNI, 2011)

## Abbreviations

ABSDF	All Burma Students Democratic Front
AFPFL	Anti Fascist People's Freedom League
AMI	Aide Médicale Internationale
ANC	African National Congress
AVI	Australian Volunteers International
BEWEG	Burma Environmental Working Group
BGF	Border Guard Force
BPHWT	Back Pack Health Workers Team
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEC	Central Executive Committee
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDKP	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People
COHRE	Centre on Housing Rights and Eviction
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CPPCR	Committee for the Promotion and Protection of Child Rights
DAB	Democratic Alliance of Burma
DEP	Distance Education Programme
DfID	Department for International Development
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
ENC	Ethnic Nationalities Council
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia)
FBR	Free Burma Rangers
FMLN	Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)
GONGO	Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation
HRDU	Human Rights Documentation Unit
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IT	Information Technology

KCO	Karen Central Organisation
KED	Karen Education Department
KEWU	Karen Education Workers Union
KHRG	Karen Human Rights Group
KIC	Karen Information Centre
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNA	Karen National Association
KNDO	Karen National Defence Organisation
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KNU	Karen National Union
KNUP	Karen National Unity Party
KORD	Karen Office for Relief and Development
KPF	Karen Peace Force
KRCEE	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity
KSCB	Karen State Coordinating Body
KSEAG	Karen State Education Assistance Group
KSNG	Karen Students Network Group
KUSG	Karen University Students Group
KWO	Karen Women Organisation
KYLMTC	Karen Youth Leadership and Management Training Centre
KYO	Karen Youth Organisation
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MA	Master of Arts
MPU	Members of Parliament Union
NCUB	National Council of the Union of Burma
NDD	Network for Democracy and Development
NDF	National Democratic Front
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NLD	National League for Democracy
NLD-LA	National League for Democracy – Liberated Areas
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NRA	National Resistance Army
ODA	Official Development Assistance
PRB	Population Reference Bureau
RUF	Revolutionary United Front
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council

SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSA	Shan State Army
SYCB	Students and Youth Congress of Burma
TBBC	Thailand Burma Border Consortium
TNI	Transnational Institute
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United National Development Programme
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
USDA	Union Solidarity and Development Association
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army
VSO	Voluntary Service Overseas

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

This thesis examines how and why youths participate in non-military roles in an armed opposition group. It focuses on the case of the Karen National Union (KNU), which is active along the Burmese-Thai border and has been in conflict with the Burmese state for over sixty years. It analyses how external factors, as well as the group's internal youth policies and political culture, influence youth roles in the group. It also examines how youth participation redefines youth roles, influences inter-generational relations and hierarchies within the movement and interacts with the KNU's changing political and strategic goals.

In contrast to the predominant literature on youth and conflict, which tends to focus on youths as armed belligerents, this study considers their non-military roles. It adopts an actor-oriented approach to examine the interaction between micro-level processes influencing youth mobilisation and participation, and wider structural and institutional factors shaping individual decision making. These broader contextual factors include the changing nature of conflict, processes of state formation, violent non-state resistance, and evolving organisational adaptation by the KNU and its leadership. A fine grained analysis of youth roles and activities provides a lens to examine broader changes in the group's non-military operations and strategies as it adapts to changing external conditions and seeks to replace declining black market revenues with INGO funding.

This study aims to contribute and add to the emerging literature on youths' engagement in armed opposition groups by explaining youth participation patterns in non-military roles and the complexities of constructing a youth cohort in armed groups. It also seeks to contribute to the literature on conflict and armed groups by adding a perspective on the changing operations and political strategies of armed opposition groups from the youth cohort, rather than military or political elites.

This introduction to the thesis begins by setting out the research rationale and the research questions. It then outlines the research design and explains the key influences on this study. Finally, this chapter outlines the structure and logic of the following chapters.

### **1 Research rationale**

My interest in this subject stems from a twenty-month work placement in 2003-04 as an Organisational Development Adviser within the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) (one of the KNU's mass organisations and its youth wing) in Mae Sot, Thailand. This was organised by Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) as a result of a previous successful VSO

volunteer placement with the Karen Refugee Committee. VSO aimed to build the organisational capacity of local organisations to manage the delivery of services to the refugees in the context of a large refugee case load on the Thai-Burma border.

My period of employment with the KYO in 2003-04, and subsequently with the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) in 2006-07, illuminated a number of contradictions in the structure and operations of the KYO since it was simultaneously a mass organisation and youth wing of the parent political party, a social network for youths and a local community-based organisation (CBO) involved in youth and child social work. Trying to understand the complexities of such a multi-faceted organisation drew me into numerous discussions with KYO staff about the variegated and multiple roles of the youth cohort within the KNU's structures and the different routes in (and out) of the organisation that staff had taken. Reflecting the KNU's multiple spaces of operation, some staff had come from conflict zones, had witnessed severe human rights abuses and had first joined as soldiers before moving in to a non-military role in the KYO, for example. Others had become refugees and joined the organisation after finishing high school in a refugee camp. Still others were urban activists who had made a conscious decision, sometimes against their parents' wishes, to join the movement and voluntarily migrated in to exile for ideological reasons. There were clearly different reasons for joining the organisation and different ideas of what the organisation actually was, although there appeared to be a strong socialising discourse mediating differences.

The most striking aspect of the KNU, from the perspective of an outside observer in Thailand, was its large non-military apparatus in the form of quasi-governmental departments and mass organisations. These had complex relationships with the parent party, other Burmese exile groups, Thai officials and international aid agencies and their activities appeared to be significant to the KNU and its political agenda. The relative ease of access to the KNU's non-military structures in Thailand seemed to present an ideal opportunity to study the micro-dynamics of non-military roles and operations within an armed opposition group engaged in a protracted conflict with the Burmese state. My familiarity with the youth cohort also presented an ideal opportunity to study the internal operations of an armed opposition group from below, providing a counter-point to the many other studies of armed groups which focus on elite leadership. As Jabri (1996:21-22) notes, accounts of war tend to focus on "leaders as opposed to the led" and the causes of violent human action as opposed to non-violent support for armed groups. And as she goes on to argue, in order to understand war (and peace) better, there is a need to appreciate non-combatants' willingness to support war.

### ***Key influences on this study and its position within the existing literature***

My interest in understanding youth mobilisation for non-violent forms of participation in an armed opposition group led me to a broad body of literature on youth participation in a variety of armed groups. My exploration of this literature revealed a variety of explanations for youth participation in armed groups and diverse conceptions of the term 'youth'. While many scholars adopted the UN definition of youth (the 15-24 age range), this frequently diverged from local interpretations of the term in armed opposition groups. The idea of a fixed, universal definition of youth fails to capture processes through which 'youth' may be (re)defined and instrumentalised in different contexts; and how a 'youth' category may be created by political leaders for political expediency (Parsons, 2004:49; McIntyre and Weiss, 2003). For instance, the reasons for why armed opposition groups create a political youth wing and construct a particular 'youth' category were not dealt with adequately in the existing literature.

Writing on youth recruitment in to armed opposition groups tends to focus on military mobilisation rather than non violent or civil roles within armed groups. This literature identifies an array of external, organisational and individual factors influencing youth recruitment in to an armed group, but it is largely silent about youths' non-military careers and why they may stay or leave an armed opposition group.

This study draws upon Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice and loyalty to examine why youths may stay or leave the KNU. Armed groups are forms of social actors that have processes for formulating and acting upon decisions, but they are understood here to emerge as a result of the interactions, negotiations and struggles that take place between elites, members and the supporting community, however imbalanced power may be. By taking Hirschman's (1970) theory as its starting point, this study seeks to investigate why youths remain loyal or exit the group and when they may be able to negotiate in order to exercise greater political voice.

This study also draws on Long's (1992) 'actor-oriented' paradigm which considers individual action never to be the sole explanatory factor in human behaviour since all actions are authored within a particular set of external conditions. Likewise, while external conditions are important, Long (1992:20) argues that it is theoretically unsound to base any analysis of participation in armed opposition groups on the concept of external determination since human behaviour is not path dependant. In Long's (1992) 'actor-oriented' paradigm, human action can neither be reduced to a generalisable model of rational choice nor explained only in terms of individual motivations, intentions and interests; rather it situates individual action within a socially bounded context (Long,

1992:21). Jabri (1996:62) also argues that conflict is an inherently social phenomenon which is affected by social discourses and institutions. Thus, while individuals can be considered purposive actors, they also act within a framework of institutions which constrain and legitimate decisions depending on the dynamics of the situation (Jabri, 1996:70).

By drawing on Long's (1992) 'actor-orientated' paradigm, this study is situated within a social constructionist approach to armed opposition groups which emphasises the interactions between individuals, group and social structures in determining social and political phenomena. This approach is argued to be well-suited to a study of youths in armed opposition groups because it takes in to account both individual motivations in human action and broader external factors, which are all found to be important factors in youth action in chapter two.

As already noted, the literature on youths' non-military roles and functions within armed groups is rather limited. However, a small number of studies highlight the key role that youth wings of political parties and armed groups play in training the next generation of leaders, mobilising new recruits, shoring up grassroots support, performing mundane tasks allocated by party elders and staging protests and processions (Leao, 2004; Burgess, 2002; McFaul, 2005; Seif, 1999; Van Kessel, 1993; Wickham-Crowley, 1992; Altbach, 1967; Velasco, 2005; Burgess, 2002; Parsons, 2004; Kuzio, 2006; Marks, 2001). This literature covers an extremely diverse range of armed groups operating in very different contexts, yet my research interest focused on a very particular kind of organisation.

As explored later, the KNU is the product of a long running peripheral conflict, which is itself a reaction to post-colonial state-making practices (Grundy-Warr, 1993; Brown, 1994). The term 'state-making', is used here to encompass both state formation and state consolidation and is understood to be, "a historical process characterized by the creation of political order at a new spatial and institutional level" (Cohen, Brown and Organski, 1981:902). The new spatial and institutional level referred to here is understood to be the state, which (often violently) redistributes political control of power resources away from subnational collectivities and polities in a centralisation of power (*Ibid*).

The transnational character of the KNU and its support base is an important aspect of its operations, therefore a borderland perspective was adopted as part of this study. A 'borderland' is understood to be a zone or region within which lies an international border (Van Schendel, 2005:44). Adopting a borderland perspective means studying the people involved, the flows, networks and perspectives of participants and how territoriality and transnationality are negotiated in everyday practices. It also means looking at what conditions draw certain objects and persons to certain segments of borderlands, how

changing borderlands condition and reproduce flows and how these in turn shape and reproduce borderlands (Van Schendel, 2005:44).

Understanding youth participation in this type of armed opposition groups requires understanding the nature of the group itself and the conflict that it is involved in. However, the literature on state-making and civil war often assumed that either the state commands a monopoly over the means of coercion or the limits of the state give way to a Hobbesian state of anarchy and disorder (Gates, 2002; Hagmann and Péclard, 2010); and that there is a binary distinction between the state and the non-state and political legitimacy (cf: Kaldor, 2007; Reno, 2006). More promising from the point of view of this study, is a growing body of historical political economy literature on state-making which highlights the central role of coercion but also the symbiotic relationship with armed actors outside the state, blurring the lines of sovereignty and legitimacy (cf: Gallant, 1999; Tilly, 1985; McCoy, 1999, North *et al.*, 2009). This approach situates armed groups within historical, contested, non-linear processes of state-making. Furthermore, the borderlands literature provides detailed accounts of the specific temporal and spatial processes of state-making and responses to these by populations located in the periphery of core states (cf: Scott, 2009; Grundy-Warr, 1993). Together, these studies highlight the complex relationships between states and armed opposition groups over control of territory, coercive power, legitimacy and sovereignty in the Southeast Asian borderlands.

Recent research on the non-military activities of armed opposition groups draws links between revenue streams and governance services provided by armed opposition groups and has sought to explain why armed groups may have extensive welfare wings under certain conditions (Mampilly, 2007, 2011; Naylor, 1993, 2004). These studies have challenged the normative assumption that the state is necessarily the sole provider of political and social order, and build upon anthropological observations that a variety of other individuals and groups outside the state may assume sovereign functions (Spears, 2004, Lund, 2006; Metelits, 2010). Mampilly's (2007, 2011) and Naylor's (1993, 2004) studies point to a number of important non-military roles within an armed opposition group, however, neither explain how the group's bureaucratic apparatus changes as it becomes militarily weaker and loses the territory it once had.

This study, therefore, seeks to build on Mampilly's (2007, 2011) and Naylor's (1993, 2004) findings and investigate the linkages between non-military activities in a group with declining territorial control and military power and changing revenue streams. It seeks to understand the changing relationships, issues of agency and process of internal organisation that an armed opposition group is engaged in as it changes its goals and strategies, from the

perspective of the youth cohort. The approach adopted in this study is an analysis of youths in non-military roles in an armed opposition group situated within a historical context of state-making and peripheral conflict.

The primary aim of this study is to understand non-military youth activity in armed opposition groups, including their roles, the processes of construction of a youth category, their participation patterns and their career trajectories. However, this cannot be understood in isolation from the ways in which youth roles in turn affect armed opposition groups' military strategies and means of reproduction, including how they gain access to external humanitarian assistance and development interventions delivered from across an international border.

## **2 Research questions and definitions**

This thesis sets out to understand the patterns of, and rationale for, youth participation in non-military capacities in an armed opposition group by answering the central research question:

**How and why do youths participate in non-military roles in the KNU, and what are the effects of their participation?**

This question is broken down in to a set of three sub-questions:

1. How is 'youth' defined and understood in the KNU and how are youth roles remade through their participation in the group?
  - a) What is meant by the term 'youth' within the KNU?
  - b) How does a youth category in the KNU intersect with other social categories?
  - c) Why is there a specific youth organisation in the KNU?
  - d) How are youth roles defined within the KNU?
  - e) What are the effects on inter-generational relations, youth voice and participation in the KNU (intended and unintended) of creating specific youth roles?
2. Why do youths take on non-military roles in the KNU and what factors influence their career trajectory within the movement?
  - a) What influences youth mobilisation and recruitment in to non-military roles in the KNU?
  - b) How are youths matched to non-military roles in the KNU? Which factors influence the type of role they take on?
  - c) Which factors influence youth career progression in the KNU?
  - d) Why do youths in non-military roles continue working in the KNU and why do they leave?

3. What is the purpose of youth non-military roles in the KNU and how are they affected by the KNU's political and strategic goals?
  - a) Are there specific non-military roles which youths take on in the KNU? If so, what is the purpose of these roles to the KNU? Why are they specific to youths? Which factors make youths better suited to these roles?
  - b) What factors constrain or enable youths' non-military work in the KNU?
  - c) How do youths' non-military roles and the KNU's political and strategic goals affect each other?

**a) Definition of key terms**

The term 'youth' is understood in this study to be a socially constructed emic term which, like all social constructions, is not static, but continually re-defined by society based on the social context of the time. The term 'non-military' is used here to refer to roles which are not located within army or militia structures. Since roles within military structures involve both combat and non-combat roles (army cooks, porters, signallers and engineers, for example), the term 'non-combat' can be used to refer to ancillary roles within a military, which are not the focus of this study. This study is concerned with participants outside the armed wing of an armed opposition group entirely, for instance, within its administrative apparatus or mass organisations.

The term 'armed opposition group' is contested and highly political, especially since the onset of the 'war on terror', with states prioritising domestic security and labelling many armed groups as 'terrorists' (Policzer, 2005:3). One of the problems of labelling is the discursive contestation over nationalist struggles, whereby a militant movement may alternatively be described as 'freedom fighters' or 'terrorists' (Stokke, 2006). The language of terrorism can deny political legitimacy to groups, such as the LTTE, for instance (Nadarajah and Sriskandarajah, in Stokke, 2006), yet the political transformation of former 'terrorists' may see them subsequently sitting quite legitimately in government seats in parliament (the ANC in South Africa and Nepal's Maoists, for example). Terms such as 'rebel group' or 'insurgent group' are also normatively loaded with assumptions about the legitimacy of states and non-state groups. Normative labelling is considered unhelpful here since de-legitimising and de-politicising such groups does not further understandings of their behaviour. The term 'armed opposition group' is preferred here because it indicates the importance of a group's military capability while also pointing to the key characteristic of its conflict: opposition to a central state. In the absence of a consensus, and recognising the complexities and great differences in groups engaged in intra-state conflicts, this thesis

adopts the definition of armed groups proposed by Policzer (2005:8) as “challengers to the state’s monopoly of legitimate coercive force”.

Legitimacy is a contested concept in social and political science, which this thesis cannot discuss in depth. This study adopts a Weberian perspective of legitimacy in social orders, elaborated on by Schlichte (2009) and the Armed Groups Database developed by the Micropolitics of Armed Groups research group at Humboldt University. This sees legitimacy as a necessary condition to stabilise relations and establish the domination of leaders of armed groups in the minds of staff members in order to last beyond the group’s initial formation phase. This is referred to as ‘inner legitimacy’ by Schlichte (2009). However, leaders of armed groups sometimes also aim to build their legitimacy among a broader local population, whom they may rely on for support, and occasionally also among external, international audiences. Thus, this thesis distinguishes between *internal* and *external* legitimacy. Internal legitimacy is used here to refer to the relationships between state and society and between different groups within society, all contained within the state. External legitimacy is used to mean the belief among other state leaders outside the state in question, codified in international norms and rules, that a public authority possesses the right to rule. In the current hegemonic Westphalian state system, external legitimacy is normally bestowed upon state governments who control the principal means of coercion within a country, usually the national army.

### **3 Research design**

My initial interest in this subject stemmed from three years’ work with local Karen NGOs and CBOs along the Thai-Burmese border. This experience influenced my initial thoughts about youths working in the KNU’s apparatus, the nature of their roles and the contested state-making processes the KNU was involved in. However, it also influenced my methodological approach because three years of talking to my friends and colleagues highlighted the considerable difference between what organisations and staff *say* they do and what they *actually* do in practice. These contradictions were sometimes remarked upon and discussed, and at times they were un-noticed by the staff themselves and by me until a later date. I also found that asking the same questions and talking about the same issues on different occasions produced different answers, even from the same people, reflecting variations in the way ideas or events could be presented. These experiences demonstrated to me that an ethnographic approach was necessary to gain depth in understanding the micro-dynamics of youth participation in an armed opposition group.

This study used an ‘instrumental case study’ approach whereby a single case is analysed in depth to reveal a situation ordinarily inaccessible to in-depth scientific observation (Yin,

2003; Stake, 2003). An ethnographic approach is inherently 'interpretivist', thus my role was to read and interpret meaning in the observed actions of people, their explanations and the "tissue of everyday life" (Brewer, 2000:11; Herbert, 2000:551; Geertz, 1973). The study used a composite of methods including unstructured and semi-structured interviews, focus groups, photographic discussion, participant observation, life histories and organizational analysis. A composite and flexible approach was deemed most appropriate because it provides methodological triangulation and best deals with the intense practical problems of research in highly politicized conflict zones, as well as going some way towards addressing the common problems of reliability, validity and access in conflict research (Barakat *et al*, 2002:995). This is discussed in more detail in chapter four.

The Karen National Union (KNU) was selected as the research case in this study because it appeared to have a well-formed and extensive administrative apparatus which included in its ranks large numbers of youths. It also had a large and active youth wing, the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) which, interestingly, was not militarised. Furthermore, the youth wing and welfare wings of the KNU appeared to be involved in a variety of governance functions in eastern Burma, which were changing their modes of operation as the KNU ceded territorial control to the Burmese state and lost control of the borderland economy. Thus, the KNU appeared to have a politically complex internal structure and a much wider agenda than purely military activities, thereby providing an excellent case for studying the non-military roles of youth participants in conflict.

The KNU has been in conflict with the Burmese State since one year after independence from British colonial rule in 1948 and is possibly the longest-running intra-state conflict in the world. It is active along the eastern borderlands of the country, with its political and administrative headquarters located across the border in Thailand since 1995. Given its longevity and resilience, the KNU provided an excellent opportunity for the analysis of internal inter-generational relations, ongoing social category construction processes and issues of organisational regeneration.

#### **4 Thesis outline**

This thesis is presented in three parts. The first part of the thesis (chapters two and three) examines theoretical understandings of youths and armed opposition groups and highlights gaps in the academic literature. The second part (chapters four and five) lays out the methodology required to tackle this subject and provides background information to the Burmese context of conflict and state-making. The third part (chapters six, seven and eight) presents the empirical findings of the research. The thesis concludes in chapter nine with a

critical discussion of the key findings and theoretical advances this research has made and the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

**Chapter two** provides a critical review of the literature on youths in armed opposition groups. It starts by examining how the term 'youth' is constructed and what this means for studies of youths in armed opposition groups. It then examines explanations of youth recruitment, retention and exit in armed opposition groups. A framework for studying youth participation is generated from this analysis.

**Chapter three** places youth roles and actions in armed opposition groups within a wider context by examining the literature which deals with the nature and structure of such groups and their historical emergence in contexts of state-making. Thus, it situates youth participation in conflict in the particular context of armed opposition groups engaged in a form of peripheral conflict with a post-colonial central state. It also examines why and when armed opposition groups may develop more extensive non-military structures.

**Chapter four** sets out the methodology used in this study. A mixed methodology utilising ethnographic research methods and a case study was most appropriate to a deep study of the lives of youths in an armed opposition group because it sought primarily to generate new insights rather than test existing theory and because the highly politicised nature of conflict can marginalise youth voices and pose distinct methodological challenges.

**Chapter five** shifts to an analysis of the KNU and its conflict with the Burmese state. It examines ethnic politics in the state and the rise of ethno-nationalist forms of conflict. The chapter then examines the changing modes of state-making used by the Burmese state and the effects these have had on the KNU. Finally, it turns to an examination of the nature of conflict, control and youth political action in the complex mosaic of sovereignty in the borderlands.

**Chapter six** proceeds to address the question of how and why a 'youth' category emerged in the KNU. It also analyses the impact that the creation of a youth category has had on inter-generational relations and youth voice in the KNU.

**Chapter seven** continues the analysis of youth in the KNU by examining their participation patterns from recruitment to exit. It builds on the four different zones of governance and control identified in chapter five and the framework of participation factors developed in chapter two.

**Chapter eight** examines the KNU's changing strategies of contesting Burmese state-making through the lens of youth programmes and activities. It highlights the interaction between internal organisational dynamics and shifting structural conditions at the

international, national and local levels. It also shows how the growing significance of youth within the KNU has paralleled the growth of the welfare and humanitarian arms of the organisation, which in turn is a reflection of strategic adaptation in the light of shifts in the Burmese state's state-making practices.

**Chapter nine** concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the thesis and locating its contribution to the existing literature on youth roles and participation patterns in armed opposition groups and the contemporary non-military strategies that armed opposition groups utilise to pursue their goals.

## **Chapter 2: Youths in Armed Opposition Groups: Recruitment, roles and participation patterns**

When I started working in Thailand with the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) as a volunteer, I thought I was working for a national youth charity, since this was how it had been portrayed to VSO, the intermediary volunteer agency. However, it quickly became clear that although the organisation was engaged in a large degree of social work for youths, it was also the political youth wing of an armed opposition group in exile from Burma. Some of my new colleagues had transitioned into the youth wing from the armed wing, which they had joined at a young age, and many had friends working in the extensive welfare departments of the organisation. Thus, all around me were youths working in a surprisingly broad range of non-military roles for an armed opposition group.

This study seeks to explain why and how youths participate in the KNU and starts in this chapter by analysing research on youths in various forms of collective violence. It begins by unpacking the term 'youth' and considering how it is variably constructed. While a universal definition allows for cross-country comparison, I argue that if the objective is to understand how youth roles are used for political purposes in a particular armed group then it is more appropriate to investigate how the term 'youth' is understood and constructed by the group and by youths themselves.

The chapter then turns to the question of why youths join an armed opposition group, the kinds of non-military roles they have taken on and why they exit. Although this study is concerned with youth involvement in a particular type of political armed opposition group, I draw on a broad body of literature concerned with youth participation in forms of collective violence, including social movement studies, the child soldiers' literature, the youth gangs literature, terrorism studies, the civil war literature and revolution studies. This array is often quite dissimilar, since collective violence encompasses a range of coordination, targets, tactics, methods, objectives and perceived legitimacy. However, this eclectic mix of writing allows me to explore issues of youth action in conflict outside the confines of fixed academic disciplines.

The academic literature on armed opposition groups has often focused on youths participating in military roles and less so on non-military and non-violent roles, such as in their youth wings and welfare wings. This reflects a broader bias in the complex emergency literature towards explaining why ordinary people participate in violence, rather than why they choose non-violent methods of resisting domination (Gilgan, 2001:7).

This study considers youth participation within a historical, political and social context, and takes into account issues of individual choice and organisational culture. In addition to explaining the purpose of youth participation in an armed group, this approach may also shed light on the changing strategies an armed group adopts. Furthermore, the analytical gaze is extended towards analysing the effects that youth participation in non-military roles has on internal generational relations and the group's non-military operations.

## **1 Who is a 'youth'?**

A fundamental concern throughout this study is with how youths are conceptualised by external researchers, by groups which employ them and by young participants in armed opposition groups. This first section examines how 'youth' is variously categorised before looking at how the term is used and adapted in conflict situations.

### **a) Categorising 'youth': Emic vs. etic perspectives**

Conceptions of who is a 'youth' vary and it is clear from anthropological literature that societies demarcate 'youth' in different ways. In the West the term usually refers to young people past adolescence but not yet with children of their own, encompassing both those in the legal category of 'child' and 'adult' (Ansell, 2005:14). In other cultures people may leave the category of 'youth' upon completing a rite of passage, bearing children or getting married *inter alia*.

Understanding how youth is categorised in conflict situations is important because it is a label with material effects; it shapes understandings of appropriate behaviour for people in that category, including political behaviour and violent action. For example, 'youth' has been used as a term for teenagers in situations of social conflict in order to avoid unwanted connotations of passivity and victimhood associated with the term 'child'. Utas (2003), for instance, uses 'youth' to describe soldiers under the age of 18 precisely because it implies a degree of agency over actions which may have purpose and be a route to adulthood. The term 'youth' can also imply deviance; for example, in Britain, the category of 'youth' in conflict situations has often been accompanied by their representation as 'troublesome' (Griffin, 2001).

Often, a false dichotomy of youth as perpetrators and youth as victims of violence is portrayed, most obviously in media reportage of child soldiers (Utas, 2003). The mainstream 'humanitarian' discourse on child soldiers is particularly vocal in drawing attention to the victimhood of young participants in armed groups (Brett & McCallin, 1998; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994:93-120; Happold, 2005:26; Machel, 1996:13). This discourse is associated with human rights and humanitarian organisations and the Machel

(1996) study on the impact of war on children. Yet young people in armed groups may fit neither of these pictures and there exist considerable differences even between young people in the same armed groups, let alone those operating in different countries and contexts. While there are particular concerns around how young people aged under 18 participating in armed groups should be treated and conceptualised, this research is more concerned with the experiences of young people aged over 18 who, being considered adults in most countries and in the UN system, do not pose the same conceptual and practical dilemmas as those under 18.

In the UN system, 'youth' is an etic term. 'Children' are defined as aged 0-17 while a further term of 'young people' is used to define those between the ages of 10-19. 'Youth' is defined as all people aged between 15-24 in order to allow statistical comparison between countries (Ansell, 2005:1; UNESCO, 2010:2). However, there is no legal standing to this definition and some regional blocs have very different categorisations; the African Youth Charter, for instance, defines youth as the 15-35 age group (UNESCO, 2010:2). External, chronological definitions of youth, such as that of the UN, enable academic comparison between countries and cultures and provide a basis for international agencies to formulate policies and programmes. Thus, UNDP, DfID, the World Bank, USAID and the ILO all routinely use the 15-24 age range as their definition of 'youth', whether formally or informally. However, there is recognition among these agencies that there are different understandings of the term around the world and that 'youth' may also be defined functionally (involving a process of transition from childhood to adulthood) and culturally (relating to social roles) (UNDP, 2006:15; UNESCO, 2010:2).

Functional definitions, which consider 'youth' as a transitional life-stage, are limited by their presumed universal application to all youths everywhere and portrayal of youths as following a natural process of development (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006:16). Yet even within a society, people of a wide range of ages may claim the space of youth or be treated as such at specific times and in specific places (Durham, 2000:113). In South Africa and Sierra Leone, for example, 'youth' has at times seen an upper age limit of 35 years (Wessels & Kostelny, 2009:187; McIntyre, Aning and Addo, 2002:8).

An emic perspective draws upon local conceptions of generational roles, which have more salience in local cultures. From this perspective, 'youth' is a term used to represent a social category rather than the simple characteristic of a defined age range or developmental stage. Anthropological studies of youth have long argued that youth categories are socially constructed and relational constructs which serve to regulate social interaction by age (Durham, 2000). However, this makes defining 'youth' very problematic, since, as Durham

(2000:116) notes “the local nature, definition and experience of youth is everywhere and at all times quite different for different gender, class or occupational groups”. Durham (2000:116), therefore, suggests that the term ‘youth’ should be employed more as a discursive indicator of social relations, structures and categories than as an absolute reference to a fixed age group. Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006:11) similarly argue that the concept of youth should be explored in terms of how youths position themselves and are positioned within generational relations and categories. Adopting this approach, it is argued, illuminates the ways in which the category of youth is socio-politically constructed.

#### **b) Constructing a youth category in conflict**

McIntyre (2006:332) argues that the category of ‘youth’ in conflict situations is a political construct that does not adhere to any particular age, but is used “for rallying those members of societies who perceive themselves to be in states of transition”. Similarly, some scholars have argued that ‘youth’ categories are constructed by elites in conflict zones in order to mobilise young people’s labour for political purposes. A classic example is Sierra Leone where grievances among teenagers and young people in their twenties are argued to have been co-opted and traditional youth initiation ceremonies adopted by leaders such as Foday Sankoh to mobilise fighters for the 1991-2002 war, often for personal profit (Fithen & Richards, 2005). However, the politics of younger generations in Sierra Leone is considerably more complex than common depictions suggest (Fithen & Richards, 2005; McIntyre, Aning and Addo, 2002). Young people’s social marginalisation through declining education and work opportunities, as well as gerontocracy, were real grievances in Sierra Leone prior to the outbreak of civil conflict, with many who joined the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) expressing hope that their actions would bring about a more just social order in the country (Fithen & Richards, 2005).

In the Angolan conflict, Parsons (2004:49) argues that ‘youths’ were constituted both as subjects of top-down discipline by elite leaders and as individual ‘subjects’ capable of action in their own right. This particular construction aimed to mobilise fighters for both UNITA and Renamo and politicise young people to ensure their loyalty and support, as well as perpetuate the movement. Youth movements were created to accomplish this through education and organisation of youth activities. Politicised younger generations (in their teens and twenties) have also been an important feature of a number of contemporary conflicts, including South Africa under apartheid (Marks, 2001) Afghanistan (de Berry, 2008) and Nepal (Upreti, 2008).

McEvoy-Levy (2006) argues that young participants in conflict have frequently been marginalised once the goals of conflict have been achieved. However, the political

construction of Angolan youth also resulted in their establishment as political subjects in their own right, often with strong and coherent views (Parsons, 2004:45-46). Nolte (2004), studying Nigeria, also argues that co-option of younger participants by elite political leaders is never complete since although they may be instrumentalised by local elites, the fluidity of shifting personal alliances and loyalties prevents the complete appropriation of younger members.

It is clear from the civil war literature that 'youth' categories may be constructed or deconstructed for political expedience, often by political elites, but they may also be influenced by local cultural norms. For example, 'youth' is never a gender-neutral term, particularly when it is used in the context of conflict. In many cultures a female youth category scarcely exists because females transition directly from childhood into adulthood either upon menstruation, marriage or motherhood (Sommers, 2006:4). The 'youth' category is, therefore, often associated with and biased towards young men, rather than young women. Burgess's (2002) study of youth participation in the Zanzibar revolution, for instance, found that women who sought greater political participation gravitated towards the women's wing while youth organisations commonly served as spheres in which masculine identities were created.

Some authors argue that younger generations may develop a collective consciousness that differs from a previously prescribed category as a result of their social, political or economic marginalisation and use this to challenge power structures and gain access to resources (for example, Fithen & Richards, 2005; Richards, 1996; Zack-Williams, 1999). In some cases, this has resulted in violent generational clashes over gerontocracy<sup>1</sup>. For instance, insurrections in the Sekhukhuneland area of South Africa in the 1980s were generation-based, and were formed around young people's grievances concerning the conditions in rural schools and the use and abuse of chiefly power (Van Kessel, 1993:596). As a result, 'youth' movements in South Africa emerged both on generational lines (Van Kessel, 1993) and in conjunction and collaboration with adult elites fighting the apartheid state (Marks, 2001). Similarly, the Liberian civil war was primarily waged by younger people aiming to wrestle power out of the hands of local 'big men' and challenge the lack of opportunities in Liberian society (Utas, 2003:229). However, the problem with the idea that a youth cohort develops a collective generational consciousness and then engages in political violence as a result of a shared experience of marginalisation is that there are

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<sup>1</sup> See Argenti (2002) for more on youth conflict over gerontocracy in Africa and Fernando (2002) for a Sri Lankan example.

considerable differences in the lives and experiences of young people, even within one area of a country (Boyden, 2006:4-5).

Meanwhile, the literature on youth gangs demonstrates that in many places, including Western countries and particularly Latin American and Caribbean countries, the social marginalisation of younger members of society results in the emergence of collective gang subcultures rather than politically organised armed challenges to the state or local power holders.<sup>2</sup> However, the study of youth sub-cultures in this literature risks portraying young people as socially and culturally detached from their surroundings, when in fact they are embedded and socially positioned in families and societies (Christiansen, Utas and Vigh, 2006:16). Although it is important to analyse how youths position themselves and understand the world, Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006:16) argue that it is also important to analyse how external political and sociological forces seek to shape youths' movements.

In order to generate a deep understanding of the behaviour of younger participants in a particular armed opposition group engaged in conflict with the state, it is important to begin without prior assumptions and investigate how their roles and behaviour are framed from within their own environment. Few studies have done this, perhaps in part due to the methodological difficulties inherent in researching active armed opposition groups. This study is concerned with generating an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon in a defined social setting rather than drawing comparisons. It aims to investigate how the term 'youth' is created and used within the KNU both by those who self-identify as youths and elder political leaders, how it intersects with other social categories and how it affects generational relations. Thus, 'youth' is understood not as a universal, cross-cultural term, but as a dynamic social construction that is continually re-defined in complex and reciprocal ways shaped by the changing social context (Greene, 1994). 'Youth' is therefore understood as a relational term as well as a social effect of power (Durham, 2000:115).

I propose investigating the construction of 'youth' from *within* the organisation, prioritising the viewpoints and lived experiences of those who self-identify as youths. However, as Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006) suggest, emic perspectives also need to be complemented by a consideration of how external political and sociological forces shape the way youths are positioned. Meanwhile, the terms 'youth' and 'young people' are used throughout the rest of this chapter to encompass a range of people included in a variety of studies from different disciplines looking at how younger generations participate in armed opposition groups. This does not intend to imply that 'youth' is a universal category;

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Spergel (1990); Huff (1990); Decker & Weerman (2005)

instead it seeks to draw together the many different studies that explicitly use the term of youth or young people when discussing armed opposition groups. One of the main problems with this expanse of literature is indeed very different, often vague, understandings of who a youth is.

## **2 Patterns of youth progression through armed opposition groups**

Young people enter armed groups in broadly three ways: forced recruitment, voluntary recruitment and compulsory conscription, although the lines between each category may be blurred (Wessels & Kostelny, 2009:188). This study is interested in why youths voluntarily join an armed opposition group. The literature on armed groups in which youths participate is very broad, spanning not only a variety of understandings of the term 'youth' but also multiple disciplines and research areas including revolution studies, social movements and collective action, the child soldiers literature, the extensive civil war and insurgency literature, peasant studies, psychology and the youth gangs literature.

The literature on youth participation in un-armed but highly political organisations, such as those found in democracy or anti-colonial movements, is relevant too, since there may be similarities between a youth joining an armed group in a non-military capacity and a youth joining an un-armed group which is nevertheless engaged in a form of (non-violent) conflict with the state. Factors influencing youth participation are therefore likely to be wide-ranging. As Angela McIntyre (2003: 94-95) argues: "What motivates young people to co-operate with armed groups is as varied as the individuals themselves, and as the huge variety of educational, developmental and personal influences in their lives". Theories addressing the mobilisation and recruitment of young people are examined first, followed by an examination of the much more limited literature on how recruits are retained and desertion or exit managed.

A table summarising the factors that influence youth recruitment into armed groups is given below. Added to the table is a list of factors that may influence youth retention or exit from armed groups. This study draws upon Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice and loyalty to examine why youths may stay or leave the KNU. This theory talks at length about when people, faced with a perceived decline in quality of a firm, organisation or polity, are more likely to leave and when they will instead remain loyal and seek to voice their concerns. It has been applied to a variety of human groupings but loyalty to an armed group is an amorphous concept which has received little attention in previous studies. In this thesis, armed groups are considered to be forms of social actors that have some processes for formulating and acting upon decisions, but are also understood to emerge as a result of the interactions, negotiations and struggles that take place between elites,

members and the supporting community, however imbalanced power may be. By taking Hirschman's (1970) theory as its starting point, this study seeks to investigate why youths remain loyal or exit the group and when they may be able to negotiate greater political voice.

This table provides a framework for the analysis of youth participation in the KNU in chapter seven.

Participation stage	Individual factors	Political, economic and social structure factors	Armed group organisation factors
<b>Recruitment</b>	<p>Experience of a critical event (e.g. death of kin, experience of abuse by agents of the state)</p> <p>Physical insecurity</p> <p>Pursuit of private goals (e.g. personal feuds)</p> <p>Political convictions</p> <p>Ease of organisation</p> <p>Lack of family obligations</p> <p>Personal history of activism / conflict</p> <p>Pecuniary incentives</p> <p>Non-pecuniary incentives</p> <p>Psychological incentives (e.g. power, prestige, revenge, excitement)</p> <p>Pleasure in agency</p> <p>Friendship / kin networks to armed groups</p>	<p>Political oppression / grievances over political injustice</p> <p>Authoritarianism / gerontocracy limiting youth political voice</p> <p>Resource exploitation or distribution biases</p> <p>Obstacles to youth transition to adult social status</p> <p>High youth unemployment / livelihood grievances</p> <p>Poverty / deprivation</p> <p>Social marginalisation</p> <p>Oppressive / threatening power relations</p> <p>Educational grievances</p> <p>Demographic pressures</p> <p>Indiscriminate state brutality</p>	<p>Ideology</p> <p>Grievance framing processes</p> <p>Leadership skill and style</p> <p>Organisational ethos</p> <p>Organisational needs for youth (e.g. as a labour resource)</p> <p>Organisational needs for students / intellectuals (e.g. to set the political agenda)</p> <p>Links to pre-existing community networks and institutions</p> <p>Links to universities</p> <p>Education / propaganda discourses</p> <p>Utilisation of ethnic networks</p>
<b>Retention</b>	<p>Pecuniary benefits</p> <p>Non-pecuniary benefits</p> <p>Personal political convictions</p> <p>Level of integration in the armed group</p> <p>Opportunities for political participation</p> <p>Access to power</p>	<p>Fear of state retribution</p> <p>Severed family / community links</p>	<p>Force</p> <p>Ideology</p> <p>Grievance framing</p> <p>Punishment / high exit penalties</p> <p>Terms of service</p> <p>High entry costs</p> <p>Loyalty</p>

<b>Participation stage</b>	<b>Individual factors</b>	<b>Political, economic and social structure factors</b>	<b>Armed group organisation factors</b>
<b>Exit</b>	<p>Disillusion with / lack of pecuniary benefits</p> <p>Disillusion with / lack of non-pecuniary benefits</p> <p>Better opportunities elsewhere</p> <p>Changes in family circumstances</p> <p>Influence of family / friends</p> <p>Personal feuds within the group</p> <p>Disillusion with hardship and risky way of life / conflict fatigue</p> <p>Lack of political voice</p>	<p>International / national DDR processes</p> <p>Improvements in local security and stability</p> <p>Better governance provision</p> <p>Changes in political opportunity structure</p> <p>Changes in resource exploitation / distribution</p> <p>Community pressures (e.g. through religious leaders)</p>	<p>Changes in capacity to provide governance services / selective incentives</p> <p>Change in coercive behaviour</p> <p>Changes in leadership</p>

*Table 1 Factors influencing youth participation in armed opposition groups*

### a) **Mobilisation and recruitment: Diverse motivations, different experiences**

Theories concerned with the mobilisation and recruitment of youths into armed groups can broadly be grouped into three areas: theories which prioritise individual motivations; theories which emphasise political, economic or social structural determinants of youth behaviour and theories which consider the character of organisations and their leadership to be important mediators of youth action.

#### ***Individual factors***

##### Push factors

Individual factors propelling some young people to participate in armed groups have sometimes been argued to be related to personal political convictions. Students (usually understood to be men and women in their twenties) in particular in developing countries may have a strong history of political activism, be relatively easy to organise, have a strong ideological commitment (often nationalist and leftist), be unencumbered by family obligations and be articulate and politically conscious, all of which facilitate their participation in political opposition groups (Altbach, 1967:26).

Young people may also be pushed into an armed group along with the broader civilian population through the experience of a 'critical event' such as the death of kin or personal experience of abuse, for instance by agents of the state (Ferguson *et al.*, 2008; Parsons, 2004). Threats of violence by armed groups were found to be a factor pushing young Sierra Leoneans to voluntarily participate in armed groups out of safety concerns (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008:451). Excessive nationalist discourse, often adopted by newly-liberated states confronted with multiple heterogeneous populations has been argued to compound insecurity by framing ethnic minority people (often located in the borderlands) as 'other', illegitimate residents of the state (Scherrer, 2003). In addition, poorly trained and controlled state armies, together with weak local policing (a common feature of developing countries) results in inept counter-insurgency practices which fail to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and drives previously neutral civilians into armed groups (Mason, 2004). Viterna's (2006) study of female participation in the Salvadoran Civil War, for example, found that many women joined armed groups as 'reluctant guerrillas' for protection. Therefore, relatively weak and capricious states, or 'low-capacity' regimes which repress incompletely and with unpredictable violence, encourage the rise of local rulers, given enough opportunity, who supply local protection against central state aggression and a rough justice in return for tax both for themselves and a wider cause (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Tilly, 2006:128).

Participation in an ethnic-kin armed group may then be understood as a rational choice in order to better manage the risk of annihilation, persecution, enforced resettlement, human rights violations, settler colonialism, forced assimilation or climates of psychological or physical terror (Scherrer, 2003; Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007). Most of Mao's followers, for example, were driven to support the Chinese communist guerrillas by the promise of protection against indiscriminate violence and only became revolutionary after they joined the movement (Mason, 2004).

Kalyvas (2003:475-476) argues that individual motivations for participating in armed groups are often more about settling personal scores and taking advantage of armed groups to pursue local or private conflicts. In this way, the leaders of armed groups and their followers ally in a "joint production of action" to pursue different goals simultaneously (ibid.). Andvig and Gates (2006:9) also argue that motivations at the lower levels of organisations may be quite different from at the leadership level, which is most often the focus of studies of armed groups. Thus, not only may young people join an armed group to pursue private goals, but they may have quite different motivations from elite leaders.

#### Pull factors

Factors that have been argued to 'pull' individual youths into armed groups are incentives, especially financial incentives for youths otherwise living in poverty. It is argued from a rational choice perspective that poor youths have little to lose and potentially much to gain by joining an armed group. They make a calculated choice weighing up the perceived weakness of the state, the strength of the challenger group, the risks of engaging with the group and the potential payoff which may accrue. According to this perspective the economically poorest should choose to rebel (Mason, 2004). In Somalia, for example, Gjelsvik and Bjørge's (2012:7) research finds that young men and women in their late teens and early twenties joined pirate gangs primarily because of poverty and a lack of alternative livelihood options. In order to retain their masculine identity as breadwinners and gain recognition as an adult, these young people join armed Somali groups, gaining a sense of belonging and purpose along the way (UNDP, 2010 in Gjelsvik and Bjørge, 2012:7). Similarly, Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) in a survey of 1,043 ex-combatants (ranging in age at the time of research from 15 to 79, of whom 67 per cent were male) in Sierra Leone found that poverty made participation more likely.

In the child soldiers' literature, material benefits available to combatants has been argued to be the primary driver of young people under age 18 into armed groups with around 60 per cent of demobilised soldiers under age 18 surveyed in the Democratic Republic of Congo

and East Asia citing poverty as their main motivation, while children who joined rebel groups in Liberia and Sierra Leone were variously promised diamonds, gold, regular meals and shelter (Conteh-Morgan, 2004:106-108; Brett & Specht, 2004:14; Cohn & Goodwin-Gill, 1994; Singer, 2006:62). However, Ghimire (2002) argues that family poverty can also be a reason for non-participation in agitation as the economic imperative may drive youths away from rebel groups and into migrant work to help support their family.

Where youth participation is clearly not explained by pecuniary incentives, non-pecuniary incentives have been highlighted. These include educational opportunities, health care, social services and opportunities for political participation (McIntyre, 2003). For instance, Museveni's National Resistance Army attracted around 3,000 young soldiers under 18 motivated by basic survival needs, such as gaining access to food and protection, by the opportunity to take revenge on those who had killed their relatives and by the chance to feel a sense of identity and purpose (Furley 1995:36; Hick, 2001:114). Psychological incentives discussed in the terrorism studies and child soldiers' literature include the chance to gain power, prestige, excitement and revenge (Rashid, 2000; Wessels & Kostelny, 2009; Brett & Specht, 2004). They may also experience an increased sense of belonging to the group and of personal identity; the release of fear, tension, frustration and grievance in a legitimate manner and the sense of fulfilment from occupying a useful role and learning a new skill (Mitchell, 1980).

Many rational choice perspectives focusing on the incentives that pull young people into armed groups are based in Mancur Olson's analysis of public choice using game theory. Olson (1971) argued that individuals must reap a personal reward, distinct from the public goods provided to all, if they are to commit themselves to public action, otherwise they would prefer to be 'free-riders'. This is described as the 'rebel's dilemma' in Lichbach's (1995) thesis. These theories are based on the assumptions and logic of neo-classical economics which holds that everything can be explained from the point of view of the individual and that individual behaviour is a function of choices rationally made in order to maximise utility (Cramer, 2002).

There are a number of problems with a rational choice approach to studying the individual factors motivating youth participation in armed groups, not all of which can be addressed here. First, there are countless examples of youth participation which defy explanation through rational choice and selective incentives models, which tend to under-predict actual instances of political violence (Cramer, 2002). Qualitative research into the micro-level motivations for engaging in conflict has shown that participants often run high risks with little expectation of material reward, suggesting more complex motivations than the

rational actor model predicts (Wood, 2003b). For example, the pleasure in doing something to take control of one's life, fight back against injustice and assert individual dignity and agency is a compelling motivator, even in situations where participation in an armed group would seem foolhardy or irrational (Wood, 2003a). Kalyvas & Kocher (2007) argue further that the collective action paradigm, which is based on the assumption that non-participation is costless and free-riding is preferred, is not necessarily true in all cases. A Hobbesian interpretation of the lack of consolidated control over territory and populations, which is particularly common in the borderlands of developing countries, argues that participation in an armed group may offer better protection than non-participation.

Second, rational choice-based theories problematically assume that individuals make mercenary calculations ignoring ideology and behave as rational individuals unaffected by social pressures (Mason, 2004). Thus, they tend to subsume ideology and ethnicity, which are argued often to play a key role in shaping compliance and enforcement, even with the most blatant loot-seeking group (Gates, 2002).

Finally, methodologically, the econometric approaches used to model human behaviour in conflict are much criticised for their problematic operationalisation of variables and for lacking depth (Richards, 2005, for example). For instance, a high number of young males with low education is used as a proxy indicator for low opportunity cost to rebellion, but it could just as easily be a proxy for grievance (Richards, 2005). Moreover, quantitative correlations of indicators lack explanatory depth. For example, it can be difficult to determine whether actions and goals are political or for personal profit because political goals may be a smoke screen for avarice while opportunistic actions unsanctioned by leaders may occur on the margins of political actions (Wood, 2003b). Looting by soldiers, for instance, can be both a sanctioned tactic of war and an opportunistic action. Quantitative studies of conflict also do not explain how actors' interests change over time, whereas the case literature on war shows that conflicts are very dynamic, evolving situations (Wood, 2003b).

Weinstein's (2005) comparative study of armed opposition groups goes beyond a narrow rational choice approach and attempts to tease out the relationships between individual calculations, resources and organisational structures. He argues that although motivations vary considerably, certain patterns may be seen based on the type of resource base a group has. If it is an economically-endowed group which relies on natural resource wealth, external support or crime as the primary source of support, then voluntary recruits are likely to be motivated by pecuniary rewards (Weinstein, 2005). On the other hand, if it is socially-endowed with the consent of the civilian population and distinctive identities and

interpersonal networks that provide sources of solidarity and moral commitment; for instance, in the form of strong communal relations, then voluntary recruits are more likely to be motivated by non-pecuniary rewards (Weinstein, 2005:48). Social ties have frequently been found to be important to armed group mobilisation with individuals joining because their family members or friends are involved (Sageman, 2004:178, in Gjelsvik and Bjørgo, 2012:2; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008:449).

### ***Political, economic and social structures***

Drawing on a Marxian and Weberian tradition, scholars with a political economy and sociology background have considered the dynamic interplay between constraining historical, social, political and economic conditions and human action (for example, Moore, 1966; Skocpol, 1979; Scott, 1990; Wolf, 2010). Factors rooted in the political, economic or social structure of society are summarised in the second column in the preceding table.

In the social movements and contentious politics literature, political oppression, injustice, a changing political opportunity landscape or other grievances rooted in the political structure of the state have been theorised as key factors in mobilising participation in armed opposition groups (for example, McAdam, 1996; Tilly, 1978). For example, although youth movements were key to African independence struggles, the gradual curtailment of political space for younger generations since independence and perceptions of elite manipulation have prompted the mobilisation of ‘youth’ (an undefined term in these studies) into locally-organised, economically-driven armed groups (Mochizuki, 2009; Reno, 2006; Hazen, 2009). Scholars researching Nigeria, Sierra Leone, DRC and sub-Saharan Africa, find that an inability to engage in politics at all due to authoritarianism, gerontocracy or other powerful vested interests in the status quo results in more economically motivated participation among younger generations in armed groups, with the aim of getting a better share of local resources before others (Hazen, 2009; Sall, 2004; Reno, 2006).

Other grievances that have been argued to drive participation in conflict include economic grievances and inequalities over the division of resources such as land ownership (in peasant studies (Huntington (1968) and Paige (1970), for instance)), other environmental resources (in the social movements’ literature (Clapham, 1998; Earle, 2011)) or the income from resource rents (in the civil wars literature (Cederman, 2008, for example)).

For young people in the Middle East and North Africa in particular, studies of ‘waithood’ (a term used to refer to an extended stage between adolescence and adulthood) suggest that participation in armed opposition groups is motivated by grievances over high unemployment and restricted or costly access to land or marriage partners (Dhillon, Dyer

and Yousef, 2009:16). The 2011 North African and Middle Eastern revolutions, for example, were linked to high levels of unemployment among men in their twenties and frustrated transition to adulthood (and marriage) as a result (Knickmeyer, 2011). Unemployment and poverty have frequently been argued to drive young people into armed groups, especially in situations where armed actors are the first to eat (Stavrou, 2004), although it is unclear whether this is as a result of economic grievances, individual resource maximisation, a lack of other options or a greater vulnerability to political manipulation by elites (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008).

Meanwhile, relative deprivation theorists such as Gurr (1970) argue that it is not the absolutely deprived who support armed groups but those who feel relatively deprived – the upwardly mobile, ambitious poor who have more time, energy and social resources (Mason, 2004). This theory assumes that when people's expectations about what they should be achieving exceeds their actual level of achievement frustration occurs, resulting in aggression. However, inequality is far more common than instances of social unrest or engagement in armed groups, leading to criticisms that theories which are based on political, economic or social structures over-predict participation in armed groups (Cramer, 2002; Kahl, 2002:262). Moreover, they rely too heavily on frustration-aggression logic when other responses to frustration are also possible including nonviolent as much as violent behaviour (Mason, 2004).

Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argue that many groups follow a Marxist-Leninist theory of rebel organisation in which the population for recruitment does not initially realise it is oppressed, so they have to be made aware of their grievances to enable recruitment (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000). Collier and Hoeffler argue from this that subjective grievance is consciously generated by armed opposition groups to enhance mobilisation efficiency, rather than being an objective cause of civil war. Where conflict occurs in ethnically diverse societies, Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argue that the need for homogeneity in recruitment to aid military cohesiveness may result in a focus on ethnic grievances. Ethnic network theory also argues that ethnic group affiliation offers an efficient and reliable mode of organising group claims (also see Congleton, 1995), thus the reason why so many conflicts organise along ethnic lines (Sambanis, 2002). Given these findings, it is unclear whether it is the framing of grievances or grievances themselves that motivate participation. Moreover, this is difficult to study because participants may re-frame their motivations once group discourses are internalised.

Studies of youth gangs and child soldiers have found that social marginalisation is a key factor in the mobilisation of some teenagers into armed groups (Utas, 2003; Gore &

Pratten, 2003, for example). Meanwhile, Hart (2008) argues that experiences of oppression and profoundly asymmetrical and threatening power relations among Palestinian children in displacement camps are also important contextual factors. Studies from Palestine and South Africa indicate that in war time, young people may also volunteer for armed groups out of social and political concern (Hart & Tyrer, 2006:9; Veerman and Levine, 2001).

Educational structures in society have also emerged as a critical issue in the mobilisation of younger participants, either because of declining provision or standards (Sierra Leone), real or perceived bias in provision (South Africa and Sri Lanka), or inapplicability to the job market, resulting in thwarted aspirations (the Middle East and North Africa) (Fithen & Richards, 2005; Fernando, 2002; Dhillon, Dyer and Yousef, 2009; Stavrou, 2004).<sup>3</sup> Notably, a number of armed opposition groups have provided significant educational opportunities to their youth cadres, UNITA and the EPLF, for instance (Parsons, 2004).

Relative deprivation theories, combined with demographic analysis have led to an interest in the relationship between 'youth bulges' and conflict. It is argued, from a neo-Malthusian perspective, that demographic changes can cause instability and violent conflict. A correlation is found between a high percentage of youths (usually taken to be the UN categorisation as the 15 to 24 age cohort) relative to the adult population and political crises (Goldstone, 2002:11). The reasons for this may include a combination of over-urbanisation relative to income, lowering the ratio of capital to labour; over-education relative to employment prospects and inter-generational conflict (Urdal, 2004). This theory has proved to be enticing for policy-makers, with USAID including a youth population bulge and youth unemployment as fragile state indicators (Earle, 2011:20).

If the age range of youths is taken to be 15 to 24, then youths number around 1.2 billion people and comprise roughly 18 per cent of the world population, 87 per cent of whom live in developing countries (UNDP, 2006:12).

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<sup>3</sup> Educational frustrations have also been noted in youth uprisings outside the context of war. For instance, South African students during apartheid became an increasingly political group, striking over teaching in Afrikaans in schools as well as frustration over the shortened school year and subsequent prospect of failing exams (Cruise O'Brien, 1996).

<b>Region</b>	<b>Total number of youths aged 15-24 ('000s)</b>	<b>Youth as a percentage of the total regional population</b>
Africa	208,897	20%
Asia	755,830	18%
Latin America and the Caribbean	105,457	18%
Northern America	49,415	14%
Oceania	5,495	15%
Europe	95,976	13%

**Table 2 Selected youth demographic data (UN, 2010:95-101)**

The literature on youth bulges has become more nuanced since it was first proposed, with political and social grievances correlating more consistently than demographic factors with youth involvement in violent social conflict (USAID, 2010). Moreover, as Jabri (1996:8) argues, analyses of war based on notions of innate drives or basic needs fail to recognise the social and political origins of conflict and complex processes of group formation. They also do not adequately explain differences among the youth cohort. Boyden (2006:5), for instance, argues that demographic analyses of youths are not a sufficient indication of the motivations of all young people in conflict because “significant structural (or generational), experiential and developmental differences exist between different age cohorts, these in turn producing different motives and opportunities for fighting in war.”

A briefing paper by USAID in 2007 recognised the complexity of the relationship between youth bulges and conflict, stating “while youth bulges *can* exacerbate existing societal tensions and conflict causes, a large youth population does not by itself lead to instability” (USAID 2007, in USAID, 2010:1). Thus, a relatively high youth cohort may constitute one contextual factor among others, which by itself is not a cause of conflict (Staveteig, 2005). A counter argument raised by Argenti (2002:146-151) is that not only is it remarkable how few youths in Africa have embraced violence, given the dire situations they are faced with, but the ‘youth bulge’ argument may in fact be seized upon more as a legitimator of State violence against youths than as an actual reflection of the actions of youths themselves. Autocratic regimes seeking to suppress dissent and silence youths may find a convenient pretext in the formulation of ‘youth’ as a social problem bent on destabilising the nation

(Argenti, 2002:146). State violence against youths can then breed resistance, which is in turn used to justify further repression (Argenti, 2002:146).

The case literature on civil wars finds that only a small proportion (estimates range from five to 33 per cent) of the population ever participate in armed opposition groups directly, even in cases of mass mobilisation (Lichbach, 1995:18 and Wood, 2003 in Mampilly, 2011:54). Part of the problem in predicting support for armed groups is that the literature does not indicate whether it is national-level or more local inequalities that are more salient. More nuanced studies argue that a combination of factors drive participation in armed groups, such as state exploitation of rural resources combined with lack of political voice (Clapham, 1998) or lack of political voice combined with authoritarianism and indiscriminate targeting by state brutality (Goodwin, 2001).

Individual motivations and factors rooted in political, economic or social structures may both be important but it is unclear what happens when an armed group operates in multiple geographic spaces, each with different local conditions, and how an armed group manages diversity in participants' motivations. Moreover, participant motivations are affected by the polymorphous nature of conflict and often change over the course of their own participation (Henriksen & Vinci, 2008). Similarly, local political, economic and social conditions change over the course of conflict. For these reasons, my research approach will conceptualise young people's action as being socially embedded and will situate their motivations within the local political, economic and social contexts of their lives.

### ***Organisational and leadership factors***

Resource mobilisation theorists argue that grievances rooted in political, economic or social structures are far too common in most societies and individual factors are too divorced from the social and political context of conflict to fully explain participation in conflict, therefore, they suggest that a number of other contextual factors must be at work mediating participation. These may be the nature of the organisation and the skill and style of its leadership (Clapham, 1998), summarised in the third column of the preceding table. For example, a compelling leader can articulate grievances, frame them in such a way that remedial action is clear and motivate participants to follow his or her lead. In Clapham's (1998) study, the organisational culture nurtured by particular leadership styles resulted in startlingly different behaviour by young participants in armed groups in Africa despite often similarly traumatic backgrounds, suggesting that leadership and organisational ethos may be a critical factor. Social movements' theorists have also argued that framing processes within organisations are critical to the construction of particular identities that drive collective action mobilisation (Hunt, Benford and Snow, 1994:185).

The case literature on armed groups, particularly those with a revolutionary aim, indicates that many are formed with a young leadership of 'pariah intellectuals' who formulate the political agenda. Weber's term of 'pariah intellectuals' originally referred to revolutionary Jewish intellectuals marginalised by anti-semitic European state structures in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Löwy, 1992), but it has also been applied more generally to any group of elites marginalised by the state. Skocpol (in Wickham-Crowley 1992), for instance, uses a similar term of 'marginal political elites' who, she argues, when excluded from full power, turn to revolutionary organisations and attempt to secure power through an alliance with peasants.

Clapham's (1998) comparative study of African insurgencies since independence supports this theory, arguing that most were rural rebellions led by urban intellectuals. However, this did not necessarily determine the organisational capacity of the movement; Museveni's NRA in Uganda was highly organised while Charles Taylor in Liberia became a classic 'warlord'. A practical consideration is the organisation of a movement and its links to pre-existing forms of public authority. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) argue that pre-existing community networks and institutions are utilised by leaders who manage to convince the members or leaders of those community institutions to follow them.

Scholars of revolution studies argue that young students are a common source of 'pariah intellectuals'. Gouldner (in Wickham-Crowley 1992), for example, argues that revolutionary leadership has consistently been dominated by highly educated intellectuals who emerge from universities and urban centres and go to the countryside to mobilise the peasants. Universities are seen to be enclaves of resistance because of the autonomous organising space they often have as well as the freedom of thought and speech they nurture (Wickham-Crowley 1992). In the case of 'pariah intellectuals' then, the literature points to their roles in mobilising participation as well as being mobilised themselves.

At the peak of the Latin American revolutions between the 1950s and 1970s, Wickham-Crowley (1992) finds the average age of revolutionary leadership was between 25 and 40 years, but not all groups are initially founded by an intellectual leadership with politically framed goals. What was noticeable about the RUF in Sierra Leone was its lack of intellectual foundation and developed political goals. It was fairly uniquely a movement formed from the 'lumpenproletariat' of disaffected, uneducated urban youth who shared no common ethnic origin or class, only a rebellious youth culture revolving around drugs and vague, populist machinations against the 'system' (Abdullah & Muana, 1998). University youth were brought in later once the movement had started, specifically to formulate a coherent political agenda and articulate grievances (Abdullah & Muana, 1998). However, Clapham (1998) argues that there has been no case of a disciplined movement

with clearly defined political projects arising without educated leadership; education is at least a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for organisational effectiveness.

Education may be a critical mediating factor in the mobilisation of mass populations into support for armed groups. Boudreau (2002), for instance, argues that education is central to any effort to mobilise people to national action (whether for or against the state). In addition to formulating the political agenda, education is argued to play a key part in shaping individual and collective identity, as well as social and political realities, and adapting local perceptions and those of insurgents to each other (Boudreau, 2002; Winthrop & Graff, 2010:29).

Education may play an important part in mobilising younger recruits for armed opposition groups for a number of reasons. Educational opportunities provided by the group can be an incentive for recruits; lack of education, poor quality education or over-education compared to available jobs can be sources of grievance; enlightenment, ideology and the organising space of educational facilities can prompt and facilitate student political activism; and education can orient youths towards particular forms of collective action. Furthermore, studies of 'pariah intellectuals' indicate that educated young people may be key to the creation of frames of reference and, therefore, to the mobilisation of other young recruits. This suggests that youths may be more important to an armed opposition group than mere pawns in elite power struggles.

### **3 Retention of recruits: Participant exit, loyalty and voice**

There is a wealth of literature addressing the reasons why young people may join armed groups, however, aside from formal, externally driven processes of participant exit in the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration literature, there is little analysis of why they stay in or leave armed opposition groups. Building on the factors that have been found to influence youth recruitment, individual factors which might influence young people's decisions to stay or leave an armed group might be disillusion with material benefits or the perception of better options elsewhere, changes in family circumstances of participants, the influence of family or friends, their level of integration in the group, personal feuds within the group, conflict fatigue or grievances over a lack of opportunities to voice opinions or influence policies within the group. These are summarised in the earlier table.

Gjelsvik and Bjørge's (2012) recent study of young Somali pirates analysed the processes by which young participants voluntarily left armed groups as well as the reasons why they joined. They found that disillusionment with the hardships of pirate life and failure to make much money from piracy prompted many young participants to leave, while group loyalty

was hardly any barrier to exit at all (Gjelsvik and Bjørge, 2012:16). Andvig and Gates's (2006:8) review of the child soldiers literature finds that young members of a military group may be retained through three forms of incentives: force; non-pecuniary benefits (often linked to ideology, religion or ethnicity); and economic incentives. If an organisation can provide pecuniary benefits to recruits, then Hirschman (1970:80-81) argues that in situations where there is no real substitute for the provision of such benefits, participants will stay in the group anyway. However, Andvig and Gates (2006:9) argue that some form of punishment for leaving is also usually necessary.

Youth exit from an armed group may in some cases be related more to the political, economic and social structures in society. For example, changing structural conditions, such as the initiation of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration processes for members of armed groups, improvements in local security conditions, better provision of governance services, changes in the political opportunity structure, changes in patterns of resource exploitation and distribution and community pressures could all be important explanatory factors. Meanwhile, young participants may be retained by the fear of state retribution should they leave or severed community/family links, making return home difficult.

In Gjelsvik and Bjørge's (2012:17-18) study of young Somali pirates, a critical factor in the process of disengagement from armed groups for many youths was the influence of family, friends and community pressure, in which religious sanctions against theft and violence played a large part (Gjelsvik and Bjørge, 2012:17-18). Also important was the duration of membership in the group and the level of integration, because the longer a participant stayed in the group the more they cut ties with friends and family outside and the more they were entrusted with secrets which made it more risky to disengage (Bjørge, 2009 and Bjørge & Horgan, 2009, in Gjelsvik and Bjørge, 2012:17).

It appears to be difficult to ignore the influence of organisational factors such as group ideology, the capacity to provide incentives or support the dependents of participations, the nature of the organisation's internal coercive power and the style of its leadership when considering why young people stay or leave armed groups. Hirschman (1970:80-81) argues that in situations where an armed group cannot provide benefits, or they can be found elsewhere making the group vulnerable to participant exit and the withdrawal of crucial support, generating loyalty is critical, thereby raising the costs of exit. Meanwhile, Weinstein's (2005) theory of the behaviour of armed opposition groups argues that groups which rely less on voluntary support and more on coercion have less need to focus on generating loyalty. However, the use of coercion in recruiting participants and extracting

civilian resources undermines popular support and generates a downward cycle of legitimacy, turning previously popular insurgents into unpopular, predatory warlords (Renamo, for example). Therefore, groups that seek to maintain their local legitimacy try to avoid this cycle and maintain a system of voluntary support through loyalty. Group loyalty can be nurtured through the promotion of a cohesive ideology, the delivery of selective incentives and the creation of high entry costs (initiation rites, for example) and exit penalties (such as denouncement, social exclusion or punishment for desertion) (Hirschman, 1970). Research into the British Army's recruitment and retention of 16-22 year olds shows that recruits may also be prevented from leaving by the use of fixed terms of service, enforced through punishments for desertion (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2011:3).

### ***The interaction of loyalty and voice in organisations***

A neglected area of research is the negotiation of generational relations and youth voice within an armed group. Although loyalty-promoting organisations may vocalise an ideological agenda, Hirschman (1970:92-93) argues that they are not necessarily interested in the opinions of their members (even though it is in their long-term interest) because their short-term interest is to act as they wish, unconstrained by complaints and desertions. Therefore, they often seek to repress members' voices and aim to develop unconscious loyalty (Hirschman, 1970:92-93). They can be aided in this by members themselves who may self-deceive, particularly if they have invested a great deal in their membership, however, many members may maintain a conscious, reasoned loyalty. Youth loyalty, retention and voice may be important issues to be negotiated within an armed group because, as Hirschman (1970:82) argues: "while loyalty postpones exit, its very existence is predicated on the possibility of exit. That even the most loyal member can exit is often an important part of his bargaining power vis-à-vis the organisation".

To address the lacuna in the academic literature around youths' continued participation, exit and voice within an armed group, this study will examine not only the factors influencing why youths decide to join the KNU, but also the factors which influence why they stay or leave. By taking Hirschman's (1970) theory as its starting point, this study will also seek to analyse the effects youth participation has on opportunities to voice their political opinions within the group.

Hirschman's theory of exit, voice and loyalty has previously been applied to social movements in Burma (Zaw Oo, 2004), focusing on the exit, voice and loyalty patterns among the exiled population at a national level, rather than at a group level. This model was used to analyse the exodus of political dissidents from Burma and the development of

their political voice in exile. Zaw Oo (2004:234) argued that exile from Burma and the pursuit of revolution from outside the country is a historical pattern of political dissent when vocal dissent is suppressed inside the country (Zaw Oo, 2004).

#### **4 Youth roles in armed opposition groups**

The child soldiers' literature as well as the extensive literature on young people's participation in armed groups from a broad range of disciplines has done much to further understanding of the factors influencing recruitment. However, much of it is focused on recruitment for violent forms of collective action, reflecting a growing concern about violence perpetrated by young people in a climate of anxiety about terrorism and insurrection (Boyden, 2006:22). Yet youths are not necessarily mobilised into violent action in armed groups (Earle, 2011:6).

The social movements literature points to non-violent youth involvement in democratic revolutions in Serbia in 2000, Ukraine in 2004 and Georgia in 2005 (McFaul, 2005). Indeed, youths' collective protest has often been seen as the 'vanguard' of some important historical changes around the world (Jeffrey, 2012:247). In this literature, the type of collective action undertaken may be influenced by culturally learned 'repertoires of contention', based on a community's history of contentious behaviour (Tilly, 1995). For example, stone throwing and suicide bombing are prominent actions by Palestinian youths in conflict with the Israeli state (both male and female) (Seif, 1999), while organising demonstrations and school closures were typical roles of South African youth during the apartheid struggle (Van Kessel, 1993).

Even in armed groups, youth action may not necessarily be violent. Highly political armed groups with a self-determination or secession objective often have more complex civilian and political structures because they have to continue demonstrating their capacity for governance in order to build or retain legitimacy (Weinstein, 2007; Mampilly, 2011). Thus, there may be a greater range of non-military roles available to youths in this type of group. This study seeks to understand the function of non-military roles of youths in armed opposition groups. The relevant literature is grouped here into roles within the political party apparatus, particularly in student or youth wings; roles in the welfare apparatus of armed groups; and roles in external organisations which may be linked to armed groups.

##### **a) Student and youth wings**

A small number of studies highlight the key role that youth wings of political parties and armed groups play in training the next generation of leaders (who are often kin relations of incumbent leaders) as well as mobilising new recruits and shoring up grassroots support

(Twum-Danso, 2004; Leao, 2004; Nolte, 2004). Wickham-Crowley's (1992) study of revolutions finds that the way in which armed groups often do this is by using 'phenomenological virtuosos' who can move through many social worlds communicating with different people, thereby reducing the 'social distance' between guerrillas and peasant supporters. Youth wings and youth leaders in particular have been observed taking on this role. 'Phenomenological virtuosos' are usually rural born and bred people who have received an unusually high level of education and can therefore appeal more successfully to both mass peasant supporters and elites (Fidel Castro, for example) (Wickham-Crowley, 1992).

Student youth in particular occupy a critical intermediary position between poorly educated populations and elites in developing countries. Additionally, the social position of students as an 'incipient elite' themselves, is argued to make developing countries more sensitive to student agitation (Altbach, 1966:175). As a group usually located in universities in urban areas and capital cities, students have been argued to be important catalysts for social change and national development in developing nations, though their influence tends to wane once change has been initiated (Altbach, 1967:26).

Student groups and youth wings are not always catalysts for social change, though, they have also been used as tools of social control, policing the activities of dissident citizens. In the Philippines, for example, President Ferdinand Marcos's *Kabataang Barangay* 'Village Youth' organisations were created to quell opposition to his dictatorship rather than provide genuine youth representation in community affairs (Velasco, 2005:87). For groups still engaged in active conflict, youth movements may also be intricately tied to the processes of conflict perpetuation, as Parsons (2004) found in Angola. Youth wings can variously be seen, then, as tools for elite manipulation, training grounds for future political and military leaders, catalysts of social change and an important link in the organisation of collective action between elites and peasants.

Although political parties may form youth wings for particular goals, youth wings may also take on a life of their own. Their loyalty to and subjugation by the parent party is by no means guaranteed, since radical and politicised youth wings often split off from political parties<sup>4</sup> (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). Thus, it is important to consider the influence that

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<sup>4</sup> The largest guerrilla group in the FMLN in El Salvador's civil war, for example, was a blend of a Communist youth splinter group, youth dissidents from the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and members of a left-wing student organisation known as *El Grupo* (The Group). Similarly, the origins of the Sandanistas in 1961 were in the Revolutionary Nicaraguan Youth (JRN) and Patriotic Nicaraguan Youth (JPN) – part of the Communist Party of Nicaragua (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). The Italian Red Brigade emerged in the 1970s from disillusioned members of the Communist Youth League who were disenchanted with the lack of activism in the Italian Communist Party (Siqueira, 2005:219).

organisations and leaders have on youth action while also considering the effects that youths themselves have on organisational dynamics. Burgess's (2002) analysis of the Zanzibar revolution shows how this may be done. His study finds that political roles were defined along generational lines, with youth organisations taking responsibility for grassroots political organising, performing mundane tasks allocated by party elders and staging protests and processions. However, he also finds that the youth wing organised themselves politically across race, class and neighbourhood boundaries unlike the party elders, which shaped the eventual outcome of the political contests of the period. Thus, his analysis demonstrates how youth wings can have important, albeit unintended, consequences for a group and the conflict in general.

Generational roles have historical significance in many countries and can change during the course of conflict. In war to peace transitions, youth movements may try to re-negotiate their roles in the new post-conflict political order. After the Zanzibar revolution, for instance, Burgess's (2002) study found that youth continued to be articulated as a crucial resource in building the post-revolutionary Zanzibar state through their support for state agendas of national development, security and cultural integrity. In post-apartheid South Africa, the voting age for the 1994 election was lowered from 18 to 14 in recognition of the role of youth activism as the backbone of the anti-apartheid struggle (McEvoy-Levy, 2001:13). However, more commonly, youths are marginalised and disenfranchised from national politics once the goals of revolution or independence have been achieved (McEvoy-Levy, 2006). In post-revolutionary Zanzibar, despite the continued importance of youth movements to the Zanzibar state, generational roles were reconfigured in terms of a return to traditional norms of respect and deference for elders as a means to encourage unity and discipline, and control and extract labour from young people (Burgess, 2002). The Youth League was constructed to exercise control over young people by sending them to labour camps or organising them into "voluntary" work parties and closely supervising their movements, associations, appearance and leisure practices (Burgess, 2002).

For newly-independent state-builders in the pursuit of orderliness, youth may be considered a basis for a dangerous autonomy. De V. Graaf's (1982) study of post-independence national youth movements in Africa found that politically active youth, many of whom had participated in independence struggles as youth wings of the main nationalist movements, were directed into youth movements which originally aimed to de-politicise and/or demobilise them. This failed, though, as many African youths faced education and employment crises (De V. Graaf, 1982). African youth movements then developed into centres for vocational training and national development, and aimed for political

socialisation of youths within a new, independent, multi-ethnic nation-building context (De V. Graaf 1982).

Although De V. Graaf's (1982) study highlights a transformation of politicised youth into positive social roles, much of the extant literature examined here stresses the lack of opportunities to do this in post-independence Africa and highlights youth transition into violent local gangs instead (Mochizuki, 2009; Reno, 2006; Hazen, 2009). As McEvoy-Levy (2001:3) argues, in post-conflict peace building processes, youths "pose at once potential threats to peace and peace building resources". However, it is unclear under what conditions a positive transformation of youth roles in conflict can occur. Additionally, although youth wings of armed groups are quite common, more research is needed to understand how their political roles are negotiated within the group.

#### **b) Welfare roles**

Youths participating in armed groups are not always violent, and they may not always be very political either. Ghimire (2002) notes that youth action in armed groups may also be directed towards tackling social problems such as gambling, drinking and spousal abuse; providing adult education to raise local awareness of issues and helping people to negotiate their way through complex state bureaucracies in order to secure their rights and entitlements. Joanna de Berry's (2008) analysis of youth groups in Afghanistan also highlights their long history in social roles as well as demonstrating the political connections and strategies that youth groups utilise both with power holders inside the country and external funding agencies.

In armed groups with welfare wings, it is reasonable to assume that youths may variously be employed as teachers, health care professionals and bureaucrats. In these roles and particularly in an armed opposition group which controls and administers territory as a *de facto* government, it may be more logical to view youth participation in a similar way to youth employment in a civil service or public sector job elsewhere. However, this perspective is not usually adopted because it implies a conception of armed opposition groups as local public authorities with a degree of legitimacy, whereas the dominant postcolonial and post-Cold War discourse finds opposition groups who were once supported by the international community as armies of national liberation frequently redefined as rebels or terrorists and their leaders as criminals (Rosen, 2005:14). This is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

### **c) Roles in external partner organisations**

Youths may also work in community-based organisations or NGOs allied with or broadly supportive of armed opposition groups, publicising certain issues or representing particular interest groups. Publicising the cause can be an important function for armed opposition groups, particularly if they face the prospect of military defeat, because securing external moral, financial or military support through international advocacy can be a decisive factor in their success (Byman *et al*, 2001). Challengers confronting powerful opponents therefore seek support outside their home states from international organisations, NGOs, the media and the broad public (Bob, 2005:1-2). NGOs can raise awareness about little-known conflicts, mobilise resources for beleaguered movements and pressure repressive governments.

The social movements literature demonstrates that during the democratic revolutions in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), youth NGOs were crucial to the mobilisation of protestors, provision of logistical support to protests and providing the first wave of protestors (early risers) Kuzio (2006:366). Most members of civil society NGOs in these countries were under the age of thirty-five, and it is argued that they were able to overcome old divisions and group animosities, reach out to foreign supporters who gave training and support in deploying non-violent strategies, which enabled them to mobilise extensive civilian support (Kuzio, 2006).

The social movements' literature also points to some overlap between youth participants in armed groups and youths engaged in non-violent organised resistance in authoritarian countries. For example, Beatty (2011) finds some collaboration between the armed and non-armed groups which make up Burma's opposition movement, while student and youth movements in South Africa worked alongside or in collaboration with armed groups opposing the apartheid state.<sup>5</sup>

Not all youth action appears political when viewed from the outside, though. Argenti (2002:135) argues that in authoritarian countries, youths' seemingly non-political activities are often overlooked by commentators on Africa's youth leading their creative but necessarily covert methods of expressing a political voice, for example through religion, theatre or folklore, to be missed by academics, NGOs and governments. As Nordstrom and Robben (1995:6-7) argue, "the lives of those who suffer under violence or are engaged in warfare are not defined exclusively in global political, economic, social or military terms" despite these being at the forefront of scholarly and popular attention, "but also in the

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<sup>5</sup> Youths were particularly prominent campaigning on education issues in South Africa during apartheid, for example (Van Kessel, 1993).

small, often creative, acts of the everyday”. This argument echoes Scott’s (1987:xvi) ‘Weapons of the Weak’ thesis which argues that most subordinate classes of people rarely have the luxury of open political activity, this being the preserve of the middle class and the intelligentsia. Instead they employ small acts of covert resistance to those who seek to exploit their resources and labour; acts which may multiply over time and across populations to have a significant political effect (Scott, 1987:xvii).

The relationships which youths working in external organisations have with armed groups sharing the same geographic space may be very complex, especially if they are funded and accountable to other third parties, such as international agencies. However, there is currently little research which takes into account the relationships and networks between such groups. Research on the delivery of humanitarian aid in areas controlled by armed groups provides some indication of how donor agencies may negotiate humanitarian access and aid delivery, but there are very few studies which examine how armed opposition groups (or youth organisations linked to them) deal with international funding agencies.

Given the relative lack of analysis of youths in non-military roles in armed groups, I propose an approach that examines the key non-military roles that youths are involved in through an armed opposition groups and analyses the functions these serve for the group. In addition to explaining the purpose of youth participation in an armed group, this approach may also shed light on the changing strategies an armed group adopts. It also aims to analyse the effects that youth participation in non-military roles has on internal generational relations and the group’s non-military operations.

In the case studied here, the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) operates simultaneously as the KNU’s political youth wing and an INGO-funded community-based organisation (CBO). As such, it provides an opportunity to analyse not only the roles and relationships youths have as youth wing members but also how organisations affiliated to armed opposition groups manage their relationships with external donors. Youths also work in the extensive welfare apparatus of the KNU, thus youth roles in the organisation and delivery of welfare services through an armed group are also included in this study.

## **5 Conclusion**

In understanding the dynamics of conflict it is important to understand how and why young people participate in armed groups, the purpose of their roles to the group and the effects their participation have on inter-generational relations and hierarchies, ideas about youth roles and the armed group’s political and strategic goals. Prior research which has focused on youth activities in conflict zones, whether inside or outside armed groups has

allowed numerous micro-level studies to be conducted with small numbers of participants<sup>6</sup>, primarily focused on young people involved in violence. Yet debates on the involvement of young people in violent conflict have been criticised for being sensationalised and based on misperception about the nature of youth involvement in war (Boyden, 2006:22). Writing on child soldiers from a human rights and applied research perspective in particular has perpetuated the idea that young people's actions in war are the result of acts of commission or omission by adults, paving the way for a universal notion of childhood and child rights to be advocated, but infantilising older youths' actions (Boyden, 2006:8). Meanwhile, the literature on demographic 'youth bulges' considers older youths' propensity to engage in violence but is conceptually and methodologically problematic and tends to induce an unwarranted 'moral panic' (Boyden, 2006:2-5).

This thesis argues that differences in young people's lives and experiences of conflict are too great for a universal understanding of 'youth' participation in armed groups to be usefully applied to policy prescriptions. To craft appropriate policies and programmes that address the actual situations of young people in a variety of armed groups, a deep understanding of social categories, generational relations and the experiences of young people themselves in different conflict contexts is needed.

The literature on young people's participation in armed groups, especially the extensive studies on child soldiers, has been very useful in exploring the dynamics that conspire to encourage participation in armed groups, but so far there is little understanding of the non-violent actions of young people in conflict situations, especially outside Africa. Although several studies have highlighted the importance of welfare wings, youth wings and party structures to some armed groups, youth participation in non-military roles has in general received much less academic attention. In terms of how young people participating in armed opposition groups should be conceptualised, the literature on child soldiers is less useful when considering young people aged over 18 (unless they were recruited before age 18) due to a general consensus that they are at the age of majority for independent decision-making. The micro-dynamics of non-military youth participation in armed groups, including youth mobilisation, recruitment, progression and exit, are, therefore, still poorly understood.

This chapter proposed addressed this lacuna and the relative lack of research on youth involvement in armed groups in Asia by studying youths participating in non-military roles

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<sup>6</sup> For example, Parsons (2004) in Angola; Leao, (2004) in Mozambique; Stavrou (2004) in Uganda; Maclure and Denov (2006) in Sierra Leone.

in the KNU's youth wing, as well as the non-military roles of other youth participants located outside the youth wing but in organisations affiliated to the KNU.

An increasing number of scholars are calling for civil wars and other forms of organised violent conflict to be conceptualised as ongoing, dynamic processes which generate various incentives and constraints over time, rather than discrete events for which participation derives exclusively from expectations about outcomes (for example, Cramer, 2003; Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007). Since the KNU has been in conflict with the Burmese state for over sixty years, it is to be expected that the dynamics of the conflict will have changed over time. Therefore, this study assumes that youths' participation patterns, generational relations and roles may be constantly in flux and seeks to understand the changing effects they may have by examining young participants' life histories, the organisational history of the KNU and changing youth roles with the group. In addition, Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) point out that the spatial and temporal logics of participation vary greatly so multiple logics of participation may coexist in a single war (as Humphreys & Weinstein (2008) also argue). This is particularly relevant to this study because the KNU operates in multiple geographical areas with differing contexts. The local conditions in each of these areas are discussed in more detail in chapter five.

To address the lacuna in the academic literature around youths' continued participation, exit and voice within an armed group, this chapter made the case for a study which examines not only the reasons why young participants decide to join the KNU, but also the reasons why they stay or leave. I advocate using the same approach as that proposed for studying recruitment, which considers individual factors; political, economic and social structure factors; and organisational factors that appear to influence participants' decisions. I also assume, as Wickham Crowley (1992) argues, that the loyalty of youth wings to the parent party is by no means guaranteed. By taking Hirschman's (1970) theory as its starting point, this study seeks to analyse why young members leave and the effects their participation have on their opportunities to express political voice within the group.

The extant literature on the roles of youths in armed opposition groups indicates that youth leaders and youth wings may be important as mediators who negotiate the needs of the armed group and the grassroots population (Wickham Crowley, 1992). Youths can operate within or allied to armed group structures and youth wings have variously been viewed as tools for elite manipulation, training grounds for future political and military leaders or schools of citizenship and leadership (Del Felice & Wisler, 2007). However, this chapter argued that there is a gap in understanding the functions of youths' non-military roles for the group and the effects (intended or otherwise) these have on the group, the

conflict and the youth cohort itself. Other issues which have been neglected are how youths are matched to particular roles, the dynamics of a young recruit's career from entry to exit, and whether youths are more suited to certain roles. These questions are most suited to an in-depth study of youths which examines their life histories as well as the context of their employment in organisations linked to armed opposition groups. The precise methodology I propose to study these questions is elaborated on in chapter four.

Armed opposition groups vary wildly resulting in a great diversity of explanations for youth participation, therefore, it is necessary to narrow down the focus on the group involved in conflict and the nature of the conflict itself. This study is concerned with politically-based armed opposition groups who are involved in a 'peripheral conflict' with the state in the borderlands. Understanding their aims, historical reasons for engaging in conflict with the state and modes of operation are fundamental to understanding how policies and interventions directed towards youths in the group can be successful, therefore, the next chapter situates political armed opposition groups within a broader literature on state-making and peripheral conflicts in developing countries.

### **Chapter 3: Youths in Armed Opposition Groups: Understanding the micro-dynamics of state-making from the periphery**

The central question of this thesis asks why and how youths participate in an armed opposition group, but given the great diversity of explanations for youth behaviour in various types of armed groups and conflicts found in the previous chapter, it is necessary to narrow the focus somewhat. This study is concerned with a particular type of conflict between the state and armed opposition groups that is especially prevalent in the borderlands of Southeast Asian states. Borderlands are fundamentally “an area through which a boundary line runs” (Morehouse, 2004:29). Conventional borderlands are spaces through which an international border runs, where a borderland society is a social and cultural system straddling the border (Goodhand, 2005:193). They may also be internal spaces which do not straddle an international border but are characterised by weak state penetration, often difficult terrain (mountains, marshes, jungle or sea, for instance) and populations who have resisted the central state’s attempts to exert control over their labour and resources, as in James Scott’s (2009) study of the Southeast Asian borderlands (Goodhand, 2005:193). Finally, borderlands may be entire countries which act as regional ‘buffer zones’ or ‘shatter belts’ between empires (Goodhand, 2005:193; Morehouse, 2004:29).

This chapter seeks to understand the nature of ‘peripheral conflicts’<sup>7</sup> in the borderlands of Southeast Asia and the ways in which armed opposition groups engage in conflict with the state. It asks why and how the state and armed opposition groups are embroiled in long-running conflicts in the borderlands of Southeast Asia, what this type of conflict is fundamentally about and how they may be changing in the post-Cold War period. It then seeks to use a greater understanding of both the conflict and the group to elucidate the types of non-military activities the armed group is engaged in and suggest ways in which youths may be involved.

The first part of the chapter examines the literature on state-making and conflict in order to understand the nature of armed opposition groups engaged in peripheral conflicts. By ‘state-making’, I adopt Tilly’s (1985) use of the term to mean both state formation and state consolidation activities. State-making is understood to be, as Cohen, Brown and Organski

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<sup>7</sup> Fearon (2004:277) uses the term ‘peripheral insurgencies’ to describe “civil wars involving rural guerrilla bands operating typically near the state’s borders”. I prefer the word ‘conflict’ instead of ‘insurgency’ since it is less normatively-loaded with assumptions about the legitimacy of borders, armed groups and state governments.

(1981:902) describe, “a historical process characterized by the creation of political order at a new spatial and institutional level”. The new spatial and institutional level referred to here is understood to be the state, which (often violently) redistributes political control of power resources away from sub-national collectivities and polities in a centralisation of power (Cohen, Brown and Organski, 1981:902). State consolidation activities may also include activities now referred to as ‘state-building’, but I avoid using this term because in current parlance it refers to external interventions since the 1990s to establish key institutions and processes in order to form a particular kind of democratic, market-based state (Fritz & Menocal, 2007:16).

Using Tilly’s (1978, 1985, 1992) and Gallant’s (1999) theories of the highly coercive nature of state-making and the complex roles that armed non-state actors have played in state formation processes, as well as North *et al.*’s (2009) theory of developing states as ‘limited access orders’, it is argued here that armed opposition groups should be seen as part of the long and brutal politics of sovereignty and state-making, rather than actors outside or necessarily against the state.

In Southeast Asia in particular, it is argued that local histories of state-making and the geographical conditions of difficult terrain and sparsely populated, remote areas, have favoured ongoing conflicts over state-making in borderland areas (Scott, 2009; Grundy-Warr, 2006). Peripheral conflicts in this region are fundamentally about sovereignty and the spatialisation of power, but frequently they have taken on an ethno-nationalist character due to the nature of state-making and the particular logic of conflict employed by the state and armed opposition groups. Southeast Asian states have attempted to co-opt or crush local powerful individuals or armed groups, which has magnified the state’s interest in penetrating and consolidating its power in the borderlands, creating a ‘border effect’ that strengthens their capacities (McCoy, 1999; Gallant, 1999). However, it also creates highly fragmented patterns of sovereignty, legitimacy and coercive power as locally powerful leaders establish variegated relationships with the state.

The second part of the chapter examines the relationship between armed groups’ conflict strategies and the development of non-military roles in their bureaucratic structures. I draw on Naylor’s (2004) analysis of the links between armed groups’ revenue streams and the development of bureaucratic capacity and Mampilly’s (2011) study of governance provision by armed groups to explore the types of non-military roles that emerge in armed opposition groups with more extensive bureaucratic structures. While these indicate some important non-military roles, I find that neither study explains how an armed opposition group’s bureaucratic apparatus changes as it becomes militarily weaker and loses the

territory it once had. Nor do they elaborate on other resources in the borderlands which armed opposition groups have to fall back on such as resources delivered to refugees or IDPs by INGOs. Conflicts are highly dynamic and armed opposition groups as well as states must continually find ways to adapt to a changing international, national and local environment. Moreover, changes within armed opposition groups imply changes in the roles and relations between participants, including the youth cohort. Thus, it is argued that understanding these changing processes may supplement studies of the military strategies of armed opposition groups, thereby providing a more complete picture of armed opposition groups in peripheral conflicts.

### **1 Peripheral conflicts and state-making in the borderlands**

Modern states are territorial entities which seek to solidify their boundaries and assert control over their residents by monopolising violence, establishing legitimacy, controlling revenue and transforming social identities (Blanchard, 2005:694). However, the legitimacy of every single post-colonial Southeast Asian state has been challenged by armed opposition groups along the geographical periphery, ethnic or religious minorities, or those espousing a different political ideology (Tan, 2007:3-8). Where these have resulted in civil wars, they have lasted longer in Asia than anywhere else, displaying many similar dynamics (Fearon, 2004:283). They are often insurgencies in peripheral areas of the state populated by ethnic minorities who face a majority ethnic-dominated state, although they may also be organised by religious affiliation and, much less commonly since the end of the Cold War, by political ideology, usually communism (Tan, 2007; Fearon, 2004:283).

In academic studies of the causes of conflict in developing countries, there is a growing interest in the connection between state making, state failure and violent conflict (Cohen, Brown & Organski, 1981; Tilly, 1985, Migdal, 1988; Posen, 1993; Gates, 2002; Reno, 2003; Hui, 2005, Kaldor, 2007; Fritz & Menocal, 2007). Some writers identify causal connections between state fragility and civil war because political instability generates a fragmenting of authority and rival ethnic or political groups face a 'security dilemma' and take pre-emptive action to secure an advantageous position (Posen, 1993). Conversely, civil war may lead to state collapse (Kaldor, 2007).

Other scholars examine the actions of state leaders themselves and their relationship to conflict. In pre-colonial state-making practices, Hui (2005) distinguishes between 'self-weakening' and 'self-strengthening' revenue extraction techniques used by states. 'Self-weakening' methods included the use of tax farming and mercenaries (bandits and pirates, for instance), who tend to be very unreliable and violent state-making partners (Tilly, 1985:173; Hui, 2005). 'Self-strengthening' methods included national conscription, national

taxation and development of a meritocratic bureaucracy. In analysing some of the world's weakest states, Migdal (1988) and Reno (2003) both argue that many weak states are self-weakening because they are engaged in the 'politics of survival', which are actions designed to prevent local strong men or rival factions within the state from becoming too powerful. 'Dirty tricks' to remove leaders of powerful non-state organisations and shuffling officials around different state offices to prevent loyalties developing in potentially strong agencies are common tactics (Migdal, 1988). Such actions deliberately weaken the state's coercive capacity and bureaucratic coherence in order to protect state leaders. Conversely, the state may weaken its opponents' coercive capacity by attempting to fragment armed opposition groups (Heupel, 2009:65).

The state-building literature argues that more effective state institutions will prevent civil war. The term 'state-building' refers to "the set of actions undertaken by national and/or international actors to establish, reform and strengthen state institutions where these have been seriously eroded or are missing" (Caplan, 2005 in Fritz & Menocal, 2007:13). It involves building security provision, the rule of law, delivery of basic goods and services through state institutions and the political legitimacy of the state Brinkerhoff, 2007 in Fritz & Menocal, 2007:13). Thus, it is assumed that state-building involves sweeping away feudal structures and replacing them with institutions based on individual freedom, market openness and democracy, with a Weberian 'rational-legal' bureaucracy. Much of the state-building literature is pre-occupied with the technical aspects of international involvement in state-building, rather than its underlying logic, the type of state that is to be built and even whether existing states are worth preserving in their current format (Fritz & Menocal, 2007). Moreover, development interventions and state-building projects aimed at strengthening the central state problematically ignore the long histories of centre-periphery relations, the impact of previous state formation attempts in periphery areas and the presence of local authority structures (Dobbins et al. 2007, in Scott, 2007). They also tend to take a normative stance that questioning current state boundaries and the legitimacy of centralised government will lead to a collapse in the sovereign state system.

Contained within much of the literature on state-making and civil war are two assumptions and binary distinctions concerning the nature of the state. First is the assumption that the state commands a monopoly over the means of coercion (Gates, 2002). The failure to do so is then assumed to lead to a Hobbesian state of anarchy and disorder, especially among international relations theorists (Yannis, 2002:822). The presence of armed groups outside the state is then assumed to be both a product and a cause of state failure (Yannis, 2002). However, the territorial limits of the state do not necessarily give way to disorder, rather,

contemporary forms of political regulation, accumulation, investment and institutionalisation operating at the local level beyond the reach of conventional states are found in a diverse array of countries (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010:541). Moreover developing states very often do not hold a monopoly over the means of coercion, instead they enter into a number of agreements with other coercive agents which blur the boundaries of sovereignty.

The second assumption is an implicit binary distinction between the state and the non-state and political legitimacy. One of the problems with the hegemony of the sovereign state system is that when civil conflict is discussed, the state is often equated with law and order and political legitimacy, while other armed actors operating outside the state are relegated to the status of illegitimate, predatory rebels, who are engaged in a 'privatisation of violence' (Kaldor, 2007:97; Reno, 2006). Consequently, the problem becomes one of how to eliminate the rebels and extend the power of the state. These arguments have been criticised for overlooking the role of the state itself in fuelling intra-state wars through state violence towards members of the population, the promotion of nationalistic discourses, or other actions that do little to build and much to erode its own legitimacy (De Graaff, 2005; Scherrer, 2003).

Gallant's (1999) theory of bandits and state-making represents a corrective to both of these assumptions. His examination of brigandage and piracy around the globe over the last 300 years demonstrates the complexity of the 'legitimate' wielding of coercive violence by both states and armed non-state actors. He points to a symbiotic relationship between non-state armed actors and state actors in state formation and consolidation, especially in the development of capitalist networks and the centralisation of a monopoly of coercion (Gallant, 1999:26). Gallant (1999:30) argues that as states have expanded and transformed local modes of production to capitalism, peasant smallholders have been displaced from rural land in the periphery to make way for commercialised agrarian regimes. As a result, poverty, servitude and social unrest have increased, providing fertile ground for violence. The poor integration of peripheries into a central apparatus still struggling to take form then provides an opening for armed intermediaries, whom Gallant (1999:43) terms 'military entrepreneurs', to mediate between the centre and its margins (McCoy, 1999:130). In Gallant's (1999:27) terminology, 'military entrepreneurs' are people who use arms to threaten or wield violence as their "stock in trade". They have had varying degrees of legitimacy over time as weak states have supplemented their lack of a monopoly of coercive power in the periphery by engaging in informal local relationships with local armed and powerful actors (Gallant, 1999:41-43).

Gallant's approach recalls Charles Tilly's (1985) metaphor of 'war-making and state-making as organised crime' in which state and non-state actors, such as bandits, pirates and gangs all seek to consolidate their hold on power, often by acting as protection rackets, and therefore belong on the same continuum of organised coercion and extraction. The only distinction he then sees between them is their degree of legitimacy (Tilly, 1985). Tilly's (1978, 1992) studies of European state formation point to the highly coercive nature of state-making in the European historical experience. In Europe, a variety of primarily coercive strategies were used by royal state-makers to extract men, materials and money from the population residing in their claimed territory (Finer, 1975, in Taylor & Botea, 2008). These included conscription, contracts with mercenaries, extensive and multiple varieties of taxation on flows of goods or resources accrued by the population, and credit agreements with rich capitalists promising a dividend from the spoils of war (Tilly, 1985).

Tilly (1978, 1992) also points to the development of capitalism and civilianisation of government as by-products of state-making. In many cases of European state formation, extraction of surplus production from the population was not lucrative enough to fund increasingly expensive military projects, because there was not enough surplus to extract in the first place. Therefore, state-making also involved the promotion of capital accumulation, the monetisation of the economy and the separation of direct producers from ownership of resources, enforced by contracts and property law (Mann, 1988). This history demonstrates that the pre-modern European state was not an objective, benign institution, it was coercive, repressive and biased towards elite interests. As Jackson (1990:22) argues: "The history of the modern state is in no small part a history of rulers who are illegitimate, governments that are disorganized or incompetent, and subjects who are indifferent, isolated, alienated, cowed, or in rebellion." Despite this evidence, there is an assumption in contemporary state-building approaches that if state institutions were simply transformed into the kinds of impersonal, open-access institutions found in Western developed countries, then peace and stability would follow (North et al, 2009). Not only is this approach argued to be inappropriate to developing countries, it also tends to obscure the highly conflictive nature of state-making practices and the complex nature of developing states today. As a result, several scholars are calling for a re-think of the nature of the developing state.

#### **a) Re-thinking the nature of the developing state**

There is a growing dissatisfaction in the state failure literature with the dominance of Weberian concepts of the state, which have been argued to be too Western-centric to apply to post-colonial states (Kapferer, 2005, in Hagmann & Péclard 2010:541). North *et al.*

(2009) argue that a Weberian concept of the state is, in fact, only a feature of modern, developed states with impersonal, 'open-access' characteristics. Far from being the kinds of rational-bureaucratic states found in the West with institutionalised bargaining processes, North *et al.* (2009) argue that developing states are more often 'limited access orders'. In limited access orders, powerful leaders and privileged individuals cooperate to prevent violence. Political leaders in power limit "access to valuable political and economic functions as a way to generate rents" and use these rents to privilege powerful individuals who maintain order and solve the problem of violence for the state (North *et al.*, 2007:3). The state then relies on external legitimacy to profit from international capital, and patrimonial legitimacy from non-state coercive groups incorporated into their patronage networks.

A temporary balance of interests is argued to be more typical than a perpetually organised state (as in the Western model), with control of violence dispersed throughout multiple dominant players which only achieves stability if these dominant interests are given credible incentives not to use violence (Migdal, 1988; Lund, 2006; North *et al.* 2009:258). Since dominant interests and country conditions are always changing, this kind of state is constantly shifting and attempting to accommodate changing interests, often resulting in state instability and conflict (North *et al.*, 2009). In this model of political order in developing countries, civil war is seen as the result of an imbalance of rents to dominant players, who then mobilise the coercive resources they possess to seek a more favourable distribution.

This model of the state is more appropriate to studies of peripheral conflict in developing countries because it does not assume that the state is an ontologically pre-given entity, instead it views the state as the product of complex processes of often conflictive negotiations that occur at the interface between the public and the private, the informal and the formal, the illegal and the legal (Hagmann and Peclard, 2010:552). Importantly, it takes into consideration that these processes may include negotiations with alternative forms of public authority outside the state. Where these forms of public authority are armed groups, it is more accurate to see states as being "deeply involved in the emergence and logic of armed groups" (Schlichte, 2009:248). It is not just armed groups that wield public authority though, Lund's (2006) study of alternative sources of public authority outside the state, which he labels 'twilight institutions', highlights the range of different actors which may possess some degree of authority, including churches, neighbourhood associations and various types of armed group. Moreover, the literature on NGOs, international agencies

and multinational corporations (MNCs) highlights the assumption of sovereignty by these actors even while they do not seek to challenge state authority (Mampilly, 2007:243).

Gallant (1999) and Tilly's (1985, 1992) studies of the symbiotic relationship between states and bandits, and North *et al.*'s (2009) theory of developing states as 'limited access orders' make a clear case that armed non-state actors should be seen as part of the long and brutal politics of sovereignty and state-making, rather than actors outside or necessarily against the state. In Southeast Asia, sovereignty and state-making have been particularly contested as the following section demonstrates.

#### **b) The state and peripheral conflicts in Southeast Asia**

In Southeast Asia's history, Scott (2009) argues that many of the same processes of land enclosure and pacification of the local population found in Tilly's (1985, 1992) and Gallant's (1999) studies are evident. Before the idea that the state should control all of the territory to fixed borders became hegemonic with post-colonial conceptions of statehood, pre-colonial texts show that state power in Southeast Asia revolved around economic centres and rarely reached the hinterlands (Walker, 1999:7). Moreover, Scott (2009) argues that non-state people in the Southeast Asian borderlands have long avoided central state-making practices.

Resistance to state-making among borderland people continued through the colonial period, with colonial rulers finding that borderland societies demonstrated a much greater capacity for opposition to foreign rule than centralised, lowland kingdoms did (Scherrer, 2003:12). Although colonial rule forcefully curbed the powers of customary chieftaincies and pre-colonial political forms (Englebert, 2002:78), it did not always entirely eliminate them and indirect rule was common.

In the post-colonial period, territorial control and the development of the state's coercive power became more important as national boundaries were demarcated in independence transitions. Post-colonial state elites then overwhelmingly adopted the Westphalian idea of absolute state sovereignty to the edges of state borders and utilised the colonial structures of coercion to pursue a changed emphasis on penetration of the periphery, rather than radiance of power (Walker, 1999). As a result, absolute rather than multiple and overlapping national sovereignty, control of civil society, the constitutive monopoly of legitimate violence and the right to expropriate economic resources formed the objectives of post-colonial regimes (Scherrer, 2003). However, the claims of the central state to absolute sovereignty over the borderlands, although recognised in the international state

system, have often not been an empirical reality on the ground and have been violently contested (Jackson, 1990; Herbst, 2000).

From the perspective of the civilian population in the periphery, Scott (2009) and Scherrer (2003:12) argue that the imposition of direct rule in the post-colonial period met with opposition from local populations who preferred to maintain their status as ‘acephalous’ or self-rule societies without centralised forms of governance. At this point, the desires of unarmed civilians in the borderlands have intersected with those of military entrepreneurs operating without the sanction of the law. Gallant (1999) argues that as the state expands its reach and coercive power, armed non-state actors are drawn and pushed into remote, inaccessible areas where the difficult terrain and their links to the rural population protect and shelter them from state pursuers.

In semi-peripheral areas Gallant (1999:33-34) argues that armed groups or individuals outside the state had less freedom due to the more restrictive physical geography and had to rely to a greater extent on the cooperation and compliance of the local population: “social geography, as it were, had to take the place of the cover provided by the physical environment in the periphery”. In this situation, armed groups operated less as predators and engaged in alliances with local populations wishing to retain or regain local sovereignty (Gallant, 1999). As a result, the rise in power of armed non-state actors in the periphery and semi-periphery of states magnifies the state’s interest in penetrating and consolidating its power in the borderlands (Gallant, 1999; McCoy, 1999). Through a process of either co-opting or crushing locally powerful individuals or armed groups, states experience a ‘border effect’ that strengthens their capacities and establishes the “writ of the state” as “the law of the land” in peripheral areas (Gallant; 1999:51-52).

### **c) The rise of ethno-nationalist armed groups in Southeast Asia**

Frequently in Southeast Asia, borderland conflicts have taken on an ethno-nationalist character due to the nature of state-making and the particular logic of conflict employed by the state and armed opposition groups (Brown, 1994). Fundamental to ethno-nationalist forms of peripheral conflict is the articulation of national identities by both the state and its opponents. Following the end of colonial rule, it has been argued that the majority of states have adopted particularistic versions of nationalism based on an ethnic identity of the ruling group, which tends to exclude other groups, in an attempt to overcome the incongruence of state and society, legitimate the state and re-shape it in its own image (Englebert, 2002:98; Shultz, 1995). The principle of nationalism, which holds that the state and the nation should be congruent, therefore, has largely replaced the principle of dynastic

sovereignty on which agrarian empires were based in the pre-colonial period (Gellner, 1983, in Cederman et al, 2010).

In his studies of the European experience of state-making, Tilly (1992:101) found that cultural homogenisation projects often stirred massive resistance by unassimilated minorities, which occasionally resulted in mass rebellion. It also led to nationalism in the sense of the mobilisation of populations that do not have a state of their own to a claim for political independence (Tilly, 1992:116). Church networks were an important factor in the making or breaking of states; for example, in Northern European Protestant countries, state churches became major agencies for the standardisation of national languages and for the socialisation of the masses into unified national cultures. Conversely, in Southern Europe, the Catholic Church played a large part in the development of peripheral nationalisms and secessionist movements (Rokkan, in Flora et al. 1999:149).

Although Tilly (1992) highlights the centrality of state-led nationalism to the European experience of state-making, it is much less evident in contemporary studies of civil conflict which tend to treat the state as an ethnically-neutral actor, rarely linking state nationalism to outbreaks of political violence (Cederman *et al*, 2010).<sup>8</sup> However, Wimmer *et al.* (2009:317) argue that “the modern state is not an ethnically neutral actor or a mere arena for political competition, but a central object of and participant in ethno-political power struggles.” Quantitative studies of conflict support this argument. The Minorities at Risk dataset describes 200 groups, motivated by discrimination and threats to group identity, which openly resisted their incorporation into states controlled by other ethnic groups in the 1945-89 period (Gurr, 1993, in Shultz, 1995). While many took the form of non-violent protest, around half initiated some form of armed conflict. More compelling evidence is found in Wimmer and Min’s (2006) dataset of civil war. Since the end of the Cold War, they find that ethno-nationalist wars count for 75 per cent of all wars with more than 1,000 battle deaths.<sup>9</sup>

In many post-colonial countries, the central state’s reliance on ethnically-based patrimonial politics as the basis for state political legitimacy has been argued to have prompted a large number of ethno-nationalist anti-regime struggles to emerge from below, especially in peripheral areas where minority groups are most often located (Brown, 1994; Scherrer,

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<sup>8</sup> State discrimination, however, not necessarily as a result of nationalism, has been linked to rebellion with scholars generally agreeing that discrimination against a minority group encourages rebellion (Okomoto & Wilkes, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Scherrer’s (2003) study of ethnonational conflict finds that Africa has overtaken Asia since 1995 with the world’s largest share of violent conflicts by mortality and number of cases, although West Asia/Middle East and Southeast Asia account for over half of Asia’s share.

2003). This has been especially marked in Southeast Asia (Brown, 1994). Relying on ethno-nationalism for political legitimacy means holders of political office build their legitimacy by favouring ethnic kin when distributing public goods or services (Wimmer *et al.*, 2009:321). This is especially likely where there are weak civil society institutions capable of representing political interests along non-ethnic lines or inadequate processes for political inclusion prompting a disproportionate reliance on ethnic networks in politics and the marketplace (Habyarimana et al 2008; Sambanis, 2002; Congleton, 1995; Wimmer, 2002; Carment, 2003:29).

State nationalism has meant that armed groups and peripheral conflicts in Southeast Asia have frequently taken on an ethno-nationalist character (Brown, 1994), but they are primarily conflicts over processes of territorialisation, especially the monopolisation of land, resources and coercive power, and conflicting claims to sovereignty. Fearon (2004:283) calls peripheral conflicts ‘sons-of-the-soil’ insurgencies and divides them into two types: conflicts over land where ethnic minority communities in peripheral areas face in-migration pressures from the majority ethnic group, and conflicts over resources where minority groups are concerned by the state’s monopoly over resource extraction from their areas. However, these are not distinct categories, peripheral conflicts may contain elements of both.

In Southeast Asia today, peripheral conflicts and forms of co-existence between the state and armed opposition groups are ongoing as the state continues to strive to find ways of consolidating its power to the edges of its boundaries. As a result, the rise of the modern Southeast Asian state has created “interstices, zones within and between nations” where armed groups wield degrees of coercive power with shades of legitimacy, in some cases creating ‘shadow states’ which mimic the central state (McCoy, 1999:130). In Burma, for example, the ‘drug lord’, Khun Sa, “manipulated a variety of social, ethnic, economic, political and geographic situations” since independence and in the process created a shadow state in pockets of the borderlands that “on occasion threatened to emerge as a viable national polity in its own right” (Gallant, 1999:45).

In summary, peripheral conflicts are understood here to be the result of incomplete state formation processes, whereby the central state has not yet penetrated or fully consolidated its control over peripheral areas (Migdal, 1988). As a result, post-colonial attempts to establish the state in peripheral areas are met by challenges from local power-holders who resent the establishment of direct rule, extraction of resources, projection of coercive power and/or marginalisation of minority groups’ cultural identities (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997:211; Fearon, 2004:283; Brown, 1994). These challenges are directed

towards the state's processes of territorialisation and establishment of a monopoly of coercion over the resources contained within its claimed territory. As such, peripheral conflicts are fundamentally about sovereignty and the spatialisation of power. However, armed groups are often co-opted by the state, or effectively bought off through the state's provision of rents, which they may then use to build their own patrimonial legitimacy locally (McCoy, 1999). Thus, patterns of sovereignty, coercive power, control of resources and local legitimacy can be highly fragmented. Understanding peripheral conflicts, then, requires a departure from state-centric studies towards "a view from the periphery" which looks at the historical effects of the imposition of a national border on social dynamics, conflicts over state formation in peripheral areas and how borderland dynamics affect the formation and territorialisation of states (Baud and Van Schendel, 1997:212).

## **2 The micro-dynamics of armed opposition groups and peripheral conflicts**

Moving on from examining the nature of peripheral conflicts in Southeast Asia and the symbiotic relationship between the state and armed groups in coercive state-making practices, this section examines the micro-dynamics of armed opposition groups and peripheral conflicts from the political economy literature. In borderland areas, this body of literature points to a number of conditions that favour the development of armed conflict including; the physical geography of the land, especially difficult terrain (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Herbst, 2000); large states (possibly because of their lack of cohesiveness and history of indirect rule) (Fearon, 2004:287; Wimmer *et al.*, 2011); in-migration resulting in land pressures (Fearon, 2004); sanctuary in a neighbouring country (Salehyan); outside support, usually from the Soviet Union during the Cold War, but occasionally also from the USA (Kalyvas & Balecells, 2010); and weak, ethnically plural states (Carment, 2003:30). Studies of the micro-dynamics of violence perpetrated by armed opposition groups have found that competition between groups over an area, the internal organisation of the group, the types of revenue streams it relies on and rebel capacity are all important factors (Kalyvas, 2006; Wood, 2003a; Weinstein, 2007).

### **a) Revenue Streams and bureaucratic structures**

The type of revenue streams an armed group relies on has been a particular focus. Weinstein's (2007) study distinguishes between two types of revenue streams, which give an indication of the coercive nature of an armed group. He argues that resource-rich groups which rely on lootable resources tend to behave predatorily and fall into a downward cycle of violence and loss of legitimacy (Weinstein, 2007). By contrast, groups which have to rely on the local population for support (which he terms 'activist' groups) need to continue to demonstrate their capacity for governance in order to build legitimacy

(Weinstein, 2007). Within an 'activist' group, entire administrative systems may be established in addition to the military, as the power-holders seek to prove their capacity for governance and provide collective benefits to their supporters (usually education, health and infrastructure) (Weinstein, 2007).

While Weinstein (2007) focuses on the patterns of violence armed groups adopt and links this to the types of revenue streams they have, Naylor (1993) provides an in-depth analysis of the processes by which the development of bureaucratic structures takes place as guerrillas transform their revenues and methods of warfare. Using Mao's three stages of guerrilla warfare as a guide, Naylor (1993; 2004:45) argues that in the first stage, small bands of guerrillas rely on sporadic and predatory activities in 'zones of contention' mimicking those used by organised criminals, such as kidnapping and bank robbery. Olson's (1993) category of 'roving bandits' would also be in this stage. At this stage there are no non-military activities to speak of as the group is small, loosely connected and relatively un-hierarchical.

In the second stage, Naylor (2004) argues that insurgent groups more openly dispute or attempt to undermine the state's political legitimacy and extract capital for themselves by destroying the formal economy or taking advantage of the government's own inept handling of the economy. The population's subsequent reliance on the black market economy further discredits the government's legitimacy, shrinks the fiscal resources available to the government and expands the relative size of the black markets from which armed opposition groups can draw material support through taxation on black market trade through territory they control (Naylor, 2002). In this stage, an insurgent group develops a 'parasitical' relationship with the local population, much like mafia groups, but also faces increased pressure to care for the dependents of militants and provide some assistance to the supporting population in its 'zone of expansion' (Naylor, 2004:45). Olson's (1993) 'stationary bandits' category fits here. Rudimentary welfare systems may be developed as well as some basic administrative functions to manage the group's more complex revenue streams. Armed opposition groups may also receive outside support in the form of political backing, military assistance and/or humanitarian aid. Kalyvas and Balcells (2011) argue that during the Cold War, it was primarily the Soviet Union that supported opposition groups, which usually professed a leftist agenda, with the United States only providing occasional support to opposition groups, such as the Contras. However, Naylor's (2004:80-81) study of the financing of insurgent groups argues that communist funding to left-wing insurgent groups was actually very minimal, while US,

British, French and Saudi support to right-wing opposition groups was much more voluminous.

In the final stage, where the group succeeds in establishing extensive 'zones of control', revenues tend to come from indirect taxation (on trade flows and user fees for social services) and are symbiotic with the emerging parallel economy controlled by the group (Naylor, 1993). This stabilises the funding base, but the group also faces more extensive governance obligations, including the provision of welfare services to the general population and the building of necessary infrastructure (physical, administrative and fiscal) (Naylor, 1993). The EPLF, Hesbollah, the Lebanese Forces and Palestinian Authority, for instance, reproduced most of the functions of the formal state (Naylor, 2004, Pool, 2001). The Palestinian Authority even set up its own factories to produce consumer goods and established arrangements with all Arab governments with Palestinian populations to remit a fixed tax of five to seven percent of wages earned by Palestinian workers (Rubenberg, 1983). Some groups may go so far as to outlaw state currency and issue their own currency instead, the Biafran pound for example (Uche, 2007). At this stage, and possibly even before, the group needs to overcome problems of asset management and interface with the formal and international economy to process (or launder) its revenue flows (Naylor, 1993). This situation implies the need for a number of non-military activities to manage complex revenue streams and processes, more extensive administrative departments and broader governance services. Without fiscal management and effective administration, armed opposition groups are liable to collapse, as the Biafran experience demonstrates (Uche, 2007).

Naylor's (1993, 2004) analysis provides a framework for understanding how an insurgent group's revenue streams typically change as it advances through the stages of guerrilla warfare, but it does not explain how revenue streams change as a group declines or goes through the reverse stages of guerrilla warfare. It cannot just be assumed that the reverse pattern happens, for instance. Naylor's (1993, 2004) analysis also does not explain how the internal behaviour of a group changes, although he indicates that it comes under increasing pressure to provide services to both group members and the local population as it grows in power and increases territorial control.

Kalyvas & Balcells (2011) and Heupel (2009:69) argue that the end of the Cold War has reduced external funding to both governments and their challengers which has led armed groups to turn to criminal activities to compensate their reduced revenues, assisted by globalisation and transnational criminal networks. However, Byman *et al.* (2001 in Kalyvas and Balcells, 2011) highlight a shift in revenue sources for armed opposition groups after

the end of the Cold War from external government patrons towards diasporas, refugees and neighbouring states. Although an armed group usually lacks consolidated control over diaspora populations, diasporas from besieged minority groups have in several cases been identified as a source of support for armed groups<sup>10</sup>, particularly larger diaspora groups in America (such as Irish Americans who funded the IRA) (Collier & Hoeffler, 2000; Naylor, 2004:49). The presence of transnational ties has also been identified as a key factor in determining outside support (Salehyan *et al.*, 2011:727).

#### *Implications for non-military roles*

Depending on the type of revenue streams an armed opposition group relies upon, there may be a greater or lesser bureaucratic structure with administrative staff. For example, generating voluntary remittances from diaspora groups requires communication, marketing and grievance-framing to prompt emigrants to remit a portion of their earnings. Maintaining bureaucratic structures and operations requires fiscal management as well as negotiations and agreements with external economic partners (Naylor, 2004). They also require security and stability, either through firm territorial control, or sanctuary elsewhere. Thus, communication and marketing, tax and customs and resource management and extraction are all important non-military roles to stabilise revenue streams within an armed opposition group. However, there is a lacuna in the literature about who takes on which role in an armed group and why.

While analysis of an armed opposition group's revenue streams gives some indication of the types of bureaucratic functions it may develop, this approach tends to neglect the roles that legitimacy and political authority plays in stabilising revenue streams. Groups reliant on a form of local taxation and support (whether cash or in kind) must build both their legitimacy and a public fear of penalties should people refuse to pay their taxes, just as governments do (Naylor, 2004). Furthermore, they have to distinguish their legitimacy from that of the state because armed opposition groups of this type directly compete with the state for territory, populations and resources while undertaking expenditures for everything from warfare to welfare (Naylor, 2004).

#### **b) Legitimacy and bureaucratic structures**

An armed opposition group in a peripheral conflict primarily seeks to maintain the conflict over a long period of time because rather than aiming to decisively overthrow the state government, it aims to force the government to the negotiating table either by military might or inflicting high costs (Fearon, 2004:289). The internal organisation of armed

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<sup>10</sup> See Demmers (2007), for example.

opposition groups, including the skill and style of its leadership have been found to also be important factors in determining when armed groups can mount and maintain an effective challenge to the state (Guevara, 2001; Weinstein, 2007; Clapham, 1998). However, relatively few studies focus on the internal management, organisational structure and problems of agency in such groups (Gates, 2002). Furthermore, there has not been enough consideration of the connections between an armed opposition group's non-military operations and the group's strategies of contesting state-making in peripheral areas.

More recently scholars have attempted to grapple with this issue by analysing armed opposition groups through a Tillyan state formation lens, viewing armed groups with territorial control to some extent as 'states within states', for example (Spears, 2004; Metelits, 2010). However, Tilly (1985) himself argues that the European experience of state-making is probably not applicable to developing countries today. As Mampilly's (2007) analysis argues, the issue in armed opposition groups is not one of state formation, but rather one of the formation of political order outside or against the state. Though armed opposition groups may mimic the form of the state, they are not analogous to nascent states as in the Tilly idea (Mampilly, 2007).

What is the relationship, then, between ethno-nationalist armed opposition groups' non-military structures and peripheral forms of conflict? Olson's (1993) analysis of stationery bandits argues that the provision of selective incentives through welfare services allows an armed group to more efficiently stabilise its funding streams through taxation. Mampilly (2007, 2011:8) on the other hand, argues that the bureaucratisation of an armed group and the provision of governance is a strategic decision to garner civilian consent for rebel rule, which results in increased security for the group and gives the group the opportunity to signal their strength to the incumbent state in order to force it to the negotiating table. This study understands 'governance' in armed opposition groups as "the process by which rebel leaders develop both the structures necessary to provide goods and the practices that enforce their legitimacy" (Wood and Dupont, 2006:2 in Mampilly, 2011:55). These processes involve monopolisation of the social, political and economic inter-relations of a defined community such that the armed group improves its ability to foster voluntary participation (Mampilly, 2011:237).

### ***Internal Legitimacy-building***

Legitimacy can be built by communicating the goals of the group to the local population and building support for the group's political agenda. Both Mao and Guevara viewed educational outreach with the civilian population as important for inculcating appreciation of a rebel group's revolutionary agenda (Mampilly, 2011:13). An armed opposition group

may also raise its standing by offering external protection from state counterinsurgency action. However, local people are often aware that it can provoke an increase in counterinsurgency operations and atrocities. This may of course be a tactic of armed groups seeking to generate new voluntary recruits (Kalyvas & Kocher, 2007:189). Thus, local mediators may be needed to negotiate the group's presence and mediate its needs and actions with those of the local population.

In addition to inculcating awareness of the group's political agenda, secessionist and ethno-national armed groups intent on securing regional autonomy are particularly likely to establish governance systems in order to build internal legitimacy because they have to convince their target population that they offer a better alternative than the state and because they rely on the support of a specific ethnic, regional or national population (Mampilly, 2007:31; Weinstein, 2007). In this, they are similar to national liberation movements which sought to achieve independence from colonial rule not just by inflicting military losses on the enemy, but also by undermining the legitimacy of the central government and establishing a rival regime (Mampilly, 2007:64). Furthermore, it is important for armed opposition groups reliant upon local support to ensure the passive majority do not turn against them as a result of their negative behaviour or better conditions offered by rivals (Mampilly, 2011:54). The style of governance they create is influenced by the armed group's ideology (socialist, communist, Islamist etc.) and by pre-conflict cleavages in the local populations (along ethnic, religious or regional lines, for instance), but it aims to generate broad support and legitimacy beyond individual participants (Mampilly, 2011:54).

Mampilly (2011) argues that the development of governance services by armed opposition groups can happen as a result of civilians used to making demands of a public authority adjusting the focus of their demands to a rebel group; or rebel group reliance on a specific ethnic, regional or national population empowering civilians to force the group to provide governance. Complex networks of civilian support groups may, therefore, be created to govern and control the population; provide social services, such as health, education and security and maintain political legitimacy. The provision of effective governance by an armed opposition group is contingent upon territorial control and periods of relative calm in conflict, as well as the ability of the group's leadership to impose discipline throughout the organisation (Mampilly, 2007:245).

Leftist guerrilla movements during the Cold War aimed to acquire and govern territory by building a highly structured political organisation with a disciplined armed wing and effective administration in their 'liberated areas' Kalyvas and Balcells (2011:421). For years

the LTTE aimed for self-government for the Tamil nation and homeland (Tamil Eelam) through armed struggle and in the process created a *de facto* state structure in areas under its control in the north and east of Sri Lanka (Stokke, 2006). Other groups with significantly developed administrative structures include the Palestinian Authority, Hezbollah and UNITA in Angola from the 1970s to 2002 (Bakonyi & Stuvoy, 2005). The creation of welfare wings can build both internal and external legitimacy. The EPLF, for instance, used their distribution of international famine relief in Eritrea to raise their international standing as a 'quasi-state' while garnering loyalty from recipients in aid camps (Pool, 2001). Complex networks of civilian support groups may, therefore, be created to govern and control the population; provide social services, such as health, education and security and build political legitimacy by 'out-governing' the state. Welfare wings therefore contain a number of important roles for an armed opposition group's participants, such as teaching, health care and bureaucratic management.

Several studies of education provision by armed groups have shown that they are often an important means by which ideological indoctrination and grievance-framing are conducted. For example, it has been argued that Hamas, the LTTE and Hezbollah have exploited the terms of the social contract and the methods of its provision to mobilise recipients of social services for violence, including suicide bombings (Grynkewich, 2008; Flanigan, 2008; Laitin & Berman, 2008). Hamas, for example, includes a battery of mosques, schools, orphanages, summer camps and sports leagues integrated into its apparatus and uses these for incitement, recruitment and logistical and operational support for military activities (Levitt, 2004). Furthermore, providing alternative messages through education structures can undermine the messages the state seeks to promote in order to socialise the population. Education is a tool for socialising the population, creating an educated workforce for industrialisation projects and building both state and nation (Gellner, 1983 and Weber, 1976, in Fritz and Menocal, 2007). Thus, the provision of alternative messages through armed groups' own education services undermines the state's promotion of its own particular messages.

Socialising the local population in the culture of the armed opposition group is also argued to be important for building the group's internal legitimacy. In addition to providing welfare services, many groups adopt symbols of state sovereignty (Mampilly, 2011:56). As Lund (2006:677) puts it, some organisations outside the formal governmental apparatus "strut in borrowed plumes", imitating the state in its visual displays of statehood. In their attempts to govern, they may articulate notions of the state varying from their source of power to their antithesis. An important component of this articulation of statehood is

argued to be the construction of cultural and political representations, discourses and activities that give meaning to state practices and form the idea of the state in the social imaginary of the population (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010:543).

As the previous section discussed, the development of bureaucratic structures is often associated with territorial control and the stabilisation of revenue streams. However, groups that manage to secure external funding have less need to develop internal revenue streams. Zahar (2001, in Mampilly, 2011:89) argues that armed opposition groups with a more limited resource base have a strong incentive to develop external funding streams through transnational actors and take advantage of the credibility such associations may generate. Developing external revenue streams requires a degree of external legitimacy, though.

### ***External Legitimacy-building***

Many armed opposition groups rely to an extent on external aid for the funding of their governance services, though the characteristics of aid vary, and seek to incorporate transnational non-state actors into their political project (Bob, 2006, in Mampilly, 2007:37). Some groups quietly influence international flows of aid to match their own development programmes while others are more open and effectively 'tax' international aid delivered to communities under their control (El Salvador's FMLN in the 1980s, or the SPLA in South Sudan, for example) (Naylor, 2004; Wood, 2003). In this case, aid has a further benefit as it allows more of the group's own funds to be diverted to the military (Naylor, 2004; Loescher *et al*, 2007; Terry, 2002). In order to attract international aid revenues armed opposition groups require external legitimacy (Zahar, in Mampilly, 2007:37). This can be derived through their association with refugee populations.

Refugees have previously been argued to provide "international legitimacy, a shield against attack, a pool of recruits, and valuable sources for food and medicine...in essence...rear bases for rebels who attack across the border" Lischer (2005:2). The term 'refugee warrior' has been coined for refugees engaged in armed campaigns against their country of origin. Refugee warriors include Palestinian refugees based in camps in the occupied territories who launch cross-border attacks against Israel and Liberian armed elements who used Guinean refugee camps as a base while they pursued a campaign against Charles Taylor (Lischer, 2005:12, Loescher *et al*, 2007). However, in Terry's (2002) analysis of humanitarian aid, the primary benefit of a refugee population to an armed opposition group is the external legitimacy function they serve, raising the profile of a 'victimised' population and attracting both sympathy and aid.

INGO support can lead to the development of complex structures to extract more INGO capital (the LTTE in Sri Lanka and the Palestinian Authority, for instance) (Flanigan, 2008), but although much is known about how INGOs and donor governments manage the distribution of resources and their relationships with armed opposition groups<sup>11</sup>, the way in which armed opposition groups manage external donors and their legitimacy is much less clear. Managing external funding relationships implies a very different skill set from that of the average foot soldier in an armed opposition group. At the very least, it requires English language skills, computer familiarity and knowledge of project proposal writing, monitoring and reporting. It also requires a different set of political negotiation skills than those needed for communicating with the local population as well as skills in ‘marketing the rebellion’ (Bob, 2005). In this, armed groups can learn a lot from local and national NGOs in the country, in which youths may have a prominent role.

In terms of the external political negotiations an armed group is involved in, engaging with armed opposition groups in the provision of humanitarian aid has frequently been argued to confer external legitimacy on the group, which then has the potential to undermine the hegemonic status of state sovereignty in the international community (Steinhoff, 2009). As a result, there is often a bias towards the state rather than towards armed opposition groups in current humanitarian aid practices (Mampilly, 2011:243). However, external welfare assistance can also be considered as another form of ‘rent’ which has the potential to undermine the social contract between an armed opposition group and the local population (Svensson, 2000). Its de-legitimising potential is often overlooked, though. Mampilly (2007:38-42) identifies ways in which NGO provision of services in rebel-controlled areas can both undermine and lend support to the group’s legitimacy among the local population. NGOs may be seen as a *competitor* to an armed opposition group if they are unable to exert any control over the distribution of services (which may then reduce the perceived legitimacy of the group among the local population) or as a *supporter* if they manage to position NGOs between themselves and the local population and continue to be seen as providers of governance.

The effects of humanitarian action and cross-border refugee camps on armed opposition groups have been studied in depth in the humanitarian literature, due to the difficulties aid agencies have faced in managing the delivery of aid in areas with armed opposition group activity. However, there is little examination of armed opposition groups from within (due, no doubt, to the secretive nature of such groups and the difficulties in gaining trust and access), so there is currently far less knowledge about how actors within such groups

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<sup>11</sup> See Hofmann (2006), for example.

mediate policy objectives and aid delivery within their own structures. Part of the lack of analysis is because studies of armed opposition groups have often been dominated by examinations of the causes of conflict, recruitment of participants and the use of violence at the expense of understanding their non-violent activities.

As Mampilly (2011:239) argues, more research is needed to understand the distinct political challenges that armed opposition groups face as they attempt to provide social and political order through governance. In addition, research on political concepts of legitimacy, authority, representation and governance with regard to armed opposition groups is needed (Mampilly, 2011:239). This study seeks to build upon Mampilly's findings by investigating the relationship between armed opposition groups, political legitimacy and governance from the perspective of the youth cohort working in an armed opposition group in non-military functions.

### **3 Conclusion**

In seeking to understand the nature of peripheral conflicts in Southeast Asia and the relationships between state and armed opposition groups this chapter began by examining the literature on state-making and civil war. It argued that there are often two assumptions and binary distinctions concerning the nature of the state in much of the literature on state-making and civil war. First is the assumption that either the state commands a monopoly over the means of coercion or there exists a Hobbesian state of anarchy and disorder (Yannis, 2002:822). Second is that the state is often equated with law and order and political legitimacy, while other armed actors operating outside the state are relegated to the status of illegitimate, predatory rebels (Kaldor, 2007:97; Reno, 2006). However, as Tilly's (1978, 1985, 1992) studies of the European experience of state formation and Gallant's (1999) theory of bandits and state-making argue, state-making has overwhelmingly been conducted in a highly coercive manner in a symbiotic relationship with armed actors outside the state, blurring the lines of sovereignty and legitimacy. Therefore, in understanding peripheral conflicts in developing countries, it was argued that it is necessary to understand the actual nature of the state, its processes of state-making and the inter-relationships between state actors and armed actors outside the state.

The symbiotic relationship between states and non-state armed actors that Tilly (1985, 1992), Gallant (1999) and McCoy (1999) identify, combined with North *et al.*'s (2009) theory of developing states as 'limited access orders', makes a clear case that armed opposition groups should be seen as part of the long and brutal politics of sovereignty and state-making, rather than actors outside or necessarily against the state. In Southeast Asia in particular, it was argued that a relative lack of state penetration and the geographical

conditions of difficult terrain and sparsely populated, remote areas, have favoured ongoing conflicts over state-making in peripheral, borderland areas as local communities accustomed to self-rule have sought alliances with local armed actors in order to retain local sovereignty (Scott, 2009; Scherrer, 2003; Grundy-Warr, 1993). However, the nature of these conflicts has changed as armed opposition groups and states have influenced each other's actions, which in turn may have shaped the nature of youth involvement.

Frequently peripheral conflicts in Southeast Asia have taken on an ethno-nationalist character as minority groups have opposed post-colonial states' uses of cultural homogenisation techniques to articulate the idea of the nation in their citizens' minds (Brown, 1994). They have also involved the fragmentation of sovereignty, legitimacy and power as the state has sought to crush or co-opt local power-holders (McCoy, 1999; Grundy-Warr, 1993). In some cases, this has resulted in the rise of 'shadow states' controlled by armed groups with varying shades of legitimacy operating outside, alongside or in collaboration with the state and seeking to mimic displays of statehood (McCoy, 1999). Fundamentally, though, peripheral conflicts are primarily conflicts over processes of territorialisation, especially the monopolisation of land, resources and coercive power, and conflicting claims to sovereignty.

In the second part of this chapter, analysis shifted to a more detailed consideration of the non-military activities of armed opposition groups and the linkages between the development of armed groups' bureaucratic structures and their revenue streams and processes of legitimacy-building. Naylor's (1993, 2004) studies highlighted the links between revenue streams and the creation of administrative functions in an armed opposition group, suggesting that as an armed group develops more complex and stable revenue streams, it becomes more stationary and builds territorial control. It then faces demands both from its internal members and the local population to provide at least rudimentary welfare services, while it also needs to develop non-military bureaucratic structures for income and fiscal management (Naylor, 1993; 2004).

Meanwhile, Mampilly's (2011:239) study of forms of governance provided by armed opposition groups challenges the normative assumption that the state is the sole provider of political and social order, and builds upon previous anthropological observations that a variety of other individuals and groups outside the state assume sovereign functions (Spears, 2004, Lund, 2006; Metelits, 2010). Mampilly (2011) argues that the provision of governance services aims to shore up local support and demonstrate the group's legitimacy and strength both to the state and internationally. However, it may also be that the provision of alternative messages through armed groups' own education services aims to

undermine the state's promotion of its own particular messages. Socialising the local population in the culture of the armed opposition group is also argued to be important for building the group's internal legitimacy, hence the reason why many armed opposition groups display symbols of sovereignty. Complex networks of civilian support may be created to govern and control the population; provide social services, such as health, education and security and build political legitimacy by 'out-governing' the state. This implies that armed groups' welfare wings contain a number of important roles for youth participants, such as teaching, health care and bureaucratic management.

Both Naylor's (1993, 2004) and Mampilly's (2007, 2011) studies point to a number of important non-military roles within an armed opposition group. However, neither study explains how an armed opposition group's bureaucratic apparatus changes as it becomes militarily weaker and loses the territory it once had. Nor do they elaborate on other resources in the borderlands which armed opposition groups have to fall back on, such as resources delivered to refugees or IDPs by INGOs. Therefore, this study seeks to add an alternative perspective to the literature on INGO engagement with armed opposition groups by showing how youths within an armed group deal with INGOs. Currently, there is much less understanding of the micro-processes by which armed opposition groups' bureaucratic cadres develop the very different types of skills necessary for dealing with INGO funding and the effects this revenue stream has on internal relations within the group and the armed group's modes of contesting the state's political authority and/or state-making practices.

Conflicts are highly dynamic and armed opposition groups as well as states must continually find ways to adapt to a changing international, national and local environment. Moreover, changes within armed opposition groups imply changes in the roles and relations between participants, including the youth cohort. This study, therefore, seeks to build on Naylor's (1993, 2004) and Mampilly's (2007, 2011) findings and investigate the non-military activities in a group with declining territorial control and military power and the relationships and internal organisation that an armed opposition group is engaged in from the perspective of the youth cohort. The approach adopted in this study is an analysis of youths in non-military roles in an armed opposition group situated within a historical context of state-making and peripheral conflict. Understanding these processes aims to supplement studies of the military strategies of armed opposition groups, providing a more complete picture of armed opposition groups in peripheral conflicts.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

This chapter argues that a mixed methodology utilising ethnographic research methods and a case study was most appropriate to a deep study of the lives of youths in an armed opposition group for two main reasons. First, the purpose of the study was primarily to generate new insights from the perspective of participants themselves and new theoretical interpretations, rather than test existing theory. Second, it is particularly useful for studying youths in conflict zones because the highly politicised nature of conflict can marginalise the views and experiences of less powerful actors such as youths while research in conflict zones poses distinct methodological challenges.

A mixture of data collection methods was used in this study to provide methodological triangulation of evidence and mitigate some of the weaknesses of the ethnographic method. These are reviewed in depth in section three before the chapter discusses the methodological issues faced in this study in section four. As chapters two and three argued, the actions of participants in an armed opposition group appear to be affected by the historical, political and social contexts in which they are situated, as well as the culture of the armed group as an organisation, but actors themselves replicate and transform these contexts through their actions. An actor-orientated approach is, therefore, argued here to be critical to gaining in-depth insight into the activities of participants in the social structures of armed opposition groups. The rationale for this methodology and research strategy are outlined next.

### **1 Research Design**

#### **a) Rationale**

This study aimed to uncover the micro-dynamics of youth participation within an armed opposition group located in the Burmese borderlands. The research adopted an interpretivist research philosophy because it prioritises the world of lived experience, perceptions and social meaning. A positivist ontology was deemed unsuitable for this study since it leaves little room for the consideration of multiple realities. In the interpretivist philosophy, the research domain is considered to be a social construction relative to the situation and the researcher a ‘relativist’ who interprets meaning in a situation where many realities exist, not just one (Travis, 1999; Ellen, 2008). The interpretivist ontology is not without its critics though; in recent years it has suffered from a ‘crisis of representation’ in that the written text emerging from this philosophy is alleged to be subject to the

vicissitudes of interpretation (Flaherty *et al*, 2002:480). This criticism and other weaknesses to methods relying on an interpretivist ontology are expanded further in section two.

## **b) Research Strategy**

### ***Case study approach***

Yin (2003:13), one of the main exponents of the case study approach, defines a case study as an empirical inquiry which investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. It is both a process of inquiry and a product of that inquiry (Stake, 2003:136). Stake (2003) further specifies that an ‘instrumental case study’ is where a specific case is examined mainly to provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalisation. This research used a single case study approach precisely to facilitate understanding of the broader issues of youth involvement in armed opposition groups.

A single case study is justifiable under certain conditions, one of which is when the case serves a revelatory purpose (Yin, 2003:46). In this case, little is known about the extent, function and effects of non-military youth roles in an armed opposition group. The advantages of utilising a case study approach here were that contemporary youth action in the group could be studied in their natural setting; “how” and “why” questions covering the nature and complexity of the processes taking place could be asked; and a deep insight into the micro-processes of youths everyday actions could be generated.

A frequent criticism of the external validity of case studies is that their dependence on a single case renders the method incapable of providing a generalising conclusion (Tellis, 1997). However, Yin (2003) suggests that case studies, if properly constructed, can enable analytical generalisation, though not statistical generalisation to populations. The purpose of this study was to generate theoretical and practical insights into a phenomenon, rather than test the validity of existing theories, so a single case study is perfectly compatible with this aim. For the test of ‘construct validity’, Yin (2003) suggests using multiple sources of evidence, establishing a chain of evidence or having report drafts reviewed by key informants. He also suggests rigorous documentation and operational research procedures to improve reliability. These tactics were adopted for this study. The test of ‘internal validity’ is only a concern for causal case studies, so it is irrelevant here.

### ***Selection of the case***

The previous chapter highlighted gaps in knowledge of the internal workings of armed opposition groups, in particular the roles of non-elite members and the non-military activities of certain types of armed opposition group. The Karen National Union (KNU) was thought to be ideal as a research case for addressing this lacuna precisely because it

appeared to have a fairly well-formed and extensive administrative apparatus which included in its ranks large numbers of non-elites. It also had significant numbers of grassroots cadres in mass organisations. Furthermore, the constituent organisations of the KNU appeared to be involved in a variety of governance functions in eastern Burma. As an armed opposition group with a long history of territorial control (though this is declining), it appeared to have a politically complex internal structure and a much wider agenda than purely military activities.

It was also a useful case for examining how social roles are formed and generational relations managed in an outstandingly tenacious armed opposition group. Running for over sixty years, the KNU's conflict with the Burmese state is the longest-running intra-state conflict in the world. Few groups exist long enough to provide such a good opportunity for the analysis of generational relations, social roles and group regeneration processes.

Finally, this case lent itself well to academic study for three practical reasons: first, there exists a small body of 'Karen studies' literature which allowed this study to build on the excellent anthropological and historical work of other researchers<sup>12</sup>. Secondly, the familiarity the KNU's leaders have with previous academic and journalistic research, as well as the location of many of its bureaucratic offices on the Thai side of the border with Burma, made it conducive to an involved, lengthy study without too many of the security and access problems found by researchers in other conflict zones. Finally, my prior work experience and good relations with youth actors in the movement enabled advantageous access to informants.

### ***Actor-orientated approach***

Although individual youths and their experiences will form the basis of my enquiry, the extant literature on youth participation in conflict indicates that the wider contexts in which youths live are highly significant in shaping their actions. In order to take this range of potentially important factors into consideration, I will adopt Long's (1992) 'actor-oriented' paradigm which considers individual agency never to be the sole explanatory factor in human behaviour since all actions are authored within a particular external context. An actor-orientated approach begins with the idea that different social forms develop in the same or similar structural circumstances reflecting variations in the ways actors attempt to

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<sup>12</sup> The earliest studies of the Karen were ethnographic manuscripts by missionaries, for example Mason (1865) and Marshall (1922), then later by colonial administrators, particularly Scott (1922). Later studies have focused on Karen ethnicity, identity and ethnic adaptation, particularly Keyes (1979), Rajah (2002, 2008) and South (2007); Karen history, particularly Renard (1980) and Karen ecology, for example, Kunstandter (1969). Most recently, South (2011) has conducted a study of the KNU for TNI and Keenan (forthcoming) has written a detailed history of the KNU.

come to grips with the situations they face (Long, 1992:27). Thus, youth action in conflict situations may depend to some extent on differing actors' strategies and rationales, however it also depends on structural conditions such as the socio-economic context, actions of the state and actions of armed opposition groups, as well as family and community pressures.

Adopting an actor-orientated approach means studying the social by studying the actors and studying people by studying the social (Hilhorst, 2003:214). This is an ideal way to understand processes of social change since it involves analysing individual actions and decisions within a social context that both influences and is recreated by the individual (Seur, 1992:119). It starts from the understanding that people are social actors whose agency is shaped by their experiences, social networks and lives, among other factors (Hilhorst, 2003:5). These structural constraints are understood to be of a dual nature, though, with actors constantly recreating and reinterpreting them in their everyday actions (Giddens, 1984).

In the past, there has been little synthesis of individual-level studies focusing on motivation, behaviour and participation patterns in war with national-level processes such as the structural determinants of war or elite decision-making processes (Wood, 2003). As chapter two argued, however, the type of armed opposition group, its organisational style and the behaviour of its leadership may mediate structural and individual factors of youth participation. An actor-oriented approach is sensitive to individual differences, cultural frames of reference and social structures, but it faces a problem identifying where the emphasis between individual agency and broader structural factors should lie. This is a common problem in social explanations, but Clapham (1998) argues it is particularly the case in armed opposition groups where it is difficult to attribute events to leadership or structural features. Furthermore, human action can itself reinforce or recreate social structures as well as being influenced by them (Jabri, 1996) Thus, the social practices, forms of meaning, discourses and institutional frameworks which reproduce and legitimate the condition of conflict should also be investigated in an actor-orientated approach.

The assumption in this study follows one of the key components of Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, that social agents are knowledgeable in the sense of 'practical consciousness' and 'discursive consciousness' (Jabri, 1996:179). 'Practical consciousness' is "invoked in the routine processes of daily life but remains inarticulated" while 'discursive consciousness' is "what actors are able to say, or to give verbal expression to, about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action" (Jabri, 1996:179). The practical consciousness of youths can be studied through observation of their daily

activities while their discursive consciousness can be revealed through discussions about their actions and the social conditions around them. While there may be a difference in practical and discursive consciousness, studying the two can uncover the daily modes of representation and imagery which are drawn upon to generate and legitimate exclusionist identities and support for specific forms of group action (Jabri, 1996:180). Thus, this ontological assumption is well suited to the study of youth roles and action within an armed opposition group.

The methodological implications of this approach were that the research must simultaneously study the structural and organisational context while observing youth action and decision-making processes. An embedded, rather than holistic, design using multiple units of analysis was adopted because it is a useful way of focusing case study inquiry on particular units of analysis, thereby avoiding research of an overly abstract nature (Yin, 2003:45). The primary unit of analysis was the individual, but several organisations in which youths predominantly feature within the KNU and its affiliated organisations, and the structure of the KNU, formed secondary units of analysis. The following table illustrates the issues studied and methods used for each unit of analysis:

Unit of Analysis				
	Individual		Organisations within the KNU	Parent Organisation (KNU)
	Staff	Leaders		
Issues studied	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motivations for joining, adopting work roles and leaving a group</li> <li>- Processes which affected recruitment and the type of role they took on</li> <li>- Opinions about work tasks</li> <li>- External context of decisions</li> <li>- Construction of social categories (particularly 'youth' and 'Karen')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relationships with parent party leaders</li> <li>- Motivations for joining, adopting work roles and leaving a group</li> <li>- Processes which affected recruitment and the type of role they took on</li> <li>- Opinions about work tasks</li> <li>- External context of decisions</li> <li>- Construction of social categories (particularly 'youth' and 'Karen')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organisational history</li> <li>- Recruitment tactics</li> <li>- Work patterns</li> <li>- Human resource management practices and policies</li> <li>- Income streams (quantity, sources and how they are managed)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Purpose of youth roles for the organisation and its political aims</li> <li>- Conceptions of youth categories</li> <li>- Tactics of social construction of categories</li> <li>- Political agenda and how this has changed over time</li> <li>- Management of generational relations</li> <li>- Management of different interest groups within the organisation more generally</li> <li>- Youth recruitment tactics</li> </ul>
Methods used	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Life histories</li> <li>- Participant Observation</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Life histories</li> <li>- Participant Observation</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participant observation</li> <li>- Focus groups</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews</li> <li>- Examination of online information (e.g. Facebook page and organisation's website)</li> <li>- Internal documents and archives</li> <li>- Physical artefacts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus groups</li> <li>- Grey sources</li> <li>- Previous academic studies</li> <li>- Semi-structured interviews</li> <li>- Examination of texts published by the organisation</li> <li>- Examination of online information (e.g. Facebook page and website)</li> </ul>

*Table 3 Units of analysis, issues studied and methods used*

## 2 Ethnographic Research Method

Much recent conflict research has emanated from econometrics, whose theories of civil conflict are based on the assumptions and logic of neo-classical economics. This holds that everything can be explained from the point of view of the individual and that individual behaviour is a function of choices rationally made in order to maximise utility (Cramer, 2002). Paul Collier's work is the most prominent exponent of this approach. He argues that grievance discourses are utilised to generate international and local support but that economic factors are the only true measure of motivations in conflict (Collier, 2006). However, economic approaches to studies of conflict are also methodologically flawed, as chapter two noted, and careful qualitative research has done much to generate the theories and indicators upon which quantitative studies are based.

Anthropologists argue that views such as Collier's assume they naively take what people say for granted, whereas in reality, they examine how different untruths are told in different ways and cross-reference stories and interests constantly (Richards, 2005). In addition, they observe what happens first hand in war by being there; as Richards (2005:11) argues: "Reading a balance sheet from afar is simply no substitute for well-grounded attempts to grasp the inherent complexity of war". However, Richards's (2005:11) real disagreement with econometric work such as Collier's is about the labelling of the variables: "Once the alienation of the young unemployed, or the millenarian dreams of diaspora groups are seen for what they are – political variables – Collier's proposed conceptual division between 'greed' and 'grievance' disappears".

Previous academic studies of youths in conflict situations have used quantitative methods (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008, for example), PRA or other survey methods together with interviews and life history mapping (Fernando, 2002; Chatty, 2007, for example) or a mixture of ethnographic methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, life-history mapping and use of internal documents (Marks, 2001; Sommers, 2001, for example). A problem with many previous studies is the lack of participant observation of the actual activities of youths in armed opposition groups. Relying on interview techniques to extract highly political information and accounts, with no participant observation, introduces bias as there is a discrepancy between what people say they do and what they actually do. My previous experience working within the KYO highlighted the considerable difference between what organisations and staff *say* they do and what they *actually* do in practice. These contradictions were sometimes remarked upon and discussed, and at times they were un-noticed by the staff themselves and by me until a later date. I also found that asking the same questions and talking about the same issues on

different occasions produced different answers, even from the same people, reflecting variations in the way ideas or events could be presented. These experiences demonstrated to me that an ethnographic approach was necessary to gain depth in understanding the micro-dynamics of youth participation in an armed opposition group.

The studies that have achieved the most depth and rendered the most intricate explanations of the complex issues involved in youth participation in conflict situations are those that have prioritised ethnographic methods, are a result of significant time spent immersed in the field and have included a significant amount of contact with participants in their own language. Given that the object of this research was also to achieve depth in a small, relatively unknown area and unravel the complex issues of youth participation in an armed opposition group, an ethnographic approach was taken in this study. Additionally, with the research setting being highly politicised, even though it was located in the relative safety of Thailand, it was thought that overt information gathering could be quite a sensitive and difficult activity. As Goodhand (2000) argues, information can become part of the conflict economy and is frequently politicised, manipulated and suppressed, leading some people to seek a strategy of silence to avoid risk. The nature of ethnographic enquiry is in many ways more suited to these kinds of research issues than other methods for a number of reasons explored here.

Megoran (2006: 627) makes the case for ethnographic methods to be used more in the study of political geographies and studies of borderlands because understanding the state in borderland areas involves examining how it is experienced in everyday life (Wilson and Donnan, 1998, in Megoran, 2006: 627). It is particularly relevant for a study of trans-boundary political conflicts with a central state because it can illuminate “how power is demonstrated, projected and contested in the social, economic and political practices of quotidian life at international borders” (Donna and Wilson, 1999:155 in Megoran, 2006:628).

Ethnography aims to understand the social meanings and activities of people in a given setting by being closely involved in the setting and exploring the “tissue of everyday life” (Brewer, 2000:11; Herbert, 2000:551). For researchers interested in human action, attention to the symbolic systems that endow action with meaning, through detailed ethnographic investigation, is an important element (Herbert, 2000). It is based on a phenomenological paradigm that accepts that there are multiple realities and that the subjective reality an individual sees is no less real than an objectively defined and measured reality (Fetterman, 1998:5). Its ontological position is therefore interpretivist and the role of the researcher is to read and interpret meaning in the observed culture (Geertz, 1973).

The interpretivist nature of ethnographic analysis leads to the first criticism of the method – that it is overly idiosyncratic and subjective (Rengert, 1997 in Herbert, 2000). It has been argued in ethnography's defence that "interpretive practices are central to *all* science" (Herbert, 2000:558, italics in original) and 'objectivity' is itself a social construction (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994 in Herbert, 2000). Objectivity is not only conceptually impossible, but research in conflict zones it is often practically impossible too. As Clapham (1998) argues "it is difficult for academic observers to remain indifferent to the human and moral dimensions of the events that they study, and a measure of sympathy for victims of these events and tacit support for those who are seen as less guilty than their opponents is an inescapable part of the exercise".

As a result of my previous three years living and working with Karen refugees in Thailand, I had developed sympathy for those whose lives had been affected by the ongoing conflict in Burma and the parlous state of human rights in the country. This had turned my prior assumptions about armed opposition groups and state behaviour on their head since Burma was clearly nothing like Britain. I had also found myself completely rethinking my previous ideas about childhood and social roles. Where previously I had viewed a distinct line between adult and child at the age of 18, after working with many young people who had been participants in a KNU organisation since puberty, sometimes even in its armed wing, I now saw the differences in conceptions of appropriate social roles for young people in Burma compared to their counterparts in Britain. I saw the complexity of defining what is 'appropriate' behaviour for a youth in situations where they have little opportunity to go to school or play and are needed for family work, community defence and group survival.

These insights and many more gained over my previous three-year period working with Karen refugees in Thailand enabled me to challenge my own preconceptions, which then allowed me to challenge many similar ideas among other Western observers. However, my goal is not to judge the merit of each party to the conflict or advocate for any particular course of action, it is merely to explain as honestly as possible what is happening within an armed opposition group and how and why youths in the KNU participate. My purpose is to use this case to provide a better understanding of the lives of young participants who work outside the confines of military roles in an armed opposition groups. From this, my hope is that more nuanced policies and programmes directed towards armed opposition groups or that otherwise affect young participants within armed groups will be developed.

This study conceptualised the practice of ethnography as:

“iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human

agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory, as well as the researcher's own role, and that views humans as part object/part subject" (O'Reilly 2005:3).

While the fieldwork for this research was planned at a high level prior to entering the field, the course of the fieldwork, the interview subjects and the issues which came out emerged naturally as the research progressed. The design and key issues were therefore inductively derived and re-conceptualised iteratively. A number of methods were used over the course of ten months living and working with the research participants. They are elaborated further in the next section.

Qualitative studies of conflict such as this face a distinct challenge compared to quantitative studies. As Wood (2003) argues, such studies are "usually analyses of a single case that typically describe multiple causal processes that are so complex and interrelated that it is difficult to sort out which processes are primary and, further, whether they are primary because of their inherent salience or because of conditions particular to that case". This is clearly a challenge, but the intense difficulties of the task do not negate the need for in-depth research. A complex interplay of factors is argued to be a more accurate explanation of the vast majority of social conflicts than mono-causal explanations, despite the difficulties this throws up for quantitative analysis and comparative studies (Kalyvas, 2006). The task of deep qualitative research is precisely to uncover, where possible, the connections between very complex processes, their relative importance in conflict situations and the factors that may be replicated elsewhere in other conflicts. I believe that any good qualitative research is likely to yield a better understanding of the very complex behaviour of social actors and groups in conflict zones, which can be built upon by policy makers.

Poststructuralists and postmodernists pose serious challenges to the qualitative research endeavour by arguing that any gaze on the life of individuals is always filtered through the researcher's own lenses of language, gender, race and social class. Thus, there are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005:27). Ethnography has also suffered from a post-colonial criticism. Spivak (1988, in Nordstrom and Robben, 1995:11), for instance, argues that Western scholars studying non-Western people are so blinded by their own cultural beliefs and assumptions that their attempts to 'speak' for others are little more than post-colonial discourse.

These critics do not dismiss ethnography as a methodology entirely, rather they call for a transformation in its practice to a more self-critical and reflexive awareness of the conditions under which ethnographers are producing knowledge (Herbert, 2000). Nordstrom and Robben (1995:13) suggest that while “truth and understanding are...always conditional and situated”, the degree of distortion can be minimised by remaining close to the subjects of the study through direct experience rather than working through second hand accounts. Herbert (2000) more explicitly suggests that ethnographers be forthright with those whom they study and with the audience of their written work; reflexive about how their own cultural and intellectual position shapes their apprehension of data; and modest about their explanatory claims. As already discussed, my own preconceptions had already been extensively challenged as a result of my previous three years work with Karen refugees in Thailand. My work with the Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) in particular gave me an invaluable insight into the perceptions of rights, justice and sovereignty among rural villagers in eastern Burma. KHRG’s detailed accounts of villagers’ lives amidst conflict over 16 years of painstaking research offered a wealth of information and insight which I used to gain a better understanding of the lives, values and ideas of Karen youths in Burma. However, as Megoran (2006:627) points out, the insights from ethnographic research can only ever be partial, thus it is a useful tool that should be used to complement other research methods. These practices were carefully adopted in this study.

One of the main problems with this method is the researcher’s own limitations, whereby their inevitable incompetence in the language and culture being studied limits understanding (Ellen, 2008). This issue is commonly dealt with by turning it into a research tool: as the researcher learns about the social reality of the environment through successful and failed encounters, they document the revelations they experience (Ellen, 2008:32). This study had built upon three years of previous work within the movement. This was beneficial to the fieldwork period because several years of misunderstandings, reflection and revelations allowed me to jump in at a good level of understanding. Since native familiarity was certainly not reached, though, and since I had been absent for a year, my interpretations and explanations are modest.

A final drawback to utilising an ethnographic method is that by its nature, ethnographic research is un-replicable and un-generalisable to populations, so general theories about the subject cannot be derived without significant difficulty (Barakat *et al*, 2002:996). However, when ethnographic research is combined with a conscious awareness of what existing theory suggests, the findings can be used to improve upon that theory (Herbert, 2000). The

next stage in research of this phenomenon would be to conduct higher-level and comparative studies to examine how tentative theories apply in other situations.

### **3 Data collection methods and the fieldwork period**

This thesis seeks to understand the patterns of youth participation in non-military capacities in an armed opposition group by exploring the central research question: How and why do youths participate in non-military roles in the KNU, and what are the effects of their participation? This question is divided into three sub-sets of questions. First: how is 'youth' defined and understood in the KNU and why are they so defined? Addressing this question involved identifying what 'youth' means in the KNU context and how it intersects with other social categories such as gender, ethnicity, regional origin and religion. Since this study was interested in emic perspectives of the term 'youth', adopting an ethnographic approach was more suitable because it remains more sensitive to emic than etic categories and meanings (Megoran, 2006: 626).

I examined previous ethnographic studies of Karen society, colonial records and academic studies of the conflict in Burma which mentioned both politicised Karen youth in the formation of the KNU and traditional structures of social control in Karen villages in Burma. I also asked many youths and some older Karen people about their own experiences of life as a youth in a Karen village in Burma. By comparing oral answers and written evidence, I was able to identify the particular characteristics of a 'youth' category that were distinct to the KNU as well as how its construction of a youth category built on pre-existing social roles for youths.

My own understanding of the term 'youth' was as a vague, undefined group of young people, more or less inhabiting their teenage years. However, the term tended not to be employed that much as far as I was aware in my home country, Britain. It was more common for people to use the term 'young people' or 'young adults' as a term of respect for teenagers who were yet to reach the legal age of maturity but who were differentiated from younger children. Among the refugee community in Thailand, however, the term 'youth' was more frequently used and the KNU had a distinct youth wing, the KYO. I was surprised to learn of the high upper age range of youths in the KYO (youths were formally defined as people age 15-35) but my understanding was that 'youth' is not a fixed category, it varies between societies in different places and times.

The negotiation of power across generations within the KNU was occasionally made evident in discussions with groups of youths about their input in the KNU's decision making processes, the demands they made on the KNU's leadership and the results of their

negotiations. It was also partially evident through observation of youth leaders' interactions with the elder KNU leaders who came to visit the youth wing's headquarters. I observed these interactions, documented them in my field notes, then asked participants about them at later stages to get an understanding of their perceptions of the interaction. These discussions were also documented.

My second question (Why do youths take on non-military roles in the KNU and what factors influence their career trajectory within the movement?) required a broad investigation of how youths had been recruited into various roles. Conducting life histories with youths revealed the social connections that facilitated a young recruit's engagement with the KNU. Prior to the fieldwork period, I identified a number of variables from the academic literature on youth recruitment into armed opposition groups. I then tested these with specific questions during the life history interviews as well as letting interview participants talk more broadly about their lives. These were very revealing as the participants themselves elaborated on a range of factors that they believed influenced their eventual route into the KNU. Often their routes in were surprising, sometimes they seemed very mundane and occasionally occurred more by accident than by design. What was often very surprising, however, was the completely different attitude to armed opposition groups and the state among youths in Burma, compared to my own ideas based upon life in a Western country. Almost universally, the Burmese government was derided and military agents of the state feared and hated, while the KNU, though not immune to criticism, was regarded far more highly as a legitimate public authority among youths from both rural and urban areas of eastern Burma. This appeared to be of great significance to youths in this study.

Through participant observation, I saw how the KNU and the KYO reproduced and promoted youth participation in the KNU among Karen youths within its areas of influence, for instance through speeches at commemorative events exhorting youths to work for the 'revolution'. I took part in several commemorative events during the fieldwork period. The speeches made by KNU leaders, scheduled events and visible displays of the KNU's symbols of sovereignty were very revealing of the culture of the KNU as an organisation. There was a strong emphasis on Karen nationalism and culture while Karen soldiers paraded and were decorated with flower garlands in honour of their personal sacrifices to the Karen 'revolution'. I photographed and documented the events and my own reactions in my field notes. I also discussed the events with young participants and documented their comments about the occasion. I noticed many youths were eager to have their photo taken with military leaders and some even dressed up in their friends'

soldier uniforms and proudly had their photos taken while brandishing a gun. Finally, where possible I made a copy of the speeches made at these events and retained them with my field notes along with a rough translation.

My third question (What is the purpose of youth non-military roles to the KNU and how are these roles shaped by the KNU's political and strategic goals?) was addressed by talking to youths and elder leaders with the KNU about their perceptions of the purpose of youths' non-military roles. From my prior work researching children's rights at the Karen Human Rights Group, I knew that there were certain social and livelihood roles allocated to youths in rural Karen society, but it was clear that these were distinct from the more politicised youth roles within the KNU that I had observed while working at KYO as a VSO volunteer.

Researching this question required understanding clearly the exact nature of the KNU's goals and operations, how these had changed over the course of conflict and the importance of non-military roles. I found the existing literature on the KNU's conflict with the Burmese state inadequate here because it tended to be focused on the military angle of operations rather than the extensive non-military side of operations. In this way, the existing literature mirrored the deficiencies in the broader conflict and armed opposition groups literature. The changing nature of the KNU's political and strategic goals and the way this has affected youth roles was often difficult to talk about with participants because there was a tendency to talk about officially stated KNU policies and strategies rather than newly-emerging practices, uncertain tactics and unclear or changing goals.

I built up a clearer picture of the KNU's political agenda and operations by interviewing political leaders in the KNU and triangulating this information with the internal constitution of the KNU, the new constitution of Karen State (written by the KNU) and the constitution of Burma written by the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC), within which the constitution of Karen State sits. The ENC constitution rivals that produced by the Burmese state but provides a good indication of the KNU's political agenda in theory and its formal political agreements with other Burmese opposition groups. These documents were easily available and already translated into English.

I then interviewed youths in a number of groups forming the KNU as well as in groups affiliated to the KNU but not a formal part of it. I also interviewed KNU leaders themselves about their perspectives on youth roles within the movement. The KNU's senior leaders were surprisingly open about answering my questions and since they were fluent in English there were no problems with translation. Much revealing information came from observing the actual actions of youths within the KYO, talking with people

about the daily work and planning they were doing and talking about the effects of this work on the KNU. This revealed some differences between stated roles and actual work (which on occasion were a result of my own lack of understanding of statements made and at other times were the result of certain activities being deemed inappropriate to mention to a Western outsider). These differences were talked about as I noticed them, with participants usually elaborating or clarifying as necessary.

The actual research methods used are discussed in more detail next. All of the research questions were addressed using mixed methods, but the defining feature of qualitative research with an ethnographic component such as this is participant observation in which the researcher gains un-replicable insight through an analysis of everyday activities (Herbert, 2000:551). It is normal in ethnographic research for additional methods such as interviews, and other data, such as photographs and videos, also to be drawn upon. This ability to use multiple methods and sources, as well as retain flexibility over the conditions of the research, is particularly advantageous in dealing with the intense practical problems often found with research in conflict areas and goes some way towards addressing the common problems of reliability, validity and access in conflict research (Barakat *et al*, 2002:995).

#### **a) Participant Observation**

It was deemed essential at the outset to study this topic in its natural setting to see the actual actions that people take, therefore, participant observation – observing as one lives in and participates in the community setting – was one of the primary methods for collecting data. The key benefits of participant observation are that it can clarify what actually happens in a social context rather than what informers *say* happens and it can enable rich accounts of complex situations to be gleaned (O'Reilly, 2005:10).

This ability to contrast deeds and words endows ethnography with an unparalleled advantage over other methodologies, including open-ended interviews (Herbert, 2000). However, one of the drawbacks, according to Haniff (1985 in Labaree, 2002:101) is that participant observation by an outsider is inevitably limited in terms of understanding hidden meanings and achieving a deep level of trust with informants. This may be an inadequate assumption, though (Deutsche, 1981 in Labaree, 2002:102). The perspective adopted here is that 'insiderness' is an ongoing process related to the researcher's social location and knowledge which continuously moves back and forth between the positional boundaries of insiderness and outsidership (Griffith, 1998 in Labaree, 2002:102).

Ferguson and Whitehead (1992) argue that ethnographic studies of conflict must be situated in their real political context, including wider regional or even global processes. For them, the researcher must acknowledge not only their intrusion on the events they observe but the impact they have too. This may be very little, or it may be great, but a study that does not take into account the researcher's impact is weakened in their view. In this study the organisations and people under analysis were not just located in Thailand as a result of their forced exile from Burma, they were deliberately located in a town which had good communication links which facilitated contact with outside sources of support. Moreover, foreign volunteers and, to a lesser extent, researchers, were seen as potential sources of support, whether financially or as advocates of the cause.

My initial contact with the organisation and its staff was the result of the organisation's leadership lobbying VSO for a foreign volunteer to assist with the development of their administrative practices. My two year placement with the organisation from 2003 to 2005 then facilitated the acquisition of external sources of support, though it did not greatly transform the fortunes of the group. Returning to the organisation as a researcher in 2008 also had an impact, though it could not be considered great. Partly the presence of a foreigner legitimates the group to other foreigners, sometimes helping to build trust between external supporters and the group. A foreigner can also act as a mediator or an interpreter between the two.

Participant observation in this case entailed working and living at the headquarters of the youth wing and mass organisation of the rebel movement under study - the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO). The organisational work that I undertook for the KYO aimed not only to allow me to adopt an 'insider' social role within the organisation under study, but to compensate the organisation for the time given to interviews by participants and the effort staff took to facilitate the research process. Specifically, work tasks that I took on after negotiations with the KYO leadership over the fieldwork period included designing and scripting a website (though not deciding on content); editing English language in funding proposals, reports and emails, though not inputting new material; driving staff on the office motorbike around the town to meetings and building a Powerpoint presentation for a four-yearly review of the organisation's activities. On a number of occasions I was asked to interpret in funding meetings with international agencies since some staff were not confident with their communication abilities in English. I agreed to interpret between the group and their foreign contacts (whether in a face to face meeting, by email or through editing the English in their funding proposals and reports), but did not advocate for the group or add any of my own opinions into their work.

Some ethnographers aim for full immersion into the social world of their study to comprehend better the world view of those studied while others strive for a more detached relationship. Most, typically, attempt to balance between these two extremes, adopting the perspective of the actors under study while also remaining a theoretically detached and logically rigorous social scientist (Van Maanen, 1988 and Clark, 1998 in Herbert, 2000). The benefit of this approach is that an empathic understanding of a social world is practically impossible without living that world too, hence I became involved in the ups and downs of everyday life in the organisation and its staff accommodation. Involvement in this case recognised that my presence unavoidably disturbed the research environment by introducing new social relationships and making it easier for the organisation to do some of their current tasks, but it consciously did not influence work policy or change current organisational practice. Daily note-taking and reflection on observations and discussions were conducted from an academically detached perspective, alone in a private room.

The length of the study, eleven months from September 2008 to August 2009, combined with my previous two-year history from 2003 to 2005 working as a volunteer at the organisation helped the participants and myself become familiar with each other and build trust and rapport. Living in the office worker's accommodation also helped this process as the day to day activities of living together dramatically reduced the barrier between participants and myself and the self-consciousness of action while under observation. Some participants also knew me from another one year spell during 2006-2007 working at an independent human rights NGO in the same town.

Unstructured interviewing took place frequently throughout the period of participant observation and was not a separately defined activity. The two methods go hand in hand in ethnographic research because much of the data gathered in participant observation comes from informal interviews (Lefland, 1971 in Fontana & Frey, 2000:652). In addition, more structured individual interviews and focus group discussions were conducted throughout the fieldwork period.

#### **b) Interviews and discussions**

Semi-structured interviews, open-ended discussions and focus group discussions were all used frequently during the field work. There are specific problems with the validity or reliability of informants' statements in interviews including involuntary error, lying, personalities of participants, interview dynamics and various cultural and social constraints (Ellen, 2008:235). Accepting participants' stated motivations for engaging in conflict against the state is methodologically problematic for quantitative-orientated scholars in

particular. Collier and Hoeffler (2000), for example, argue that preference falsification is common in rebellion, therefore the stated objectives of rebels cannot inform us about the true aims of a rebellion. However, these problems can be mitigated by using internal triangulation (eliciting the same data in a different way from the same informant), probing, validating statements with other evidence and triangulating from other sources (Ellen, 2008).

Before the main fieldwork period commenced in Thailand, I took a trip to America to attend a Burma Studies conference and conduct interviews with friends who were previous participants but had left the movement on a refugee resettlement programme. These responses were internally triangulated by asking similar questions again over the phone on later occasions.

Upon arrival in Thailand for the main fieldwork, informal discussions with key informants and close friends were carried out during the settling in period to re-familiarise with the context and map out likely candidates for interviews. A passive approach, using very basic, non-intrusive questions, was adopted for the first month, as Ellen (2008:232) suggests, while friendships were forged and re-discovered, in order to familiarise participants with the research process and content and break down barriers. Interviews then took place frequently, normally as informal discussions.

Sometimes a particular topic was broached either because it was lingering in the fieldwork plan, or because observation of activities prompted further questions. These conversations took the form of open-ended interviews with techniques such as 'playing devil's advocate' or 'ignorant but eager student' openly used with participants to gain a deeper understanding of each issue. They were almost always informal and I usually followed the participants' lead when they led conversations on to other topics, aborted the discussion when distracted or tired or used tactics to avoid talking about anything they were not comfortable or interested in. This method allowed me to observe the issues the participants themselves felt were important, non-negotiable or too sensitive to talk about, as Agar (in Ellen, 2008:231) suggests.

Occasionally, participants would spontaneously recommend another participant to interview because they were deemed to have a particularly good knowledge of a subject under discussion. I enthusiastically pursued these suggestions. Participants also presented to me a range of documentary (in English and S'gaw Karen languages) and photographic evidence which they deemed relevant to the study. These were all photocopied and translated where necessary then analysed, filed and retained with the field notes.

My requests for information outside the realm of knowledge available at the KYO were carefully considered by the KYO leaders and effort made to facilitate access to interview sources. On several occasions meetings were arranged by the KYO leaders for me to interview participants in other groups within the movement. This reduced the problem of access greatly, but significantly raised the potential for selection bias and participant censoring of information. To counter this problem, I also made use of my own, independent sources of information from friends, neighbours and acquaintances in the research location and networks built up during a year's work with an independent human rights group (Karen Human Rights Group). Information and opinions were therefore triangulated from different sources. Internal triangulation was also utilised regularly by asking the same informants the same, rephrased questions on later occasions.

### ***Focus groups***

Throughout the fieldwork, as particular issues presented themselves for analysis during the daily write-up of field notes, semi-structured interviews or focus group discussions were carried out to explore the dynamics of these issues. Interview participants were sometimes purposefully selected based on my knowledge of the Karen network in the research area. While this was partially successful, as a research method it was inevitably limited by my perceived understanding of participants' knowledge of certain issues and outside knowledge of a large number of actors and networks. To counter this limitation, additional recommendations were sought from KYO leaders, key informants and the participants themselves about other appropriate interviewees for each topic, based on the specialist knowledge required. The result was that each subject was discussed with at least two separate groups of participants to triangulate information from different interview sources.

The advantages of using this method were that rich data was produced with participants stimulating each other's recall and thoughts, and that it was a flexible format which was easy to carry out whenever people were sat around with not much else to do. Disadvantages to the method in general are that results cannot be generalised; group culture may interfere with individual expression, perhaps even with 'group think' developing, and one person may dominate (Fontana & Frey, 2000:652). As Merton *et al.* suggest (1956, in Fontana & Frey, 2000:652), care was taken to ensure one person did not dominate the group and that all participants felt able to voice their opinions. Also, the focus group discussions always took place among groups of friends who knew one another exceptionally well so differences of opinion were quite common and already well known, and debate was good-natured. Fairly contentious topics were discussed, but subjects

personal to the lives and histories of individual participants were not, due to their sensitivity. These were discussed more in individual interviews or life histories.

### **c) Life Histories**

Life histories are a distinctly useful method for gaining a deep, historical perspective, revealing internal analytic connections and providing direct access to informants' own words (Ellen, 2008:252). As Hilhorst (2003:175 found in her analysis of NGOs in the Philippines, they can "give us a window through which to unravel how people are constituted as social actors". They are important primary documents in research because the finished product is almost entirely a first-person narrative with the researcher as much removed as possible (Atkinson, 1998:2). The life history method provides advantageous in-depth insight into individual lives over time and how the individual plays various roles in society and interacts with that society (Atkinson, 1998), therefore it was deemed appropriate for understanding the depth and multiple roles of youths within the KNU. It also fits well with a focus on the duality of agency and structure because individuals can explain the choices they made in their lives as well as the context of the time. How individuals then interpret their lives and construct their own histories is revealing in itself (Atkinson, 1998).

One of the issues when studying youths, particularly youths in conflict in developing countries, is taking care not to marginalise their opinions, since they are often already marginalised locally and internationally due to hierarchical structures of power and imbalances in wealth. The life history method places participants' voices in the foreground, whilst leaving room for wider contextual factors to be taken into consideration. Thus, it is particularly appropriate to use in a study of youths in armed opposition groups.

Life histories also have the advantage of giving insight into the social networks behind a person's life because they "make it possible to look at actual decisions and actions, and to perceive behind these practices the network of social relations which allowed them to take place" (Bertaux-Wiame, in Hilhorst, 2003:175). The social networks which influence youth participants in the KNU were therefore studied through life histories with young actors.

Life history interviews were used in this study to gather information about how participants came to be working in the Karen movement, the social status of participants, and the reasons they either remembered propelling them into the movement at the time of their recruitment, or subsequently chose to emphasise to justify their choice. This was an important area to study for two reasons: first, motivations for joining armed opposition groups are a key academic and practical issue and second, many prior studies of the Karen

movement had taken place during the 1970s and 80s when, unlike the current situation, the KNU controlled large swathes of territory and received external support as an anti-communist force in the region.

There are clearly many ways of recounting a life history so some care was taken to probe the participant in order to clarify the particular version of their life they were recounting. For example, if the individual said that they joined the Karen movement because they hated the Burmese soldiers, questions were asked about how the participant knew about the Burmese soldiers, the type of interaction they had experienced with them prior to their recruitment and whether hatred was formed prior, or subsequent, to participation in the Karen movement. The broader contexts of participants' lives were also explored in life history interviews to compare the social status and social origins of participants. Issues of memory recall were not too problematic since all informants were youths, so their recruitment into the movement had taken place usually within the last ten years, and often within the last five.

Life history interviews were conducted in a quiet location at the participant's office with the use of a notebook or laptop to record the conversation. A set of general questions and a checklist of standard biographical data required were used as memory aids (see Appendices A and B), but the interviews were primarily conducted using open-ended questions which invited the participant to elaborate on the choices they had made and the broader context surrounding their participation in the KNU and affiliated organisations. These were more formal than the ad hoc interviews which took place around participant observation, and they inevitably touched on sensitive issues regarding individuals' lives. Therefore, they were conducted in a more private environment and care was taken to ensure accurate understanding of responses, often by using a trusted interpreter.

In the first six months of the study life history interviews were either conducted in English, which participants were speaking as a second, third or fourth language, or through an interpreter. A number of different interpreters were used depending on their availability and the location of the interview. Relying on interpreters makes research vulnerable to added layers of meaning and biases, thereby increasing the potential for misunderstandings (Ellen, 2008:235; Fontana & Frey, 2000:655) so triangulation was key to mitigating this issue. As my S'gaw Karen<sup>13</sup> language skills improved over this period, understanding

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<sup>13</sup> S'gaw Karen is just one of at least eight mutually unintelligible Karen languages, however it is the dominant language in the KNU and affiliated organisations. Many participants also spoke another Karen language as their mother tongue or Burmese, particularly if they had been educated in a Burmese-speaking school. I also spoke conversational Thai and basic Burmese, which were occasionally used in conversations with Thai-

increased dramatically and interpretation was relegated to a clarification tool. In the second half of the study, my S'gaw Karen language skills had improved to the extent that most conversations were understood in general (although nuances and subtleties often were not grasped without clarification) and interviews could be conducted in Karen language with clarification thrown in using English or Thai words.

A great weakness of the life history method is that informants have variable abilities in self-expression and may emphasise different versions of their history given different prompts (Ellen, 2008). Narrators have their own agenda, just as the researcher does too, and both may influence the final narrative (Miesher, 2001 and Weiner 1999, in Yarrow, 2008: 336). It is clearly a dubious method to use on its own, but methodological triangulation mitigates this weakness.

#### **d) Organisation Studies**

Since participants in the Karen movement operate within political and social organisations, the specific structure and organisational culture of those organisations is of interest to a study which is grounded in Giddens's (1984) notion of a 'duality of agency and structure'. Youth participants were understood to predominate in the Karen Youth Organisation, Karen Women's Organisation, Karen Students Network Group and Karen University Students Group<sup>14</sup>, therefore brief analyses of these four organisations were conducted. The aim was to understand the organisations' histories, operations (including how decisions are taken), activities, the number and types of members, political affiliations and sources of funding/support. These organisations are themselves situated within the broader Karen movement, primarily identified with the Karen National Union (KNU), which was also analysed in terms of policies, structures and organisational culture affecting the youth cohort within its ranks.

#### **e) Photographic Discussion**

Photographic discussions took place in the KYO office, primarily with the organisation's own photographs. These discussions took place in four different contexts. The first context was the organisation's preparations for a photographic exhibition of the parent party's political leaders at the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the Karen 'revolution'. For

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speaking Karen people or those using Burmese as their preferred language of communication due to lack of S'gaw Karen language skills.

<sup>14</sup> The Karen Youth Organisation and Karen Women's Organisation formally form part of the Karen National Union (KNU) as mass organisations. They therefore were the focus of the organisational studies. The Karen Students Network Group (KSNG) and the Karen University Students Group (KUSG) are formally independent, but are heavily sympathetic to the KNU and contain significant numbers of youths. These reasons suggested a brief organisational study of KSNG and KUSG may be advantageous.

a month prior to the anniversary, the office staff were engaged in printing, framing and mounting the selected photographs. This was a collaborative task conducted as a group each evening with much discussion and story-telling (see photos below). This preparation and the actual event itself provoked a lot of discussion about the relative merits of each leader pictured, the ethnic identity and subsequent political affiliations of the leaders and reflections on the sixty-year course of the conflict.



*Photo 1 Photographic discussions at the KYO house during preparations for an exhibition commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Karen revolution. [Photo: author, 27th Jan 2009]*



*Photo 2 Part of the finished photographic exhibition which provoked significant discussion of past and present KNU leaders. [Photo: author, 31st Jan 2009]*

The second context was my assistance to the organisation in preparing a website. Discussion ensued among myself and the office staff present at the time around each photo chosen to represent the organisation and its work, as well as why particular photos were deemed inappropriate. I then showed the staff how to resize and colour photos before laying out the photos and accompanying text on the web pages.

The third context for photographic discussion was my assistance with preparation of a large PowerPoint presentation summarising the activities of the central level of KYO over its four-year leadership term. The final context was more general; throughout the research period, new and old photographs were shared around the organisation and discussed, revealing participants' feelings about a range of issues, as well as the activities KYO was involved in.

#### **4 Methodological Issues**

##### **a) Rigour**

Traditional empirical research uses the qualities of validity, reliability and objectivity to describe the rigour of a study. However, case studies, and the circumstances of their analysis, are unique so traditional notions of objectivity and reliability are unattainable (Scholz & Tietje, 2002:334). They are also evaluative criteria derived from a positivist ontology, so are inappropriate for research adopting an interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Hammersley (1992) argues that validity and relevance are more appropriate criteria for evaluating ethnographic research. He suggests that an account may be judged valid if the claims are sufficiently plausible to readers (including sufficient evidence), central claims are supported with more convincing evidence and the evidence is convincing for the type of claim made (Hammersley, 1992:70-72). Relevance means the importance of the topic to a substantive field and demonstration of a significant contribution to the literature (Hammersley, 1992:72-73). It is intended that this study will live up to evaluations using these criteria.

### ***Triangulation***

One of the difficulties with ethnographic research is researcher bias (Barakat *et al.*, 2002:995). The practice of conducting research while becoming an involved participant brings the issue of researcher bias to the fore, however, ethnographers are never merely observers, they are always an integral part of the field with allocated identities and a social character imputed to them, and often considered an important figure in the locality (Ellen, 2008:227).

In a highly politicised context such as this, one of the potential problems was that I could be perceived as less open to expressions of alternative opinions by youths within the organisation, who may ordinarily be discouraged by appeals to loyalty or actively suppressed. To reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation of the situation, multiple perceptions were sought to triangulate and clarify meaning, which is a generally accepted triangulation process in qualitative research (Stake, 2003:148). I also sought opinions independently from participants located outside the primary organisation being studied. Indeed I often found that many participants in the Karen movement also maintained relationships with non-participants and with participants in rival politico-military groups. Thus, participation, in this case, did not necessarily preclude personal friendships with rival groups.

### **b) Ethical considerations**

#### ***Informed consent***

I contacted the headquarters of the organisation at which the participant observation part of the study was to take place, the Karen Youth Organisation, by phone and email prior to the research commencing. Many of the organisation's members were already familiar with me from a two year period of previous voluntary work at the same office, through Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) during 2003 to 2005. A written explanation of the purpose, scope and methods of the research was sent to the Central Executive Committee

of the KYO, which discussed the research request at one of their quarterly meetings. Once permission had been granted and approved by the parent organisation (the KNU), further explanations of the research and the reasons for requesting interviews were given on each occasion a new participant was met.

On each occasion participants were given a choice to participate in the research and I clearly explained that any decision not to participate, or not to answer a question, would entail no repercussions. On several occasions, people did indeed choose not to participate in the study and no further discussion about the research ensued. Moreover, although non-participants were present in the organisation at times during the research period, observation of their activities and discussions was not recorded or in any way included in the study. Participants indicated their willingness to participate with oral consent, but at times they also indicated that certain activities or discussions were not to be recorded. Sometimes I understood the reasons for their decisions and at other times I did not, but taking the issue of ethical research seriously, I did not question their decisions or put pressure on them to change their minds, I simply noted their preferences and followed their wishes.

The life history method used in this study was particularly appropriate for discussing issues which were at times painful for participants to recall. As Ghorashi (2007:120) argues, it gives more room for recollection of past experiences while remaining sensitive to painful memories. For instance, some youths had witnessed violent or otherwise traumatic events that prompted their migration to Thailand as refugees. Life history discussions allowed participants to proceed at their own pace, change the topic of conversation, take a break or abort the interview process entirely, according to their own preferences. At the outset these possibilities were made clear to participants to minimise their inhibitions about disturbing the flow of conversation.

Fine (1993) in his discussion of the underside of ethnographic research, argues that researchers often conceal their true objectives and portray themselves as more sympathetic to research participants than they actually are. In this case, having already 'sounded out' likely reaction to the topic prior to requesting permission, full details of the research questions and strategy were revealed to the research participants. The issue of the researcher's portrayal of their sympathies, or even loyalty, is indeed a sensitive one in conflict situations because participants are unlikely to be enthusiastic about a researcher or research project that they perceive as being unsympathetic to their plight. The participants in this study deduced some sympathy to their cause from my previous willingness to work voluntarily in the organisation and for a local human rights group. However, it was made

clear that the study did not aim to advocate a particular political standpoint or garner support for the group, its aim was to develop a more holistic understanding of the actions of the youth cohort in a rebel movement, and would document all activities, whatever these may be.

Proponents of ethnography argue that material gathered in the field should be returned to the community of origin (Wood, 2006:383) and in this case two of the organisations I studied (KYO and KWO) requested an electronic copy of the final thesis. This is easily achievable, although the academic language in a foreign tongue unfortunately makes it less accessible to lay-readers than I would like. Of course no field notes or full interview texts will be made available since they were obtained under the condition of anonymity.

### ***Anonymity***

For all participants, anonymity was granted even where participants were happy to use their real name. Participants are therefore referred to by their coded name in the data analysis in chapters six, seven and eight. Each interviewee was given an initial from A to Z, then subsequently from AA to AZ. The gender of the interviewee is indicated in the participants' own language honorific preceding the initial. Most participants identified themselves with a S'gaw Karen honorific, so males are referred to as Saw A or Saw B, for instance, and females as Naw D or Naw E etcetera. Where a participant identifies themselves in Pwo Karen or Burmese, their honorific is explained in a footnote to the text. Occasionally an indication of the official position of the interviewee is also given, to give contextual detail. Although this allows the identity of the participant to be narrowed down somewhat, it does not go so far as enabling them to be identified. Furthermore, the research data and participants' identities are securely kept on my computer and back up drives and only I have access to these.

The decision for blanket anonymity was made to protect participants from potential repercussions arising from politically sensitive information given and assumptions or analysis drawn and published from this information. Repercussions were most likely to be encountered among the Karen community and parent political party. The only real names used were those of the political leaders in the parent party, the KNU, who were interviewed in their official capacity and as such were formal representatives of the party and its policies.

### **c) Research in conflict zones**

While this study primarily took place in the sanctuary space used by the Karen national liberation movement in Thailand, it was subject to some of the same issues as research in

actual war zones, such as contradictory perspectives and accounts; security for myself and the research participants and issues of information control by parties to the conflict and the Thai host. Research in conflict zones involves particular methodological and ethical challenges including the absence of unbiased data, sampling difficulties, logistical challenges, political challenges to the 'do no harm' principle, the presence of armed actors, security risks for most residents, general unpredictability and higher levels of trauma among the population (Wood, 2006:373).

Researching in an environment where information is highly politicised means making political and ethical choices about which voices are heard and whose knowledge counts (Goodhand, 2000:12). Wildly different testimonies can result from vested interests, personal histories, ideological loyalties, propaganda and a dearth of first hand information (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995). This study aimed to overcome these problems by adopting a composite approach as Barakat *et al.* (2002:992) suggest: triangulating oral testimonies with other sources, building a good deal of trust with research participants and remaining flexible during the research process.

### ***Partisanship***

Conducting research within highly politicised settings is also problematic because the politicised world views of the participants may generate challenges to the research project and the role of the researcher (Grills, 1998:91). Neutrality can be viewed with hostility and participants may seek to both influence the research and convince the researcher of the legitimacy of their cause. My own emotional involvement gave me some empathy for the often difficult lives that my research participants had either in Burma or in exile in Thailand and my previous work with organisations in the Karen refugee community gave me much more understanding and sympathy for these people and organisations than for others in Burma. However, my personal position was of course quite different from those I studied because I was there by choice, I could freely travel and leave and I received a certain amount of protection from the vagaries of local power-holders due to my British passport.

The position I took with my research participants was that while I have some sympathy for individuals' plights, political views of my own and indeed political opinions on the conflict in Burma and the goals and activities of the KNU, my research role was that of a non-partisan, interested observer and my working role was that of a volunteer, not a member. I did not join the organisation or advocate any particular political stance or course of action and in return I did not face any pressure to censor or reveal the information I received. Furthermore, this study does not intend to advocate any particular political stance or course of action. Thus, while working within the organisation under study entails a degree

of partisan involvement, as Grills (1998:77) argues, non-partisan ethnographic research is not necessarily incompatible with this as long as the goal is to produce a balanced, detailed rendering of the social world rather than advocate for the group. With this in mind, this study does not attempt to inflate its claims, it merely seeks to explain glimpses into the KNU at a particular point in time and in a specific place.

#### **d) Limitations**

In ethnographic fieldwork, it is necessary to observe a wide range of perspectives and subgroupings so as to be able to sample the entire distribution of topics studied (Stewart, 1998), however in conflict situations this is often difficult because certain subgroups are inaccessible due to their location and others may be marginalised in the society being studied. This study could not, in general, access populations living in Burma due to security issues, so very little participant observation took place in Burma. The only exceptions to this were the small number of commemorative occasions in KNU-controlled territory which I attended. However, a number of interviews took place with participants located in Burma who were temporarily in Thailand for meetings, and with some participants in IDP sites in KNU-controlled territory in Burma.

Other people, such as those with dissenting views, those opposing the KNU in Burma or people from minority groups in the areas under consideration, were likely to be marginalised by the KNU and their voices suppressed. These views were actively (though discreetly) sought out in Thailand, where the KNU has less control over the Karen population. However, since this study was interested in explaining participation in the KNU, it was largely concerned with those who were already members. Assertions and findings from analysis of the data were then tested for credibility with foreigners residing in the area who are familiar with the situation but removed from many of the political and cultural pressures of the society. This was extremely useful for validating my analysis and assertions.

#### **5 Conclusion**

This chapter has made the case for an ethnographic, case-study based approach to researching the issue of youth involvement in an armed opposition group. It argued that this was the most appropriate methodology to use in a situation where little about the issue is previously known, the research setting is highly politicised and the research aims to be sensitive to issues of marginalisation of participants. Since the study was grounded in an actor-orientated approach which is itself informed by Giddens's (1984) theory of the duality of agency and structure, an embedded case study approach was utilised which

examined the political and social structures surrounding individual action. Moreover, it argued that a mixture of methods best deals with the issues of research in highly politicised conflict zones, as well as providing methodological triangulation.

## **Chapter 5: Contested State-Making: Changing technologies of state-making and conflict between the KNU and the Burmese military**

This study seeks to investigate the non-military activities of youths in the KNU from the perspective of the youth cohort. The approach adopted in this study is an analysis of youth participation situated within a historical context of state-making and peripheral conflict. This chapter provides a background to the case by examining the nature of the KNU and its conflict with the Burmese military state<sup>15</sup>.

Burma does not fit the Western model of statehood as a clearly defined territory with the state wielding a monopoly of violence and legitimacy (Meehan, 2011:384). Its boundaries, political structure and/or state-making approaches have been contested to the point of violence by a range of actors, including but not limited to, ethno-nationalist armed groups and the democracy movement. This chapter examines the changing nature of conflict and control in the east of the country between the Burmese state and one of the armed opposition groups, the Karen National Union (KNU) and points to the implications this has for youth roles in the group. The chapter is structured in four parts.

Part one examines the outbreak of the KNU conflict with the Burmese state and explains it as a result of ethnocentric state-making practices in the centre and unease over the transition to direct rule by borderland peasant populations used to self-rule. These central and peripheral forces, which were a legacy of pre-colonial and colonial patterns of governance and agrarian relations, enabled marginalised Karen elites excluded from state power to enter into a strategic alliance with Karen communities in the centre and peasants in the borderlands in order to create a separate state.

The chapter then turns in part two to look at the rise and fall of the KNU as the Burmese military have attempted to form the state and consolidate power. The KNU was the most powerful of the secession groups at its height (Harriden, 2002:84) and has been in a protracted, low-intensity conflict with the Burmese state for over sixty years. While it

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<sup>15</sup> In this study I use a variety of terms to describe the Burmese state and its military apparatus. In general I use Burma Army to describe the armed forces (called the *tatmadaw* in Burmese), including its leading generals. The terminology of the unitary party structures that the military have created over the decades of its rule (the BSPP, SLORC, SPDC and USDA/P) are not used to avoid confusion. In addition, they are essentially military parties, thus, for the purposes of this study, their activities and policies are essentially considered to be under the control of the military. I also at times refer to the Burma Army as the Burmese state and the Burmese government. This does not presume that the military has legitimacy as rulers of the state, it merely points to their *de facto* occupation of state power at the time of research. Nor does it presume that the Army is monolithic in the state and in government, more that for the purposes of this study, they were so intertwined in 2008-09 as to be inseparable. This remains the case after the 2010 elections.

largely succeeded in building up an extensive *de facto* state in the eastern borderlands of the country, its fortunes have been locked in a dialectical relationship with the Burmese state. With the advent of military rule in 1962, the post-colonial Burmese state has gradually extended its control to the borderlands and, since the 1990s, the KNU has declined in power.

Two distinct phases in the Burmese military's approach to state-making are identified and discussed with reference to the KNU: the pre-1989 phase and the post-1989 phase. Prior to the democratic uprisings in Burma in 1988 and the end of the Cold War in 1989, the Burmese military was focused on counterinsurgency warfare in an attempt to disarm the armed opposition groups (Lintner, 1990; Smith, 1999). After 1989, however, it has used strategies of accommodation and military-economic agreements with armed groups to extend the reach of the state in the borderlands (Woods, 2011; Grundy-Warr and Dean, 2011:94). The aim is not only to quell armed opposition, but, perhaps more importantly, to control the land and the resources contained within it (both natural and human) and use these to build legitimacy through patrimonial politics and internal security through militarisation. The Burmese state is, therefore, more accurately an example of North *et al.*'s (2007:3) 'limited access order', whereby the ruling regime limits "access to valuable political and economic functions as a way to generate rents" then relies on these rents to privilege powerful individuals who maintain order and solve the problem of violence for the state.

Following the creation of alliances in the 1980s with other armed opposition groups and exiled democracy activist groups from the Burmese centre, the KNU re-formed its political goals and focused instead on fighting for political reform at the centre. However, while the KNU's political leadership has held out for substantive political concessions, elements of its military wing have splintered and entered into military-economic agreements with the Burma Army. This has resulted in a complex mosaic of sovereignty and governance in the eastern borderlands, with multiple groups claiming public authority, often across overlapping territory. The third part of this chapter identifies four different spaces of governance in Karen State and examines the nature of conflict and control in each, including how these relate to youths. It argues that while the KNU has lost territorial control and coercive power, its governance services to the civilian population in eastern Burma have received new, external funding sources. This indicates the availability of a number of non-military roles for youths as chapter three discussed.

The chapter concludes in part four by arguing that Burma's recent history of state formation strongly suggests that the dominant discourse around civil war and state-making is empirically weak. Civil war has not eroded the Burmese state and the limits of the state

do not give way to chaos and disorder. Alternative forms of public authority have long been present, influenced by pre-colonial hill-valley relations and the country's experience of colonial rule. However, ethnic politics and violent practices of state formation have displaced competing power-holders, traditional agrarian relations and peasant control of land and contributed to conflict. While Burmese state-making strategies have involved ceasefires with armed groups after 1989 and reduced the number of armed group at war with the state, civil peace has not followed. Multiple, overlapping spaces of sovereignty with a tenuous balance of interests has resulted in greater insecurity for youths while penetration of the borderlands and consolidation of military control over land and resources has increased displacement and impoverishment.

### **1 Outbreak of conflict between the KNU and the Burmese State: Self-rule and ethnocratic state-making**

Burma's peripheral conflicts are complex and dynamic and they cannot be understood without reference to the country's recent history. Burmese pre-colonial kingdoms in the lowlands were severely disrupted by colonial rule leaving a legacy of separate governance arrangements in the central zone and borderlands; ethnic divisions with highly antagonistic relations between ethnic groups and a capture of the central state by ethnocratic, authoritarian military dictators. The politics of ethnicity played a central role in conflict in Burma after independence, which is complicated by the very high levels of ethno-linguistic diversity in the country.

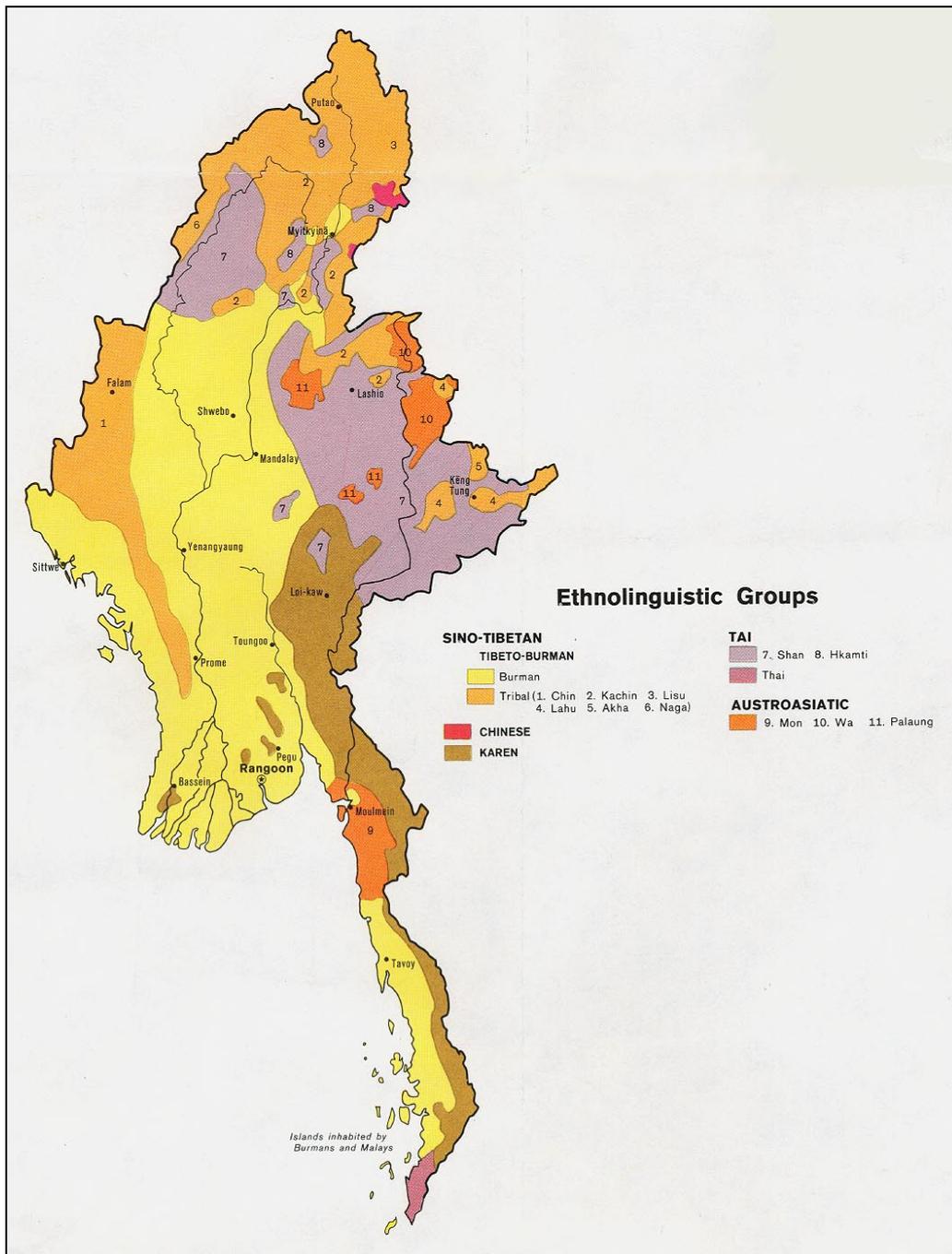
#### ***Ethno-linguistic diversity in Burma***

Burma is a large country in which the central lowlands and delta in the south are surrounded by a horseshoe-shaped ring of highlands, largely populated by ethnic minority people. The government identify 135 national races. Ethnic Burmans comprise roughly two thirds of the population with the ethnic minority groups making up the remaining third. The following map gives an indication of the distribution of ethno-linguistic groups around the country. The majority Burman group tend to reside in the central lowlands while the minority groups in general live in the hills surrounding the centre of the country. The roughly 4.5 million (8-9 per cent of the population in Burma)<sup>16</sup> Karen-speaking people

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<sup>16</sup> Estimating the number of Karen people in Burma is highly problematic, not least because no trustworthy census has been taken in Burma since 1931. Extrapolating from the 1911 census<sup>16</sup> undertaken by the British colonial enumerators yields a lower estimate <sup>16</sup> of 4.7 million Karen language speakers out of a Burmese population of 53.4 million in 2010<sup>16</sup> (His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1922; PRB, 2010). This is considered a lower estimate because the border areas of the country have never been subject to a census. In areas outside state control now there are known to be around 83,700 Karen people living in hiding in the eastern jungle and around 145,713 Karen refugees in Thailand (TBBC, 2008 and 2010). The number has been a sensitive political issue since decolonisation, when the number of seats reserved for Karens in parliament was based on

(shaded in brown on the map below) have tended to inhabit the eastern edge of Burma and its peninsula as well as parts of the Irrawaddy delta and areas around Rangoon/Yangon.



*Map 2 Map of Ethnolinguistic groups in Burma (CIA, 1972)*

the estimated Karen population. In 1911 Karen language speakers formed 8.8% of the population, but 12% of the country was not included in the census, most likely the remote areas populated by predominantly ethnic minority people, so the numbers of ethnic minorities are likely to be significantly under-estimated. Extrapolating from this data is fraught with problems, because the ethnic composition of the country has changed with the departure of native English speakers and the expelling of Bengalis, Hindis and Chinese (although there has more recently been a significant in-migration of Chinese). A chart of the ethnic composition of Burma in 1911 is available in Appendix C.

### **a) Self-rule in the borderlands**

The hilly borderlands surrounding the Burmese kingdoms in the lowlands have a long history of self-rule. As a general rule, Scott (2009:54) argues that areas higher than 300 metres were not part of Burma proper. Furthermore, pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms tended to be self-liquidating; oppressive exploitation of peoples' labour and resources forced them to flee away from the state Scott (2009). In this analysis hill people chose to live in the hills as a strategic livelihood decision to avoid the vagaries of state exploitation, the epidemics and crop failures of population concentrations and mono-cropping in the lowlands and to avoid slave-raiding and military plunder as well as army requisitions (Scott, 2009). However, different communities had different degrees of separation from the Burmese state. Some hill communities lived in symbiosis with the core state, connected by trade, patronage and cultural practices, while other communities fought to defend their autonomy, fled out of the reach of the state or sought to make themselves difficult to rule by scattering and dividing (Scott, 2009:209; Michaud, 2010; Reid, 2000; Brown, 1994; Kunstadter, 1967).

The political limits of the Burmese kingdoms did not necessarily give way to disorder or anarchy, peripheral powers also existed in the borderlands, in some cases mimicking the social hierarchy and cosmology of the centre (Wyatt, in Reid, 2000; Scott, 2009:262). The Shan princes imitated the Burmese and Thai kings and Karen millenarian pretenders claiming to be princes imitated the Shan model, creating the Karenni states (Scott, 2009:262). At certain times, however, hill people also adopted oppositional identities which challenged the political legitimacy of the nearest valley state, or reinvented their identity through millennial movements (Lehman, 1979:313; White, 2000; Scott, 2009:319-328). As a result, the extensive hill areas surrounding Burma have long been refuges for fleeing peasants, rebels, bandits and royal pretenders, but have also represented a symbolic and practical space of subversion to the central monarch (Scott, 1998:187).

Colonial sources indicate that the colonial government "never had authority over any of the tribes living more than a day's journey from the city and river" (Smeaton, 1887:193). As a result, different governance arrangements were put in place for populations in the mountainous 'Frontier Regions', which also happened to be dominated by ethnic-minority groups, and those in the lowlands, termed 'Ministerial Burma', which were primarily dominated by the majority ethnic-Burman group (Thawngmung, 2008).

The impact of different governance arrangements meant that at independence, while the new Burmese government nominally took control of a country stretching up to newly-defined borders with Thailand, in practice its reach was very limited, like many large post-

colonial states (Jackson, 1990; Herbst, 2000). Wimmer, Cederman and Min (2009:317-323) argue that large states are less likely to have penetrated areas on the periphery and as a result, populations in these areas are less accustomed to direct rule and more likely to be mobilised for secession in order to avoid the danger or reality of alien rule. Their objective, according to Scherrer (2003) and Keal (2007) is to seek a strategic alliance with armed opposition groups to challenge 'internal colonisation' in borderland areas and regain their autonomy through secession and/or self-determination. In the post-colonial Burmese borderlands, traditions of cultural and political independence have continued to be claimed by minorities (Smith, 1999:31), with some Karen communities joining or supporting the KNU in order to achieve this goal. More fundamental, however, is that the central state has sought to establish control over peasant resources and derive profit from them, thereby undermining traditional agrarian relations and social forms of sovereignty.

#### **b) Colonial divide and rule policies and the rise of ethno-nationalism**

In the case of the KNU, the majority of the Karen-speaking communities were not located in the periphery of the country, they were dispersed around Ministerial Burma, including the capital in Rangoon<sup>17</sup> (Thawngmung, 2008:5). Thus, although support for the KNU among the borderland Karen people can be explained as a rejection of the transition to direct rule at independence, for Karen communities used to direct rule in Ministerial Burma, the emergence of conflict is better explained as a result of ethnocentric state-making practices in the centre.

Christian Mission records indicate that before colonial rule, the diverse groups of people speaking one of the Karen languages were never united and there was no memory of a historic Karen kingdom or state (Christie, 1996:53). In the hills east of Toungoo town (an area of more than 2,000 square miles), the Karen tribes were engaged in frequent internecine warfare with multiple splintering and no sense of unity at all (Bunker, 1910). In pre-colonial lower Burma, which had been ruled under the Burmese monarchies for a long time, Karen people generally had a subordinate, tributary and hostile relationship with the Burmese state and were well on their way to being assimilated into the dominant Burman culture (Christie, 1996:53-55).

From non-ethnic self-identification and considerable assimilation between lowland Karens and Burmans in the pre-colonial period, a new definition of 'Karen' emerged in the mid-

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<sup>17</sup> British colonial rule in Burma identified five distinct zones of community and identity among Karen-speaking people: Karen villages in the Shan States; Karenni (Red Karen) statelets tucked away in a remote corner by the Thai border; a Karen heartland surrounding the strip of hills which divided Thailand from Burma; a parallel strip of Karen villages in the lowlands from Pinyinana down to Tenasserim, intermingled with Burman and Mon villages; and the Irrawaddy delta Karen people (Christie, 1996:54).

1800s severely impeding assimilation, based on the concept of an ethnic group as a racially distinct group of people with a set of shared customs and ancestry (Renard, 1990:95). Influenced by American Baptist missionaries, the Karen National Association (KNA) was founded in 1881 out of a series of Baptist district and provincial conventions to represent all of the Karen clans, allow them to meet on a common political platform and advance education, agricultural improvements and access to credit (Smeaton, 1887:201; South, 2007a; Christie, 1996:57). From the start it was an attempt to unite all of the Karen tribes, regardless of religion, although it was dominated by Baptist Christians (Smeaton, 1887:201). A Buddhist KNA was not formed until 1939, but in 1947 it merged with the KNA, Karen Central Organisation and the Karen Youth Organisation to form the Karen National Union. The KNUP was later set up as a Marxist-Leninist vanguard party of the KNU in an imitation of the Communist Party of Burma (Smith, 1991).

During colonial rule in Ministerial Burma, a loyalist relationship developed between the ethnic-minority Karen people and the British colonialists (Christie, 1996), which had a long-lasting influence on Karen-Burman relations. The policy of favouring ethnic minority recruits in the armed forces and bureaucracy, in order to prevent Burman nationalist advancement, stoked antagonism between the Burmans and the favoured ethnic minority people (Renard, 1990; Ghosh, 2000:155). Political alignments in Burma during colonial rule then increasingly became increasingly on perceived ethnicity and communal identity became consciously ethno-nationalist (Brown, 1994:35).

Communal relations between the Karen and Burman people deteriorated as lowland and highland Karens supported the British rulers, who used significant armed force in the governance of colonial Burma and came into violent conflict with Burman nationalists (Renard, 1990:96; Callahan, 2002:522). British colonial rulers promised their ethnic-minority allies that the Frontier Areas would not be subsumed under the control of Burmans in the centre of the country at independence, thus the KNU's secessionist goals originated in its ongoing discussions with the British government about the future form of the Burmese state and its boundaries. However, in the rush to independence, British officials reneged on their agreements to the ethnic minority groups in the Frontier areas and handed power to Aung San and a new Burman-dominated Executive Council in 1948 in order to expedite their withdrawal from the country (Christie, 1996:71-79).

The development of a Karen national consciousness during British colonial rule had been mirrored by the reification and fixing of self-consciously separate ethnic identities among other ethnic minority groups, as well as a parallel development of nationalism among Burman elites (Christie, 1996:58; South, 2008:12). The post-colonial Burmese state then

followed the pattern of other Southeast Asian states with its alienation and marginalisation of the other indigenous groups in the shift to an exclusive, *Burman*-dominated national identity (Rahin, 2001; Brown, 1994).

The KNU rejected the Burmese constitution and a federal union form of state and the KNDO formally took up arms against the Burmese state in 1949<sup>18</sup> (Renard, 1990:102; Christie, 1996:77-78). KNDO forces, boosted by mass defections of Karen units from the Burma Army, then took control of large parts of the areas they were demanding (Renard, 1990:104; Christie, 1996:77-78), followed soon after by armed Mon, Arakenese and Karenni groups (South, 2008:27). By 1962 there were twenty-four different armed opposition groups fighting the Burmese government, most of them separatist rebellions in the borderlands organised along ethnic lines (Smith, 1999:97-98).

In the case of the KNU, the exclusion of Karen elites from state power in the transition to independence, poor communal relations between Karen and Burman communities in the lowlands, and Burman-Karen military clashes in the borderlands during World War Two, which resulted in egregious abuses against the local Karen population, led to the mobilisation of disparate Karen communities around a common goal of secession. As such, it is best understood as a strategic alliance of peasants and elites from both lowland and upland areas of central and eastern Burma, articulated around a vision of Karen nationalism and independence. Thus, the outbreak of the KNU-Burmese state conflict is best understood as an outcome of ethnocentric state-making at the centre and fears over state penetration in the borderlands where there was a legacy of self-rule. Crucially, the mobilisation of disparate Karen communities was achieved by educated, middle class Karen elites who formulated the political goals of the KNU. As Skocpol (in Wickham-Crowley 1992:41), argues ‘marginal political elites’, excluded from full power, turn to revolutionary organisations and attempt to secure power through an alliance with peasants. This is consistent with Kalyvas’s (2003:476) findings that actors seeking power at the centre ally with peripheral actors fighting more localised conflict, resulting in the “joint production” of action.

### ***Youth political activism in the transition to independence***

Even before the KNU rebellion formally erupted in 1949, the KNU was riven by internal divisions. Youth leaders<sup>19</sup> from the KYO in the delta region undermined the KNU’s

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<sup>18</sup> The Karen revolt eventually erupted shortly after the massacre of 30-40 Karen worshippers at a church in Mergui District on Christmas Eve (Renard, 1990:102)

<sup>19</sup> Critical to the political direction the KYO took was the leadership of Mahn Ba Khaing and San Po Thin (Keenan, 2008)

political stance by usurping power during Burma's shaky transition to independence from colonial rule. They encouraged the KCO to withdraw from the AFPFL's transition government in protest at the lack of negotiation and compromise with Karen politicians then replaced the KCO with their own leaders in the AFPFL cabinet (Keenan, 2008). This effectively split the KNU into two factions: those who were for compromise and negotiation with the AFPFL and those who were not (Keenan, 2008). The KYO then won some of the seats set aside for Karens in the parliamentary elections in the new independent period and renamed itself the Union Karen League, while the KNU did not contest the elections at all (Renard, 1990:101; Christie, 1996; Smith, 1991). For more than forty years after this, the KNU operated without a youth wing. Although this split primarily concerned leaders of the KYO, it was more of a tactical division than a generational one as the KNU and KYO were both led by men in their early thirties to mid forties (Thawngmung, 2008:8).

## **2 Changing patterns of Burmese state-making and the KNU conflict**

The KNU-Burmese state conflict has experienced two distinct phases over the last sixty years. Until the end of the Cold War, the Burma Army conducted a counterinsurgency campaign through warfare, using 'scorched earth' tactics learnt from British colonial rule. It started in the central areas and progressed outwards, aiming to turn all of the 'black zones' outside its control into 'brown zones' then 'white zones' (areas firmly under its control). However, as this case demonstrates, the 'black zones' of Burma are spaces where the political limits of the law and geographic limits of the state do not give way to state disorder, but sovereignty at the village level and in the form of ethno-nationalist armed opposition groups (Malseed, 2008). Several of the armed groups built up politically and territorially extensive *de facto* states in the borderlands of the country (Kramer, 2009:6), which in some ways mimicked the central state and in others opposed it. The KNU employed the language of statehood and understood the symbolic value and strategic importance of its borders when building its state structures (Rajah, 1990:116 in Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2011:98).

After the end of the Cold War in 1989, assisted by changing geopolitical priorities among Burma's neighbouring countries, the Burmese military pursued a different strategy of state-making in the borderlands. It sought separate military and economic agreements with the armed opposition groups (continuing the colonial 'divide and rule' tactic), and used these to gradually establish military systems of control and resource exploitation in a form of state-making that Woods (2011) terms 'ceasefire capitalism'. This strategy has been much more effective in establishing centralised state control over the borderlands and has enabled it to

devote more of its military forces to the elimination of armed opposition groups which refuse to co-operate with its new state-making processes and structures of dominance. Thus, just as Gallant (1999) argues in his theory of the symbiotic relationship between states and bandits, state-making in peripheral areas involves either co-opting or crushing armed actors outside the state, resulting in shades of legitimacy and sovereignty.

As a result of the state's magnified interest in penetrating the borderlands, the KNU has lost territorial control and greatly declined in military power. However, since it has not been decisively co-opted or crushed like many of the other armed groups in Burma, the KNU remains in conflict with the Burma Army in an 'equilibrium of instability' (Christie, 1996:78) but its goals, revenue streams and strategies have changed over time, in a dialectical relationship with the Burmese state. These are summarised in the following table and examined in more detail in this section.

<b>Political period</b>	<b>Burmese state-making strategies</b>	<b>KNU state-making / state reform strategies</b>
<b>Immediate post-colonial, democracy period, 1948-1962</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consolidation of control in the centre</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict in the centre and retreat to the east</li> <li>- Attempted secession for 'Kawthoolei' state in the eastern borderlands</li> </ul>
<b>Military, socialist rule (Cold War period), 1962-1988</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Penetration and consolidation of control in the lowlands</li> <li>- Elimination of threats in the centre (CPB, KNU, democracy activists)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Failed defence of lowland areas and retreat eastwards</li> <li>- Build-up of 'Kawthoolei' state apparatus</li> <li>- Capitalisation of the border and borderland resources</li> </ul>
<b>Military capitalism (post-Cold War) period, 1989 onwards</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transition to capitalism and seizure of capitalist resources and networks in the borderlands</li> <li>- Increasing penetration of remote borderlands</li> <li>- Co-optation and collaboration (ceasefire groups and business people) in military-economic agreements</li> <li>- Attempted transition of ceasefire groups into state military (BGF)</li> <li>- Land confiscation, resource exploitation and militarisation of space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Declining territorial control in 'liberated areas', retreat eastwards</li> <li>- Formation of alliance agreements, abandonment of secession, promotion of political reform in the centre</li> <li>- Guerrilla warfare and undermining of state mechanisms of control</li> <li>- Increasing reliance on external support for welfare services</li> <li>- Increasing discourse of democracy, human rights and humanitarian intervention</li> </ul>

*Table 4 Summary of Burmese and KNU state-making / state-reform strategies from 1948*

**a) 1949-1988: Civil war, secession and KNU state-making**

An important component of the articulation of statehood is argued to be the construction of cultural and political representations, discourses and activities that give meaning to state practices and form the idea of the state in the social imaginary of the population (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010:543). By 1949, the KNU had articulated a vision of Karen nationalism and independence around which it sought to mobilise diverse Karen communities. The goal was secession for a large part of eastern Burma (the Salween Hill Tracts, Tenasserim Division and the eastern part of Pegu District) (Thawngmung, 2008). In the years immediately following independence, the Burmese state was weak and controlled little territory, with the KNU occupying territory just nine miles from the capital in Rangoon

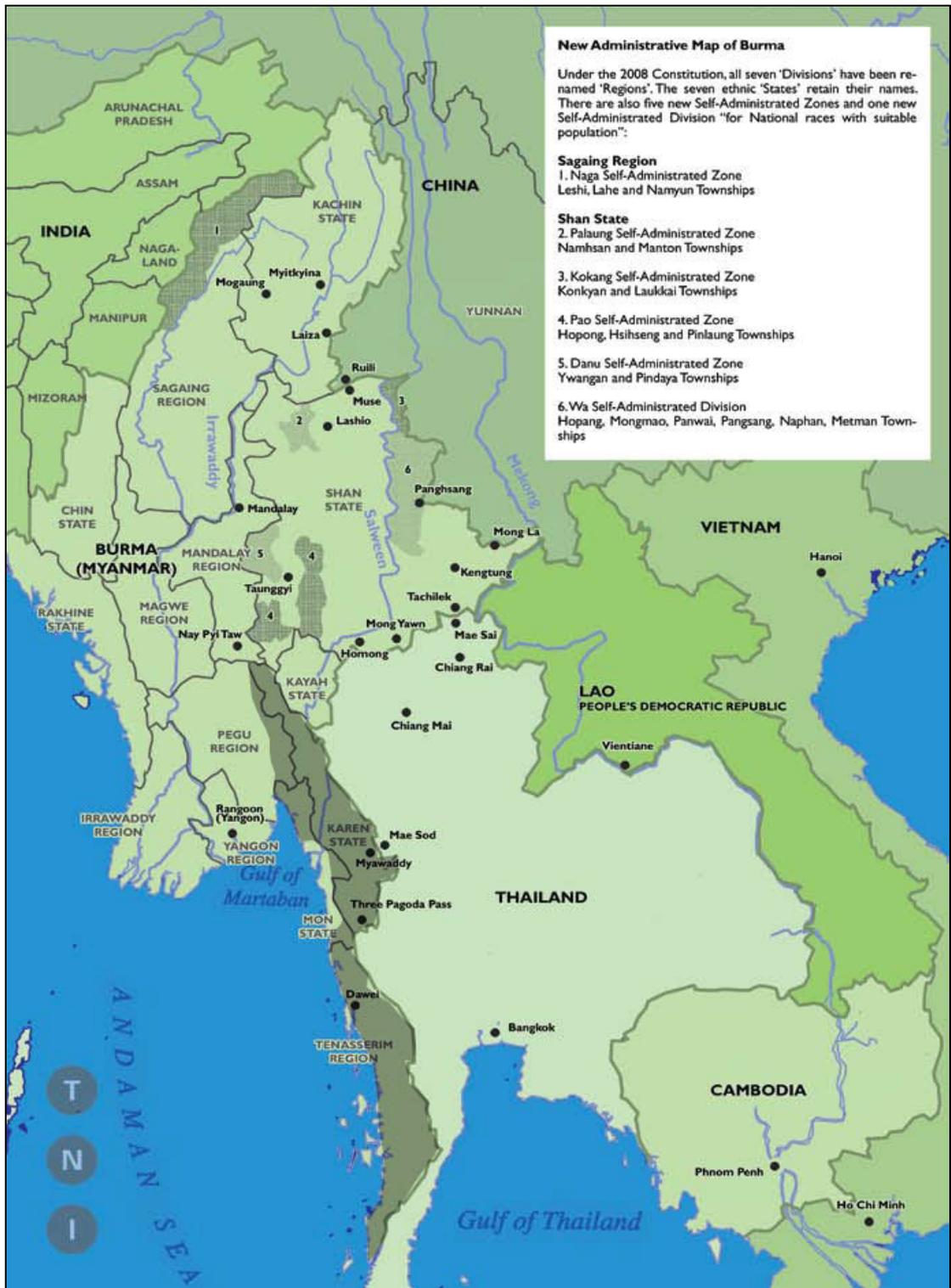
(Thawngmung, 2008). By contrast, the KNU controlled large parts of the delta and eastern Burma<sup>20</sup> and established itself as a government within a *de facto* state, declaring its independence in a letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations in 1953 and seeking external recognition as the 'Kawthoolei Free State' (the name chosen for the new Karen state)<sup>21</sup> (Grundy-Warr *et al.*, 1997:84). However, the Burma Army quickly regained control of the delta areas of Burma and from the 1960s and 1970s, as the Burma Army has gained in strength, the KNU has retreated ever eastward into its 'liberated zones' in the borderland mountains and jungle, taking with it migrant Karen communities from around the delta, Yangon and Insein (Cusano, in South, 2011:14).

The Burma Army fought the KNU and other ethnic armed groups with a military strategy termed '*Pyat Lay Pyat*' ('Four Cuts'), which involves moving the entire civilian population of an area into enclosed, heavily guarded relocation sites where armed opposition groups cannot access the food, funds, intelligence and recruits they need to survive (Smith, 1991:259). The army also conducted annual dry season military offensives against the KNU's fixed positions, eventually succeeding in breaking through the KNU's front lines in 1984, sending around 10,000 refugees into Thailand for the first time (TBBC, 2007). The SIPRI dataset records this low-intensity conflict as claiming the lives of 13,600 people at a minimum since its inception from deaths directly due to battle (Melvin & Koning, 2010:74).

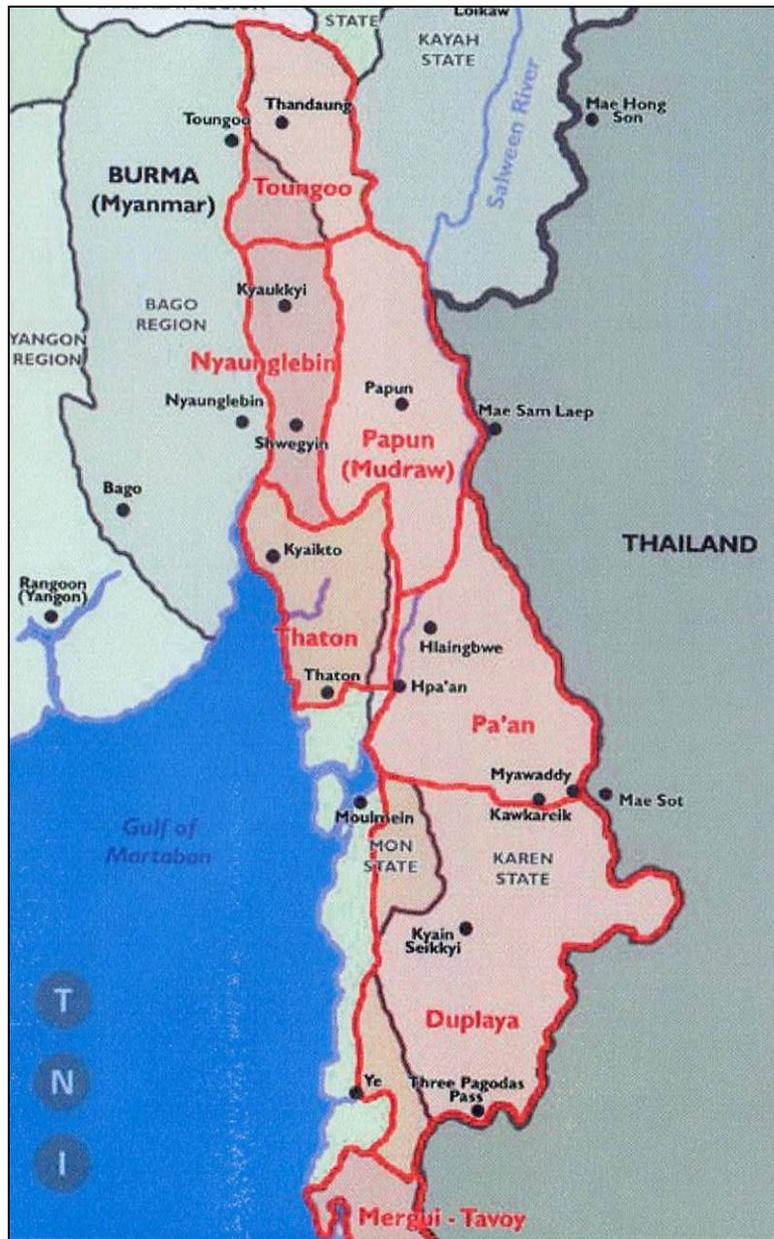
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<sup>20</sup> In its early years, the KNU had three distinct operational zones. First, the Irrawaddy delta area, which was entirely Pwo or Sgaw Karen villages sat side by side with Burman villages, more than 80 per cent Buddhist, with many villages entirely Burmese speaking. There were some large towns under KNU control and irrigated wet rice was cultivated. Second, the lowlands of eastern Burma, which were mainly rural with some small towns, Pwo Karen, Mon and Shan ethnicity, and Buddhist. Third, the hill areas of eastern Burma which were sparsely populated with small villages of Sgaw, Paku, Bre, Bwe and other sub-ethnic groups, who were Buddhist, Animist and Christian, and practiced slash and burn agriculture (Smith, 1991:280-281). The Irrawaddy delta areas were first hit by the 'Four Cuts' counterinsurgency campaigns under General Ne Win and were first to fall entirely under Burma Army control (Smith, 1991:259). Afterwards the KNU dropped its claim to the Irrawaddy delta area and focused on establishing the Kawthoolei state in the eastern borderlands.

<sup>21</sup> American analysts in Bangkok at the time considered the declaration part of a giant communist strategy orchestrated by China and refused to assist the KNU (Smith, 1991:213). This was not an unfounded accusation, the KNUP was the first major conduit for communist ideology to other ethnic armed groups in Burma, all of which took up strongly left-wing positions (Smith, 1991:173).



Map 3 Map showing divisions and states in Burma as defined by the 2008 constitution (TNI, 2011). A rough outline of the KNU's claimed area has been added to the map in grey shading using KNU-produced maps.



*Map 4 Map showing KNU-designated districts (in red) in its claimed territory (TNI, 2011:9). State boundaries as designated by the 2008 constitution are visible underneath (in black).*

***Creation of the Kawthoolei State: Internal legitimacy, structure and divisions***

The KNU divided the territory it claimed to represent into seven districts, each led by a governor, administered by a district committee and defended by a brigade of soldiers run along British lines using conventional (fixed positions) warfare (Smith, 1991:383). In the KNU’s legal system, children are people under the age of 16 (Geneva Call, 2010:22). Young people (including some under the age of 16) were, until 2003, conscripted (and volunteered) into the army, but after 2003 young people under age 18 were completely banned from enlisting in the army and in 2007 the KNU signed a deed of commitment with UNICEF regarding the use of child soldiers (Geneva Call, 2010:22). At its height in

the 1980s, the KNU was the most powerful and influential politico-military group opposing the Burmese state with a standing army of 10,000 troops (Harriden, 2002:84; Smith, 1999:394).

Mampilly, (2007:244) argues that rebel groups which rely on a specific ethnic, regional or national population face pressure from civilians to provide governance. Armed opposition groups which control significant territory are then more likely to provide governance services to the local population specifically to buttress their claims to represent a targeted population and indicate their strength to the central state (Mampilly, 2007:244). Within their extensive 'liberated zones' the KNU built up a 'pseudo-government' with a bureaucratic apparatus including ministries, taxation and revenue systems, education, health and relief services, and a 'national' language (Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2011:98). It was not the only ethno-nationalist armed opposition group to do this, the Kachin Independence Organisation, Shan State Army, Karenni National Progressive Party and New Mon State Party also built up extensive bureaucratic structures in the territory they controlled (Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2011:98; South, 2003).

The nature of the alliance between the KNU and local hill people follows that articulated by Kalyvas (2003:486) whereby supralocal actors supply locals with the military muscle to gain a local advantage (in this case continued control of peasant land) while in exchange supralocal actors rely on local conflicts to recruit and mobilise supporters and obtain local control, resources and information. For both parties, the alliance is the means rather than the goal, which Kalyvas, (2003:486) argues is typically the case in peripheral conflicts. Thus, local support for the KNU does not necessarily imply agreement with its goals. The creation of the KNU's *de facto* state was not always supported by hill Karen people more used to self-rule, especially its agrarian reform ideas during its socialist period (Smith, 1991; Keenan, forthcoming). However, the KNU attempted to establish direct control over the civilian population by incorporating their village councils into its governance structures. As McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) argue, pre-existing community networks and institutions are often used by leaders to convince people to follow them. The KNU retained the local village council structures, within which local sovereignty had long been based, but created township, district and central governance structures and a Karen penal code<sup>22</sup> above the village leader's authority which mimicked the Burmese state. However, other forms of

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<sup>22</sup> The Karen penal code was drawn up in 1955 by a Karen lawyer and is based on the colonial legal system of India (Smith, 1991:170).

collective organisation outside KNU structures, particularly any which challenged the KNU's claim to public authority, were not tolerated.<sup>23</sup>

Like the BSPP in central Burma, the KNU saw itself as above class, ethnic or regional interests but from the start it contained divisions along regional, religious, ideological and strategic lines, reflecting the great variety in communities ascribing to a Karen identity throughout the country. Not all of the people within its claimed area were Karen, the majority of Karen people lived outside Karen State and there were wide differences between those who did subscribe to a Karen identity.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, since its creation by Karen Baptist elites with American Baptist missionary influence, Christian, S'gaw speaking older Karen males have dominated its leadership, though not exclusively so (South, 2007a).

Between the 1950s to 1970s, the KNU contained ideological divisions with KNUP leaders becoming more closely allied to the CPB while the KNU's military leaders remained more conservative, especially since their sources of external support were anti-communist (Fong, 2008). The KNUP was formed as the vanguard party of the KNU and followed Marxist-Leninist and Maoist theories of mobilisation and village organisation, seeing itself as the leadership of the working class with peasants as the backbone of the revolution (Fong, 2008:118; Smith, 1991). Moreover, the socialist state-making ideology of the KNUP was in many respects different from the desires of the autonomous, agrarian Karen hill population of the Salween district who were used to self-rule and failed to resonate with villagers (other than the removal of feudal landlords) (Smith, 1991; Rajah, 1990).

When General Bo Mya became the KNU's leader in 1974, the KNUP and its communist ideology was subsumed under the KNU and the more complex principles of class struggle in socialist ideology were abandoned in favour of a simpler, ethno-nationalist ideology<sup>25</sup> (Smith, 1991; Fong, 2008). Bo Mya then claimed that the KNU was the sole representative of the Karen people and established a one-party ruling system like the BSPP (Smith, 1991). Until 2000, Bo Mya mimicked the central Burmese state and military feudal historical patterns of rule in Burma by developing a military patronage form of authority in the KNU

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<sup>23</sup> Millenarian Karen sects such as the Telakhon, Likae and the Soldiers of the Holy Mountain (dubbed 'God's Army' by the international media) which continued a tradition of emerging in the hill areas in times of crisis and re-organising collective political groupings, were at times harshly dealt with and are now either no longer active or no longer contest political authority in eastern Burma (South, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Linguistic, socio-cultural, religious and political differences among the twenty-odd ethnic sub-groups collectively termed 'Karen' are so varied that ethnic homogeneity and a unified 'Karen' representation has been called a myth (Harriden, 2002:85-86).

<sup>25</sup> One of the founders of the KNU, Saw Ba U Gyi, came up with four political demands in 1950 which continue to form the bedrock of the KNU's political position with regard to the Burmese state today: "There shall be no surrender; the recognition of the Karen State must be complete; we shall retain our own arms; we shall decide our own political destiny" (KNU, 2000).

(Keenan, forthcoming). Bo Mya refused to transfer power to new leaders according to the rules in the KNU's constitution and established a battalion of special forces in economically important areas, personally loyal to his family (HRW, 2005:21).

Hirschman (1970:92-93) argues that organisations with an ideological agenda are not necessarily interested in allowing opportunities for their members to voice their opinions (even though it is in their long-term interest) because their short-term interest is to act as they wish, unmolested by complaints and desertions. Although the KNU sought to promote participant and civilian loyalty through its ideological agenda, under Bo Mya's leadership, the KNU allowed little dissent, especially from younger members (Keenan, forthcoming, p.349). Nepotism and political patronage along religious networks, as well as personal enrichment by powerful leaders then fostered internal divisions (Smith, 1991; South, 2011:41). Some of the other ethnic armed opposition groups have had similar problems to the KNU in terms of the way they use and incorporate youth. For example, many bright Mon youths exited the New Mon State Party in the 1990s, especially after the 1995 ceasefire agreement, viewing the organisation as inflexible, undemocratic and prone to corruption (South, 2003:174).

### ***External legitimacy***

After 1976, the right-wing KNU played a significant geo-political 'buffer' function in the region preventing the communist parties of Burma, Thailand, China and Malaya from linking-up (Smith in Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:84). In Thailand's western borderlands in particular, the KNU effectively operated as a 'Foreign Legion for Thailand', according to Bo Mya, by disarming Karen villagers who joined the Communist Party of Thailand so that the Thai Army was free to concentrate its troops in the east where wars were raging along the Laotian and Cambodian borders (Smith, 1991:299; McCoy, 1999:146). This was not a small role; in 1982-83 there was a mass surrender in Tak province of over 6,000 communist sympathisers and their dependants, along with over 700 heavily armed Karen and Mon guerrillas (Smith, 1991:299).

In return for policing Thailand's western borderlands, the KNU was treated as a *de facto* state and used as a proxy for Thai power, enjoying military, financial and moral support as well as a safe haven in Thailand until the fall of the Soviet Union (Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997; McCoy, 1999). However, even at the height of its power, the KNU never managed to achieve formal external recognition and make the transition to actual statehood.

### ***Revenue streams***

The KNU's revenue streams during 1962 to 1988 boomed as a result of the Burmese military government's disastrous economic policies and lack of control over the borderland resources. Termed 'the Burmese way to socialism' and marked by extreme isolation, nationalisation of industry, xenophobia and obstructive bureaucracy, the Burmese military's introspective policies destroyed the official economy and the black market 'shadow economy' flourished under the control of the KNU for the majority of the eastern border with Thailand (Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:85; Harriden, 2002:119; Lowe, 2009:16; Silverstein, 2001:120). With the nationalisation of businesses as well as a policy of non-alignment then isolation, Burma peculiarly became a left wing army dictatorship (Lowe, 2009:124) challenged by a right wing Karen rebellion.

The KNU took advantage of the destruction of the official economy by levying a five to ten per cent tax on the increasing black market trade (rice, gems, tin ore, textiles, teak, gems, cattle and manufactured goods) flowing through its quickly established customs gates in the eastern borderlands (Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:84; Naylor, 2004:68).<sup>26</sup> At its height, the black market cross-border trade was estimated to be providing over 80 per cent of Burma's consumer goods and was worth between one and two million baht (US\$40,000 to US\$80,000) per day (Renard, 1990; Global Witness, 2003:71). The most important part of this income was the teak trade, including a tax on saw mills (Naylor, 2004:68). Burma contains 70 per cent of the world's teak forests, which are rapidly depleting, but for many years this trade helped to finance the arms needed to defend the Kawthoolei state, providing up to 80 per cent of the KNU's revenue (Naylor, 2004:68; Global Witness, 2003:62). As a result, the KNU's forestry minister, Padoh Aung San, became the second most important person in the KNU after Bo Mya (and the most corrupt, siphoning-off large profits from teak sales before defecting to the Burmese state in order to avoid facing corruption charges in the KNU) (Global Witness, 2003:62-63).

Though their strict Christian-influenced morals meant that the KNU were never involved in the large drugs trafficking operations in the region, the border trade remained highly lucrative as the black market flourished (Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:85; Harriden, 2002:119). The KNU clearly relied heavily on teak resources for income which suggests it may be considered a 'rentier' rebel group, but it actually had multiple revenue streams (including

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<sup>26</sup> The KNU established its first new customs gate at Phalu, south of the Myawaddy-Mae Sot border crossing, in 1964, soon after the start of socialism, quickly followed by another at Kawmoorah-Wangkha. By the peak of its trade in 1983 there were a further ten gates, each with a garrison of up to 200 troops protecting the black market revenue stream (Boucand & Boucand, 1992, in Chen Wei Ching, 1992). Each customs gate remitted 40 per cent of its revenue to KNU headquarters and used the remainder to maintain the army units in its sector (Boucand & Boucand, 1992, in Chen Wei Ching, 1992).

mines, businesses, plantations and a rice tax on farmers) and was also dependent on local support for intelligence information about roving Burma Army troops. From 1949 to 1989, the KNU clearly went through Naylor's (2002) three stages of guerrilla revenue raising strategies as it stabilised its funding base and developed extensive bureaucratic structures.

Exploitation of the border trade and resources transformed Burma's eastern borderlands into a central economic space on the margins of the country and facilitated processes of capitalism in the borderlands, provoking intense speculation by the Burmese and Thai states (Meehan, 2011:385). At its peak in 1983, the KNU's eastern division customs gates were raising around GBP 50 million per year, according to the KNU Finance Minister, Pu Ler Wah (Smith, 1991:283), although this could be an over-statement as Burmese government figures said that the KNU earned around US\$2.6million from teak sales in 1993 (Global Witness, 2003:61). The Burmese economy during this time was thus characterised as a "poor center and rich periphery" (Kurosaki *et al* in Kudo, 2007:14). As Rajah argued at the time (1990:122, in Horstmann, 2002), in terms of the Karen conflict "what is at stake is the capacity of the state to control and maintain its boundaries and what is contained within these national boundaries." Essentially, the KNU's control of the borderland shadow economy granted it a degree of external legitimacy, while concurrently undermining central state economic policies in the Burmese heartland, the state's socialist ideology and, therefore, its state-making programme. However, it also created a 'border effect' (Gallant, 1999) which magnified the state's interest in its borderlands. The Burmese military had built its forces in the 1950s and 60s to counteract the threat it perceived from the CIA-backed Kuomintang in Burma's northern border with China, thus a precedent had already been set that prioritised military control over territory and state-making in the country (Callahan, 2003:172).

By 1988, the Burmese military had consolidated its control over the state and most aspects of life in the centre of the country, while civil services and non-military political parties had withered away (Callahan, 2003). In an attempt to bankrupt the black market trade and the cash profits it generated, General Ne Win demonetised the Burmese economy, which sparked the 1988 urban uprisings (Fong, 2008:146). Between 1988 and 1990, the Burmese military brutally suppressed democracy protests in the centre of the country and over 10,000 political activists fled to the 'liberated areas' of the armed opposition groups in the hills, roughly half of them to KNU-controlled territory (Smith, 1999:371; South, 2011:17) mimicking pre-colonial patterns of escape from oppressive central rule. The KNU headquarters at Manerplaw hosted thousands of fugitive students, MPs and numerous

political groups, functioning as the capital of the entire eastern periphery of Burma, not just Kawthoolei (Lintner, 1989, Falla 1991, Goodden 1996).

The KNU became more of a direct threat to the Burmese state after 1988 when the ethnic armed opposition groups created a powerful alliance with the democracy groups. At Manerplaw, twenty-three of the armed opposition groups including the KNU, united to form the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) in 1988<sup>27</sup>. Subsequently, the NLD and Members of Parliament Union (MPU) also joined the alliance and it transformed into the NCUB. The alliance members agreed to fight for a change to the political form of the country from a unitary state to a federal union and greater autonomy for the ethnic armed groups as public authorities in the ethnic states. The goal of outright secession had already been dropped by the ethnic armed groups in 1984 in a major policy shift which no longer repudiated the outright existence of the state of Burma (South, 2011:50). This was a potent alliance which seriously threatened the control and legitimacy of the Burmese military regime because it combined ethnic fire power with the largely urban-based, and mostly ethnic Burman, democracy movement (South, 2011:17). As a result, it further magnified the Burmese state's interest in controlling the eastern KNU-held borderlands.

Following the suppression of dissent in the centre, the Burma Army underwent an internal reorganisation and Ne Win was ousted in favour of a new generation of Generals more interested in the benefits of capitalism and the exploitation of the borderland resources and cross-border trade (Meehan, 2011:385). They pursued a different strategy of state-making in the borderlands, prompted by the end of the Cold War and the unexpected success of new military-economic agreements with armed remnants of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), such as Khun Sa's United Wa State Army (UWSA) (McCoy, 1999).

#### **b) 1989-2011: Decline of the KNU and rise of Burmese state-making in the borderlands**

The alliance of the urban democracy groups with the ethnic armed opposition groups at the KNU headquarters made the destruction of the KNU and its territory a high priority for the Burmese military (Rajah, 1998:144), but it was not until the break up of the CPB following the end of the Cold War that the Burmese military had the resources to devote to seriously contesting the ethnic armed opposition groups' territorial control in the borderlands (Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2011:98).

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<sup>27</sup> A previous alliance, the National Democratic Front (NDF) had been created in 1976, but the DAB was wider-ranging, including more of the armed opposition groups than the NDF.

After the end of the Cold War, China sought greater access to Burma's natural resources and border trade to fuel its fast-growing economy and stimulate economic development in Yunnan Province (Meehan, 2011:386). It withdrew funding from the CPB, which quickly resulted in the Wa, Kokang, Shan, Akha and Kachin armed members leaving the party (Raw, 2001:160). Meanwhile, the Burmese military embarked on a breakneck expansion from around 180,000 soldiers in 1988 to over 400,000 soldiers in the mid 1990s (levelling at around 300,000 in 2007) as well as ambitious arms production and procurement programmes with the assistance of the Chinese government (Callahan, 2007:36; Maung Aung Myoe, 2009).

With unexpected success creating local military-economic agreements with splinter groups from the CPB, the Burmese military embarked upon a changed state-making strategy, termed 'ceasefire capitalism' by Woods (2011), in which the newly-capitalist Burmese military regime pursued military-economic ceasefire agreements with the ethnic armed opposition groups and used these to establish territorial control and re-calibrate the political economy of the borderlands. The term 'ceasefire capitalism' refers to the "intricate interplay between military force, resource-rich peasant land, and (trans-) national finance capital" (Woods, 2011:751). In essence, this strategy represents North *et al.*'s (2007, 2009) 'limited access order'. The Burmese regime confiscated land and natural resources in the borderlands to limit access to valuable natural resources such as mines, prime agricultural land and strategic sites for hydropower and gas pipeline construction projects in order to generate rents. It then distributed these rents to powerful individuals, groups and neighbouring governments willing to enter into an alliance with the Burmese military and solve the problem of violent resistance to its rule in the borderlands (McCoy, 1999).

### ***Burmese-Thai bilateral agreements***

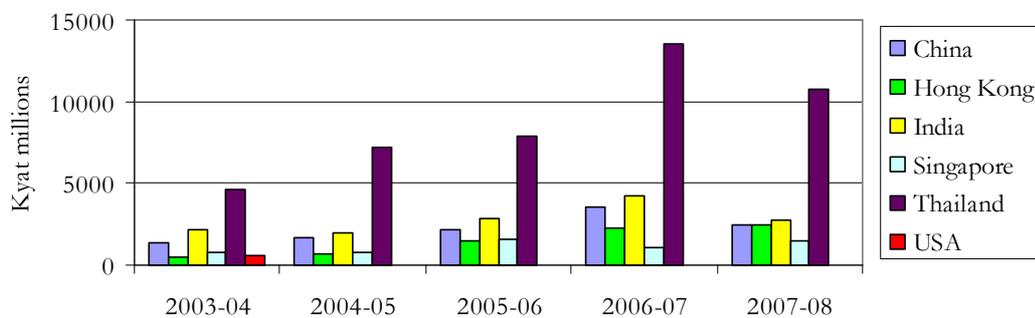
With the elimination of the communist threat in the region after the end of the Cold War, the KNU were no longer needed as a proxy force for Thailand and throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, "Bangkok and Rangoon collaborated to end support for the borderland power-holders in the 'buffer zone'" (McCoy, 1999:146-147). In a new Thai government policy to transform battlegrounds along its borders into marketplaces, the Thai government under General Chaovolit broke the international boycott of Burma (formed after the Burmese military re-asserted power in 1988) and recognised the Burmese regime's legitimacy in exchange for logging<sup>28</sup> and fishing rights (Smith, 1991:408). Its trans-boundary resource access deals with the Burmese state fundamentally changed control of the

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<sup>28</sup> Thailand had established a national logging ban in 1980 due to extensive deforestation, thus, its companies were eager to find new markets (Global Witness, 2003)

borderland economy;<sup>29</sup> as trade became legitimised (and taxed by both the Thai and Burmese governments), roads were built and Thailand gradually became Burma's biggest foreign investor and trading partner with official bilateral trade valued at US\$3.577 billion in 2009-10, most of it due to gas exports, which are the primary 'rent' for the Burmese military rulers<sup>30</sup> (Renard, 1996:108; Xinhua, 2010; Turnell, 2008; Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:87). In this way, powerful Thai military and business leaders have engaged in patrimonial politics with the Burmese regime. In return for access to rents, they have come under pressure from the Burmese regime to limit Burmese exile political activism and the activities of the KNU on Thai soil.

**Burma's exports by destination country**



**Figure 1 Burma's exports by country, 2003-2008 (Graph created from data in Turnell, 2008)**

The decline in the KNU's revenues is directly related to the Burma Army's seizure of border trade and establishment of bilateral economic agreements with Thailand (Global Witness, 2003). Although border trade and the importation of foreign goods were prohibited under the Burmese government's socialist policies (Set Aung, 2009:6), after 1996 some of the trade became legalised, though much of it continues to be undocumented. Officially, border trade between Burma and Thailand was US\$295 million in 2009-10, representing seven per cent of Burma's total trade value, but undocumented trade (not including illegal/illicit trade) in 2006 reached over US\$1 billion, which would make border

<sup>29</sup> From December 1988 to May 1989 the Burmese regime granted 42 logging concessions to 36 Thai companies, many of them linked to Thai military interests rather than specialist forestry firms (Brunner *et al*, 1998). The concessions doubled the area being exploited and gave the Burmese regime 20,000 baht per ton of teak extracted, although the Thai companies were also forced to pay the KNU 5,000 baht per ton in compensation (Smith, 1991:393).

<sup>30</sup> Taxation accounts for 26 per cent of the financing provided to the Burmese state by the Central Bank of Myanmar and a mere four per cent of GDP (Turnell, 2008:6). The lion's share of Burmese state income comes from its gas exports which, since 2003, is the primary source of foreign income for the Burmese state and is expected to bring in around US\$2 billion per year at current production rates and prices for the next 30 to 40 years (Turnell, 2008:15).

trade around 25 per cent of Burma's total trade value if it were taken into account (Set Aung, 2009:6; Xinhua, 2010).<sup>31</sup>

With new logging roads and tacit Thai support, the Burma Army were able to launch a series of large-scale attacks on KNU military strongholds and customs gates, leading to the loss of significant KNU territory, including the lucrative border customs gates (Grundy-Warr and Dean, 2011:98). During 1984 to 1994, as the Burmese military attacked the entire eastern borderland areas, the number of refugees fleeing to Thailand increased to 80,000 people (TBBC, 2007). However, since it could not breach the KNU's heavily fortified headquarters by itself, the Burma Army also initiated ceasefire agreements with individual military leaders within the KNU.

### ***KNU splinters and ceasefires***

Since the collapse of the CPB, the Burmese military have pursued military-economic ceasefire agreements with a number of ethnic armed groups as a state penetration and consolidation strategy (Woods, 2011). Between 1989 and 1995, over twenty-five of the armed opposition groups pursued a strategy of negotiation with the Burma Army rather than continuing armed hostilities, often out of military necessity, humanitarian considerations or economic inducements (Callahan, 2004:110). They have served an important function by reducing the number of war fronts for the Burma Army and facilitating greater military control over the borderlands through the use of the ethnic armed groups as proxies. In return the armed groups have received economic concessions and a degree of territorial control, with shades of legitimacy. Thus, as Gallant (1999) and McCoy (1999) argue, armed actors outside the state have supplemented the state's lack of a monopoly of coercive power in the periphery in return for access to rents.

Burma Army leaders pursued ceasefire agreements with the KNU in 1963-64, between 1995 and 1997, and between 2003-05, but with the KNU holding out for substantive political reform, while the Burmese military was only interested in pursuing the same military-economic agreements it had reached with other armed groups, the talks failed to reach agreement (South, 2011:16-17). Partly the lack of agreement was a result of pressure from the Burmese democracy movement overseas, who were pressing for international action through the UN instead (Taw, 2005, in South, 2008:60). However, Burmese military leaders were more successful at fostering splinter groups from within the KNU's armed wing. The most significant was the creation of the DKBA in 1994, which splintered from the KNLA as a result of grievances over corruption, authoritarianism and religious

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<sup>31</sup> Trade in 2009-10 was down from US\$327 million in 2008-09 due to border closures (Lawi Weng, 2010).

discrimination within the KNU (South, 2011:19; Keenan, forthcoming). The Burma Army then managed to seize the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995 with DKBA assistance.

The Burma Army broke the KNU's territorial control and coercive power in its eastern borderlands by cutting off local support with its 'Four Cuts' operations; cutting off external support by creating its own bilateral agreements with Thailand; and dividing the KNU internally by inducing individual KNLA units with economic concessions.

During the three years from 1995 to 1997, the Burma Army over-ran all of the KNU's remaining military bases along the border, as well as those of the KNPP, SSA and ABSDF resulting in the refugee caseload in Thailand increasing to around 115,000 people (TBBC, 2007). The Burma Army subsequently fostered two more KNU splinter groups: the KPF in 1997 (from the KNLA's sixth brigade<sup>32</sup>) and the KNU-KNLA Peace Council in 2007 (from the KNLA's seventh brigade), both of which signed ceasefire agreements. However, despite collaboration between the Burma Army and ethnic armed groups, ethnic distrust remains high (Irrawaddy, 2010; Global Witness, 2003:72). As a result, in 2010 a large contingent of the DKBA (around 1,500 soldiers) refused the order to join the Burmese military's BGF and allied itself back again with the KNU.

Nowadays, the KNU's armed wings are not united, according to a news interview with David Taw, one of the KNU's senior leaders, in 2009 (Irrawaddy, 2009). David Taw identified two kinds of troops: those stationed in the district central command base and those stationed in outlying areas; and reported that the KNU has difficulty controlling them all and deciding whether to discipline or make concessions to military commanders (Irrawaddy, 2009).

### ***Changing modes of KNU legitimacy-building***

As the Burma Army have become stronger and established greater control over the eastern borderlands, the KNU has become correspondingly weaker. After the DKBA split in 1995 and the KNU's loss of territory, the organisation suffered a severe challenge to its internal legitimacy and particularly, the authoritarian leadership of Bo Mya. After the fall of the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw, the KNU held its first congress since Bo Mya took power in 1976. The elections resulted in General Tamlabaw replacing Bo Mya as chief of staff of the KNLA.<sup>33</sup> At the next congress in 2000, the civilian KNU leader, Saw Ba Thein Sein, replaced Bo Mya as President and a second generation of leaders, some of whom had

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<sup>32</sup> The KPF now has around 230 soldiers active in Kawkareik Township of Dooplaya District (FBR, 2010a).

<sup>33</sup> News reports indicate that Bo Mya refused also to step down as President despite the election results (for example, Aung Zaw and Moe Gyo (2000)).

participated in student politics in urban Burma<sup>34</sup>, were elected into the Central Executive Committee. With a new leadership, the KNU sought to solidify internal support and present a more sophisticated view to the outside world (Aung Zaw and Moe Gyo, 2000). From 2000 to 2008, Ba Thein Sein and the KNU's General Secretary, Mahn Sha (another civilian leader), were the most important leaders in the KNU, overseeing a significant shift in the KNU's organisational culture and practices away from military autocracy.

Under the new leadership, the KNU began emphasising the ideology of a democratic federal union in Burma above ethno-nationalism, both externally and internally. It also continued to reform its links with the other opposition groups in Burma. In 2011 the KNU joined forces with eleven other armed opposition groups (several of whom had broken their ceasefire agreements with the Burmese military) and established the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) (South, 2011:44). The KNU's external alliances have occasionally been a source of tension among Karen communities in Burma who question whether the KNU should be following the agenda of pro-democracy groups in exile (South, 2008:61).

Finally, the KNU attempted to strengthen its internal organisation in a new 'politics before military' policy in which the KNU aimed to be led and controlled by the policies of its younger political leaders and its formalised decision-making structures, rather than by its military leaders and their unilateral decisions (Aung Zaw and Moe Gyo, 2000). It also attempted to restructure the organisation and put the needs of the civilian population first (Keenan, forthcoming p.389). However, according to David Taw, the KNU faces problems conducting public meetings and communicating with villagers inside Burma, due to the lack of territorial control, and has financial and recruitment difficulties (Irrawaddy, 2009).

Although the KNU political leadership continue to have problems with factionalism in its military ranks and discipline among its military commanders, some of which results in sporadic human rights abuses, the KNU today is in many ways very different from the KNU at the height of its power when its military wing ruled autocratically (Keenan, forthcoming). Since 1995 it has held regular, four-yearly internal elections and civilian leaders pre-dominate at the highest levels of the organisation. According to a leader in the KNU's Organising department, the main divisions in the KNU at the 2008 conference were strategic, rather than regional, religious or personal, with some KNU leaders

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<sup>34</sup> Mahn Sha believed in leftist revolutionary politic, worked for the KNU underground while at university in Rangoon and was involved in the student protests against Ne Win's coup in 1962 (Cho, 2008).

preferring to work towards a ceasefire with the Burmese military while ‘hardliners’ were unwilling to concede any territory in return for a ceasefire.<sup>35</sup>

### **3 Sovereignty and control in the Karen borderlands**

In the Karen borderlands today, four different, but overlapping, spaces of sovereignty are identifiable: government-controlled ‘white zones’; partially-securitised areas with multiple, overlapping forms of public authority (previously called ‘brown zones’ in the Burma Army’s counterinsurgency terminology); small pockets of KNU-controlled areas (previously termed ‘black zones’); and exile spaces in Thailand, including, but not limited to, the refugee camps.<sup>36</sup>

#### **a) Government-controlled ‘white zones’: Militarisation of land, labour and social control**

In the military-controlled ‘white zones’ of Karen State, army camps have become notorious for extorting money and materials from the surrounding population to provide for their needs, prop up paltry salaries and establish structures of military control (Callahan, 2007:47; Network for Human Rights Documentation – Burma, 2010). However, the most significant and fundamental challenges to local people have been changes in the control of land and extensive exploitation of local labour.

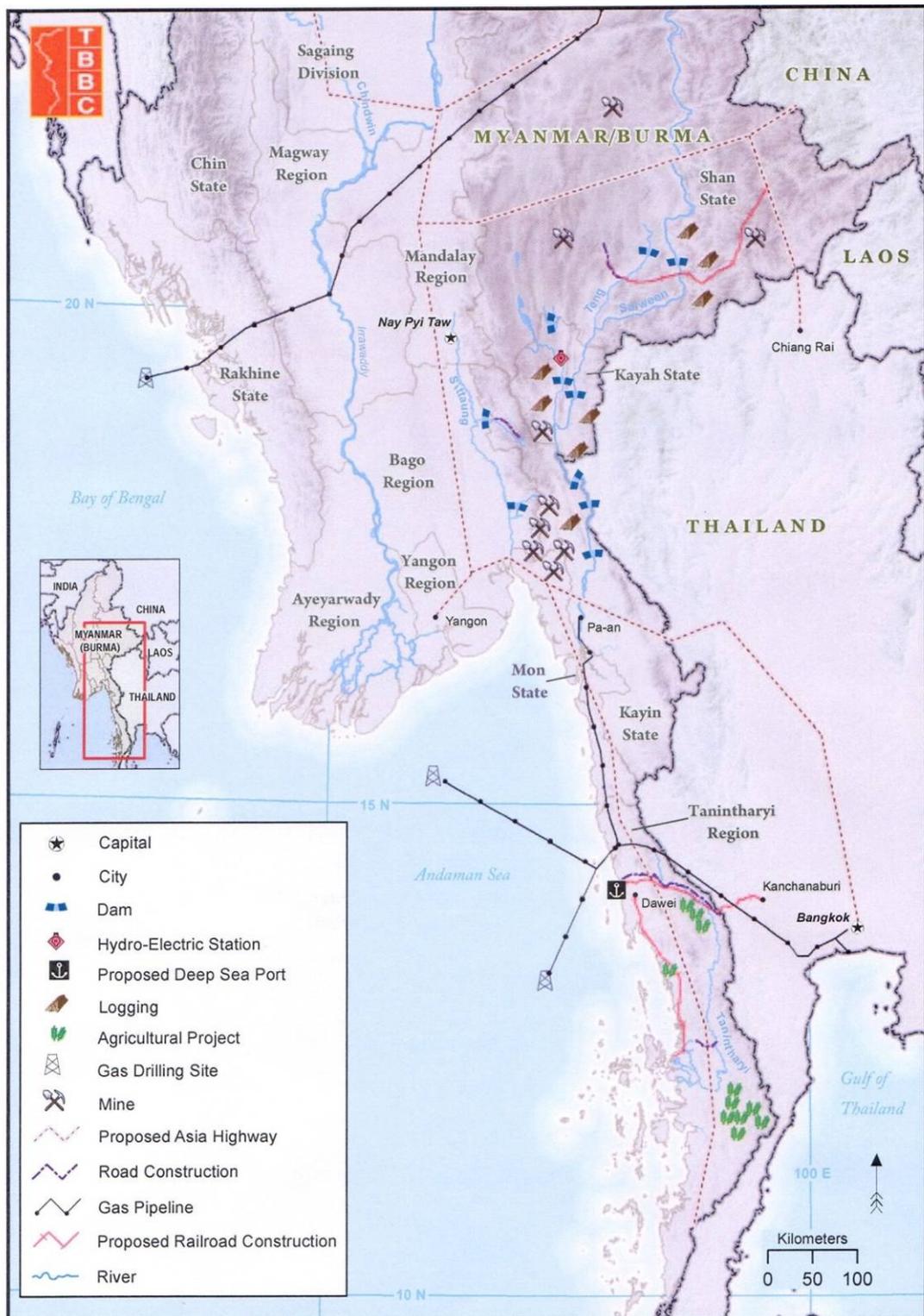
In Karen State, much land has been confiscated from villagers by the Burma Army to make way for a variety of political and economic projects including military business ventures with Burmese companies (for example, rubber plantations with Max Myanmar Group of companies), the enlargement of towns, construction of the new capital at Naypyidaw, hydro-electric dam projects, biofuel cropping and gas pipelines (KHRG, 2011; KHRG, 2009:1; KHRG, 2006; BEWG, 2011; COHRE, 2007:12). Moreover, local forced labour has systematically been used in the construction of macro-development projects, roads and on military-controlled private enterprises, such as plantations (KHRG, 2006). Thus, the Burmese regime’s attempts to make the state by reordering land and society for commercial production has institutionalised the primacy of armed coercion, just as it did under British colonial rule, and follows a similar pattern of coercive changes to capitalism and patrimonial politics found in many other countries (Callahan, 2002:533-534; Gallant, 1999).

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Saw B, Mae Sot, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

<sup>36</sup> This differs from Grundy-Warr and Dean’s (2011:97) classification of space in the borderlands by including exile spaces in Thailand. Grundy-Warr and Dean (2011:105) also identify ceasefire areas as a distinct space, which are areas under the control of a ceasefire group that the Burma Army cannot enter without permission. However, since these are primarily areas under the control of the KIO, NMSP and UWSA, they are outside Karen State.

The main macro-development projects implemented by the Burmese military in eastern Burma (in partnerships with neighbouring countries) are shown in the following map.



**Map 5 Development Projects in South East Burma/Myanmar (TBBC, 2011)**

The Burmese state’s coercive strategy of state-making in the white zones has resulted in the entire landscape being militarised to enforce power and control over land (KHRG, 2008; TBBC, 2011). This has directly led to the impoverishment of local people and has resulted

in a massive and increasing exodus of an estimated 3.5 million people to neighbouring countries, most of whom live as unregistered migrant workers (KHRG, 2009:2-3).<sup>37</sup> Young people between the ages of 15 and 17 (both male and female) are thought to comprise 20 per cent of the migrant workforce in Thailand, partly as a result of customary practices of family labour in Burma which view young people over the age of 13 as being capable of work outside the home (Burma Human Rights Yearbook, 2006 in CPPCR, 2009:12). Thus, just as pre-colonial Burmese kingdoms tended to be self-liquidating as local populations fled to avoid oppressive and exploitative rule (Scott, 2009), so the pattern continues with Burma's military rulers.

Politically, the Burmese state has been labelled a totalitarian regime with a legitimacy deficit, the characteristics of which are rule "based on fear, force and coercion rather than on consent or voluntary compliance" (Holsti, 1996:84), but despite overwhelming dislike for the military regime among ordinary people and general support for armed and/or political opposition groups, most people do not protest (Beatty, 2011:248). According to Beatty (2011:254), Burmese citizens believe that the declining economy and forced labour policies of the regime prevents political opposition as people become totally focused on merely surviving. Moreover, fear of punishment and heavy restrictions on information prevent widespread protest (Beatty, 2011:248).

Areas under consolidated Burma Army control are now only lightly influenced by the KNU through underground organising and recruiting networks.<sup>38</sup> However, despite the minimal lack of political space in government-controlled areas of Burma, Karen civil society organisations outside the armed groups have attempted to carve out spaces for social and political activities (Saw U, 2007:226). In the delta area and around Yangon especially, Karen activists linked to Christian church networks have formed political parties, acted as mediators between the Burmese military and the KNU and set up groups such as the Karen Development Committee with a youth wing (Rising Sun Group) and a women's wing (Karen Women's Action Group) (Saw U, 2007:226).

In government-controlled areas of Karen State, three Karen parties contested the 2010 elections in addition to the USDP (the Burma Army-backed party): the Karen State Democracy and Development party, the Karen People Party and the Plone-S'gaw Democratic Party (KIC, 2010). Outside Karen State, the Union Karen League and Karen

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<sup>37</sup> A report by KHRG (2009:4-7) finds that 78% of migrants cite exploitative abuses by Burmese state authorities as reasons for their economic impoverishment and subsequent migration, with regular forced labour the single most common abuse.

<sup>38</sup> Parts of the Delta around Bogale and Laputta are still considered areas of insurgent activity (classified as 'brown zones') by the SPDC because of a failed armed action there in 1991 by the KNU (HRW, 2010:70)

National Congress for Democracy contested the elections. Young people in the white zones are also involved in opposition politics, as well as being used by the Burmese government to consolidate its power.

### ***Young people and politics in the 'white zones'***

Youths (categorised according to the UN definition as males and females between the ages of 15 and 24) are estimated to number around nine million, or 18 per cent of the population in Burma, which is comparable to other Asian countries (UN, 2010:97). Within urban areas of lowland Burma, overt political protests frequently stemmed from Burmese students, who have a history of political activism since colonial rule. Student politics started when Rangoon University was formed in 1920 and was focused on reform of education which was geared towards the needs of the colonial state to one which was more Burmese focused (Aye Kyaw, 1993). University (and occasionally high school) students then became prominent campaigners for national independence and, after the 1962 military coup, democracy, resulted in the military blowing up Rangoon University's Student Union building (Steinberg, 2007:126).

In urban areas of Burma today, many of the current democracy groups are student or youth-based, such as the All Burma Federation of Student Unions or, in the case of the '88 Generation Students Group, cohort-based. Some are organised by ethnicity, often as the youth wings of ethno-nationalist armed groups, such as Kayan New Generation Youth, Mon Youth Progressive Organisation and Karen Youth Organisation (re-formed as the KNU's youth wing in 1989); some are youth wings of political parties, such as NLD-Youth; some are umbrella groups, such as Students and Youth Congress of Burma, Nationalities Youth Forum and Forum for Democracy in Burma; and others are organised around specific interest groups, such as hip hop music (Generation Wave). Despite the forming of alliance and umbrella groups, ethnic divisions continue to have an impact on the organisation of collective political action. For example, the umbrella youth group, SYCB, organises underground political activism training for its member organisations, but has had to conduct separate trainings for each organisation due to ethnic distrust between the members over security for their underground activists.<sup>39</sup>

The Burmese Buddhist *Sangha* (monkhood) has also long been influential in Burmese politics. Young monks in particular have been outspokenly critical of military misgovernance resulting in increasingly desperate living conditions throughout the country

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<sup>39</sup> Conversations with a KYO leader in July 2008, Mae Sot

and the All Burma Young Monks Union was a leading force in the 2007 ‘Saffron Revolution’ (HRW, 2009:47-49).

Many of the youth groups are involved in similar activities including political activism; awareness raising among youth in Burma around HIV/AIDS, narcotics and politics; ethnic culture and literature promotion; finding or providing educational opportunities for youth; and human rights abuse documentation and international advocacy. The vast majority are compelled to work ‘underground’ since their organisations and activities have been banned by the military government. As a result, many youth groups have seen some of their members imprisoned or killed for political activism in Burma. One of the largest wave of youth arrests in recent years was of around 70 youths in 2010, most of whom were members of Education and Economic Development for Youth (EEDY), the youth wing of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), following the Myitsone dam bombings (Phanida, 2010). The KIO had founded EEDY in 2003 and conducted basic military training for more than 2,000 youth members (Phanida, 2010).

The following table summarises the main youth groups known at the time of research which state political opposition to the military regime:

<b>Politically active youth opposition groups in Burma</b>
<p><b>Youth wings of armed groups</b></p> <p>Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) - youth wing of KNU</p> <p>Education and Economic Development for Youth (EEDY) - youth wing of KIO</p> <p>Ta’ang Students and Youth Organisation (TSYO) – youth wing of PSLF</p>
<p><b>Youth wings of un-armed political groups</b></p> <p>National League for Democracy – Liberated Areas (NLD-LA) (youth wing)</p> <p>National League For Democracy (NLD) (youth wing)</p> <p>Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) (youth wing)</p>
<p><b>Armed youth/student groups</b></p> <p>All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)</p>
<p><b>Independent youth groups with political affiliation (based in neighbouring countries)</b></p> <p>Mon Youth Progressive Organisation (MYPO)</p> <p>Pa-O Youth Organisation (PYO)</p> <p>All Arakanese Students and Youth Congress (AASYC)</p> <p>All Kachin Students and Youth Union (AKSYU)</p> <p>Kuki Students Democratic Front (KSDF)</p> <p>Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY)</p> <p>Arakan Youth Network Group (AYNG)</p>

Chin Students Union (CSU) Shan Youth Power United Lahu Youth Organisation (ULYO) Zomi Students and Youth Organisation (ZSYO) Karenni National Youth Organisation (KNYO) Karenni Students Union (KSU) Myanmar Future Generations (MFG)
<b>Student/youth political parties (based in neighbouring countries)</b> Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS)
<b>Independent youth groups with political affiliation (based in Burma)</b> Generation Wave 88 Generation Students All Burma Young Monks Union (ABYMU) All Burma I.T Students Union (ABITSU) National Youth Network
<b>Umbrella student/youth groups with political affiliation</b> Students and Youth Congress of Burma (Thailand-based) (SYCB) All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) Nationalities Youth Forum (Thailand-based) (NY Forum)

*Table 5 Politically active youth opposition groups in Burma*

The Burma Army has long had an interest in mobilising young people's support through its civilian and military structures. Most prominent in international reportage is its extensive use of child soldiers. Much of the expansion of the Burma Army has been as a result of coerced recruitment of male youths, often under the age of 18, which has become even more intensive as desertion rates have increased (HRW, 2007:30-34; UN, 2011). As a result, Burma is believed to have the highest number of child soldiers (under age 18) in its state military out of any country in the world, numbering around 70,000 in 2002 (HRW, 2002). Neither the Burma Army nor the ethnic armed groups have sought to militarise and recruit female youths, though (Fink, 2008:454).

In terms of mobilising civilian youth support, the military regime's primary strategy to quell domestic opposition has been to bring all aspects of life under military control and extend the number of people formally tied to its structures of patronage. To this end, it established a number of government-organised NGOs (GONGOs), the most substantial of which was the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), established in 1993 along the same lines as the GOLKAR party in Indonesia, with a membership of more than 20

million (South, 2011:24; NDD, 2006:71). The USDA became a military-sponsored political party in 2010 and won the national elections.

Young people aged upwards of 15 are often coerced into joining the USDA and other GONGOs including the Volunteer Firemen, Civil Militia, Myanmar Red Cross Society, Myanmar Maternal and Child Welfare Association and the Myanmar Women's Affairs Association (KHRG, 2008; NDD, 2006). Students in particular, including school students, are heavily pressured to join the USDA and as a result, the vast majority of students in Burma are members (NDD, 2006:19; KHRG, 2008). Youths also join voluntarily, especially in areas where membership results in exemption from conscription for forced labour, extra taxes and incentives such as low cost housing (NDD, 2006:24). Youth in the USDA are used to create spectacles of support during mass rallies for the government and are also used in its militia groups, civilian surveillance and intelligence operations, harassment of NLD activists and activities, street sentries and violent political attacks (NDD, 2006:48-67). In 2010, youths between the ages of 10 and 18 were also reportedly coerced into joining two new youth groups associated with the USDP (New Blood Youth and Pioneer Youth) set up to mobilise youth votes in the national elections (Khonumthung News, 2010).

#### **b) Partially-securitised areas: Multiple, overlapping forms of sovereignty**

With the re-insertion of Burma into the global economy after its socialist period, and the deregulation of the world financial system since the 1980s, Burma's military rulers have reaped the rewards of globalisation in the borderlands by drawing 'rents' from the sale of gas, rubber, teak, hydro-power and a variety of other extraction concessions (Callahan, 2007:45; Woods, 2011). Since they have then limited access to these rents and used them, as North *et al.*'s (2009) 'limited access order' suggests, to build geographical and political structures of control in the borderlands, Woods (2011:753) characterises this as 'appropriating the market to do battle'.

Mary Callahan (2007) identifies three types of political authority in partially-securitised areas: devolution, occupation and coexistence. In areas where the State's power is very limited, power is devolved to networks of traditional leaders; where power is strongly contested, state agencies constitute a dominant and oppressive occupying force and in ceasefire areas, the ceasefire groups coexist with state forces (Callahan, 2007:3). Until 2010, the ceasefire groups were allowed to retain their arms while the Burma Army pursued two other goals in the borderlands instead of disarmament: control of land-based resources to build power through patrimonial political networks, and conquering and controlling a restive ethnic population (Woods, 2011:753-754; Raw, 2001:160). In effect, the ceasefire

groups were used as ‘military entrepreneurs’ as Gallant (1999) terms it, or proxy forces as an extension of the Burma Army in areas where it was unable to impose a monopoly of violence. After the 2010 elections, however, there was a resurgence of conflict throughout the borderlands of Burma as many of the ceasefire groups refused to transition into Border Guard Forces under the command of the Burmese military (TBBC, 2011:12). As Grundy-Warr and Dean (2011:97) point out, the ceasefires have, therefore, been very dynamic, contingent upon the actors and political geography of the moment.

The ceasefire agreements have led to a situation of multiple, overlapping forms of sovereignty as the Burma Army and multiple Karen armed groups vie for control. As Grundy-Warr and Dean (2011:105) argue, this opens up new aspects of insecurity for local people as they have to contend with the demands of double, or even triple, authorities. Moreover, the increased presence of the Burma Army has deepened antipathy towards the state by ethnic minority people and prompted some young men to join the armed opposition groups to avenge abuses committed against their families and communities (Fink, 2008:460).

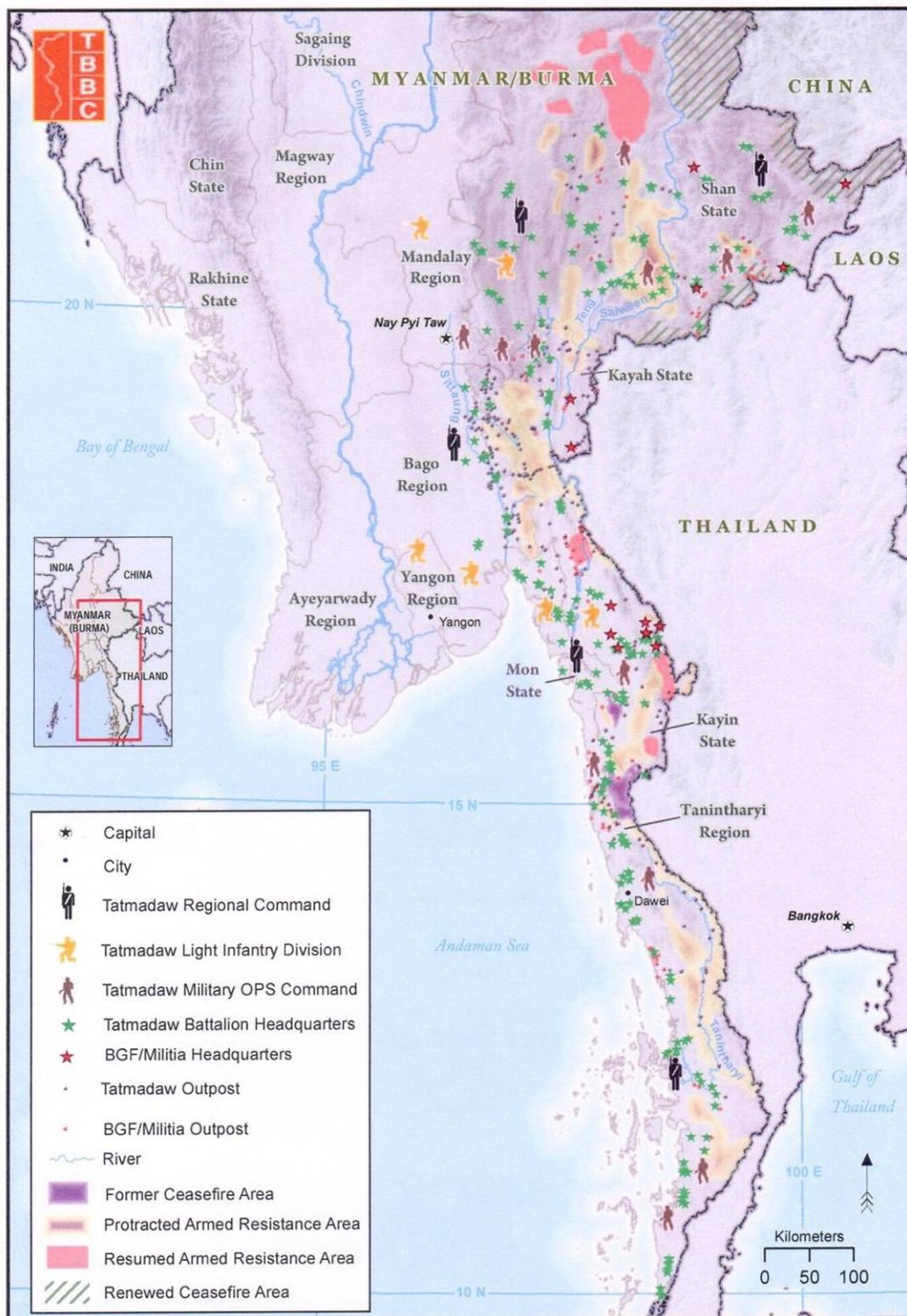
Extensive militarisation by multiple armed groups, as well as the same patterns of land confiscation and exploitation of local resources in the transition to military-capitalism elaborated on in the previous section, have become major issues in partially-securitized areas. For young males, the expansion of the DKBA prior to joining the BGF in 2010 proved particularly threatening as it resulted in a spike in forced conscription, forced portering of military supplies and/or heavy fines in lieu of either (South, 2011:19).

Control of land rights and natural resources has been central to the political economy of conflict in Burma (COHRE, 2007:10). Over 90 per cent of villagers in Karen State depend on farming for their livelihoods, so they are entirely dependent on what they can produce from the land (KSEAG, 2011:5). Moreover, farming is not just an occupation, but a way of life with land-related rituals comprising a major part of hill villagers’ traditional animist beliefs (Marshall, 1997:75-81). In Burmese law, the state owns all land, reflecting its socialist legacy (Hudson-Rodd & Myo Nyunt, 2001), but in the Karen borderlands customary law predominates. Land rights are given and adjudicated by village elders appointed by consensus from among the villagers (Malseed, 2006:8), thus few people hold government land documents,<sup>40</sup> which makes them more vulnerable to land confiscation.

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<sup>40</sup> In a study of displacement in eastern Burma by TBBC, only 23% of farmers held government land documents, while over 70% held land rights through customary ownership or assigned by village elders (TBBC, 2005:45, in Malseed, 2006:8).

With the Burmese military using its Socialist-era laws to displace farmers from land and then use the land for profit-making enterprises as part of its military-controlled capitalism, peasant land displacement is high in these areas. A study by TBBC (2006:22) found that the majority of internally displaced people in eastern Burma (287,000 people) live in temporary settlements in areas controlled by armed groups with a ceasefire agreement with the Burma Army. Gallant (1999:30) argues that as peasant smallholders are pushed off rural land in the periphery to make way for commercialised agrarian regimes, poverty, servitude and social unrest often increase providing fertile ground for violence. As a result, in these areas, dispossessed peasants may then seek alliances with 'military entrepreneurs' (Gallant, 1999).



Map 6 Militarisation and Contested Areas in South East Burma/Myanmar (TBBC, 2011)

**c) KNU-controlled areas (black zones)**

The Burma Army has attempted to penetrate the last remaining areas of the north-eastern borderlands under the control of the KNU by depopulating the hills and forcing the villages into enclosed relocation sites in a continuation of the ‘Four Cuts’ strategy (Malseed,

2008:9). This strategy primarily targets the civilian population in areas under the influence of armed opposition groups and, while not directly killing people, causes massive displacement, impoverishment and increased mortality due to increasing health and food insecurity (Keenan, 2010). Villagers who refuse to move are assumed to be rebels and may be shot on sight as the land outside the relocation sites is designated a 'free fire zone' (Grundy-Warr and Dean, 2011:99). Furthermore, the resources which villages use to sustain themselves are attacked, including food stores, medical supplies and crops (KHRG, 2010b). Given that forced relocation of villagers is very often targeted towards land the Burmese military wants to use for profit-making enterprises, local patterns of conflict are not just about insurgency and counter-insurgency, but also about territoriality, sovereignty and the monopoly of coercive power.

In northern Karen State, conflict has become more militarised in recent years not because of KNU activity in the black zones but as a result of civilians resorting to increasing use of arms due to the *lack* of KNLA soldiers able to provide protection (KHRG, 2010b). Many hill villagers organise their own security with some establishing 'home guard' armed protection to mitigate the impact of Burma Army attacks, enhance physical and food security and resist forced relocation (KHRG, 2010b:89), although this depends on a variety of factors such as their political views, connections to local power-holders and the logistical viability of evasion as a strategy (KHRG, 2010b:48). Despite these activities, however, TBBC (2011:18) estimates (conservatively) that at least 112,000 people were forcibly displaced in Southeast Burma between August 2010 and July 2011.

One of the results of the Burma Army's greatly increased penetration and consolidation of the borderlands is that state-led impoverishment and the reality of generalised violence over power and ownership of resources have caused large-scale displacement (Lanjouw et al., 2000). There are now estimated to be at least half a million internally displaced people in eastern Burma alone (some of whom remain in hiding in an attempt to avoid military control). Since the forced relocations started in 1996, over 3,000 villages have been destroyed, affecting over one million people (UNDP, 2009; TBBC, 2008). Meanwhile, the refugee caseload in Thailand has increased to over 148,000 people in 2011, despite the departure for resettlement from the camps of over 57,000 refugees during 2004-2009 (TBBC, 2011; IOM, 2009).

Another result is an imbalance in young male-female demographic ratios. In conflict zones, it is common to find an imbalance in the male-female ratio due to increased male mortality and male absence due to conscription (Lee *et al.*, 2007:44-45). Between 1999 and 2004, BPHWT found male-female ratio had increased from 89 per cent to 94 per cent in

opposition areas (by comparison, the male-female ratio was 88:100 among Afghan refugees in Pakistan) (Lee *et al.*, 2007:45). However, the continuing imbalance indicates that women have had to take on greater economic burdens and decision-making responsibilities (Fink, 2008:453).

Despite its loss of territory in the hills and lowlands, the KNU continues to retain a presence in the eastern borderlands of Burma through covert civilian support and civilian non-cooperation with state forces (Malseed, 2008:493). In many areas of Karen State, displaced civilians continue to see the KNU as a more legitimate authority than the Burmese state as a result of their personal and repeated experiences of Burma Army abuses (Hull, in KHRG, 2010:85); ardent Karen nationalism; or calculations about which group is perceived to least threaten individual, family or community livelihoods (KHRG, 2010:85; Callahan, 2007:36). They view the central state as predatory and consider Burma and the national government to be synonymous with the Burma Army (Fink, 2008:460). However, support to armed groups is conditional; local and individual priorities motivate villagers' choices of protection strategies to a greater extent than individual political allegiances (KHRG, 2010:87). Moreover, villagers do not necessarily see the KNU as a government or desire a form of state sovereignty under the KNU's leadership, rather, they perceive sovereignty at the village level and aim for a return to their villages and way of life without political or military interference (Heppner, 2005 and Rajah, 2002, in Thawngmung, 2010:160).

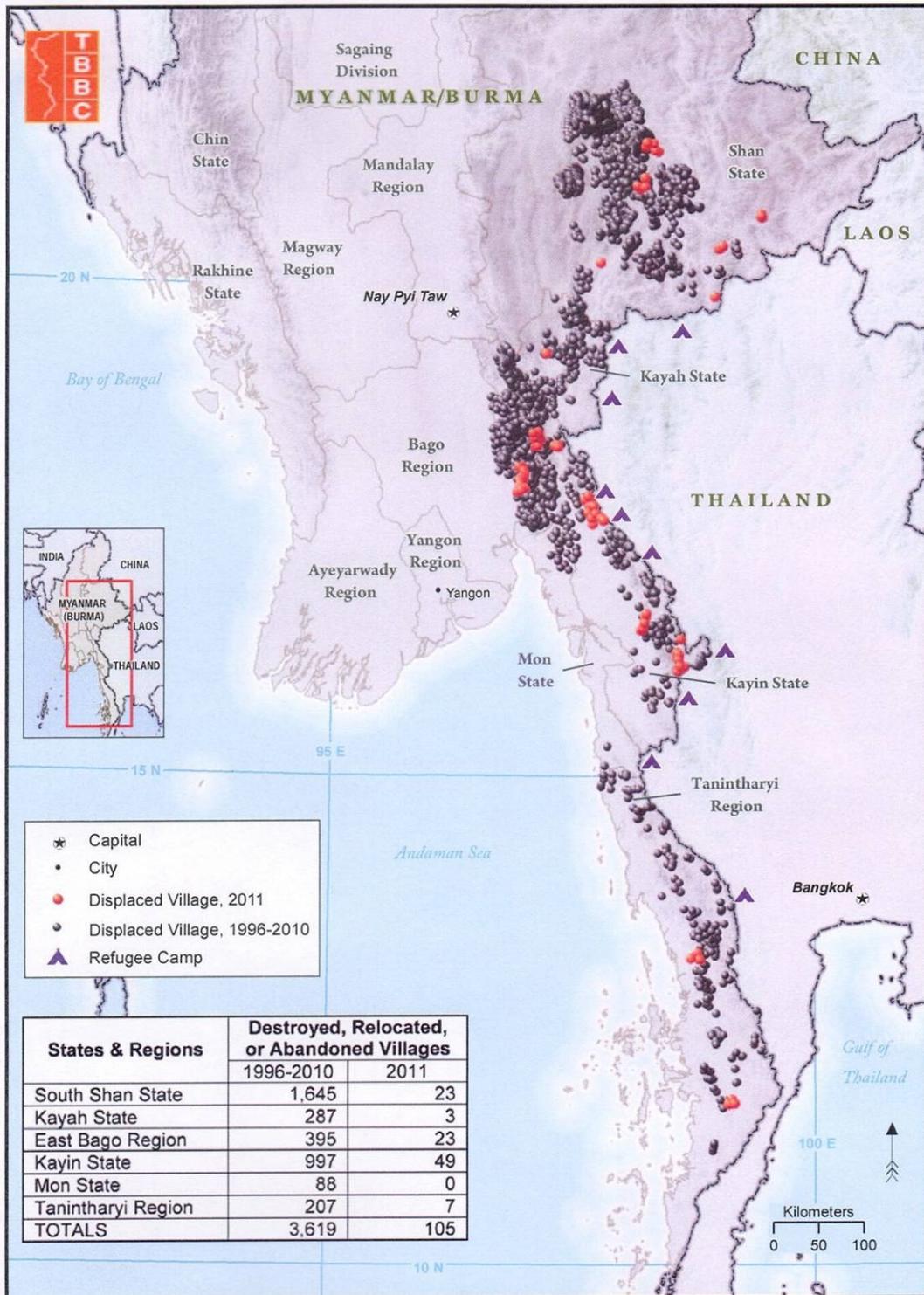
As a result of its loss of territory, areas which the KNU still defends have been much reduced, in some districts just to base camps along the border, while the remaining jungle areas host villagers hiding from roving Burma Army troops. Furthermore, within its armed wings, the KNLA has decreased to a force of no more than 3,000 poorly equipped soldiers according to David Taw, Foreign Minister of the KNU (Irrawaddy, 2009a) plus around 850 KNDO forces<sup>41</sup>.

According to the Zipporah Sein, KNU General Secretary, the role of the KNU in these areas is now largely to provide armed guards to fleeing villagers and humanitarian relief to villagers attempting to remain outside state control and living in hiding in the jungle (KNU, 2009). A small number of other organisations also provide humanitarian assistance in these areas, often working in co-ordination with the KNU. One of these is Free Burma Rangers, which is a large, armed, Christian relief group backed by substantial funding from

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with a KNDO soldier / KYO district leader / Karen State Coordinating Body member on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2009

American Christian communities, continuing a tradition of transnational support to the Karen people by American Christians.



Map 7 Displaced Villages in South East Burma/Myanmar (1996-2011) (TBBC, 2011)

#### **d) Exile spaces**

Following the loss of its headquarters at Manerplaw and large parts of its 'liberated zones', the KNU's headquarters and central departments followed the refugees into Thailand and established themselves in the vicinity of the border town of Mae Sot. While Karen people have lived in the Thai borderlands for at least several centuries, the KNU and its supporters are differentiated from long-established Thai-Karens by their level of ethno-national political organisation (Buadaeng, 2007:86). Thai-Karens have not developed a distinct national consciousness, history, written language, delineated territory or political organisation. Instead they aim to assert their ethnic identity while claiming equal rights to other citizens of Thailand (Buadaeng, 2007:86). However, more recent settlers in the Thai borderlands (outside the camps) may have some links to the KNU depending on their region of origin, community links and personal political convictions.

In Thailand, the KNU exercises public authority over its member organisations, mediates their presence with local officials and strategises with and leads the exiled alliance groups (Lee, 2008). However, its influence and power with regard to Thai officials has greatly declined as it has lost control of the border trade and access to borderland resources.

By 2010, the KNU's central treasury budget had declined to a mere US\$133,300.<sup>42</sup> Each of the KNLA's seven brigades continued to be responsible for raising their own income from local businesses, tax, some border trade and the sale of natural resources such as gold, zinc and hardwood to Thailand (Yan Naing, 2009), but the amount raised is reportedly too little to support even a small guerrilla force and a news interview with a KNU leader in 2009 revealed that the KNU was facing financial difficulties (Irrawaddy, 2009b). For example, the KNU's fourth brigade income was only around US\$40,000 in 2009.<sup>43</sup>

Facing vastly superior military strength, the KNU cannot possibly hope to gain a military victory and its significance as a military actor has greatly declined. However, armed opposition groups primarily seek to maintain the conflict over a long period of time rather than decisively overthrow the state government, in order to force the government to the negotiating table either by military might or inflicting high costs (Fearon, 2004:289). Thus, as a KNDO soldier interviewed in this study stated when asked about the KNU's military

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<sup>42</sup> Although the KNU does not reveal its financial situation, the five per cent of the KNU's annual budget allocated to the education department was reported to be 200,000 Thai Baht in an interview with a KSEAG co-ordinator on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2010, indicating that the KNU's central budget is around four million Thai Baht, or US\$133,300 as at December 2010.

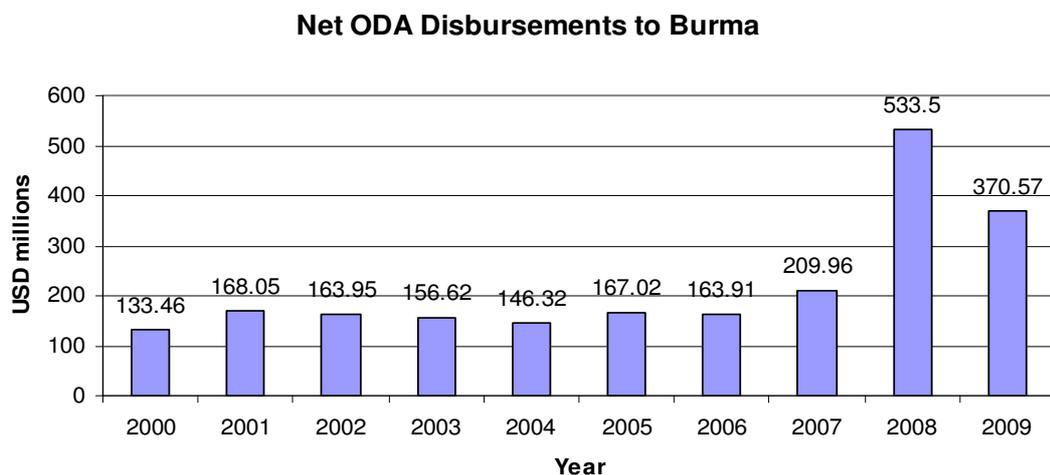
<sup>43</sup> Interview with a KNU Fourth Brigade township officer on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, Suan Pueng

goals: *“We are fighting to gain time not to occupy the space.”*<sup>44</sup> One of the problems with the maintenance of the armed struggle is that improving Thai-Burmese relations since the 1990s have resulted in Thailand putting increasing pressure on the KNU and, since 2009, has led to a ban on the KNU commanding their troops from Thai soil or bringing weapons across the border (Irrawaddy, 2009b). The loss of Thai military support and the end of the war in Cambodia have also curtailed the flow of weapons to the KNU such that nowadays, despite having funds available, KNLA commanders reportedly find it difficult to purchase guns, though they often seize weapons in ambushes (Yan Naing, 2009; Keenan, forthcoming).

As the KNU loses its revenue streams and territory, its bureaucratic apparatus has shrunk. Some of its non-military departments are now defunct (mining, for example), while others continue on a much smaller scale (for example, the forestry, customs and justice departments). However, not all of its bureaucratic departments are in decline, provision of health, education and humanitarian relief services to the civilian population in eastern Burma has continued with new, external revenue streams through INGO humanitarian aid.

#### ***Aid patterns in eastern Burma***

Official development assistance (ODA) to Burma has historically been very low since the military coup of 1988, but after Cyclone Nargis hit the country in 2007, ODA more than doubled,<sup>45</sup> as the following graph demonstrates.



**Figure 2 Net ODA Disbursements to Burma, 2000-2009 (OECD/DAC in World Bank, 2011)**

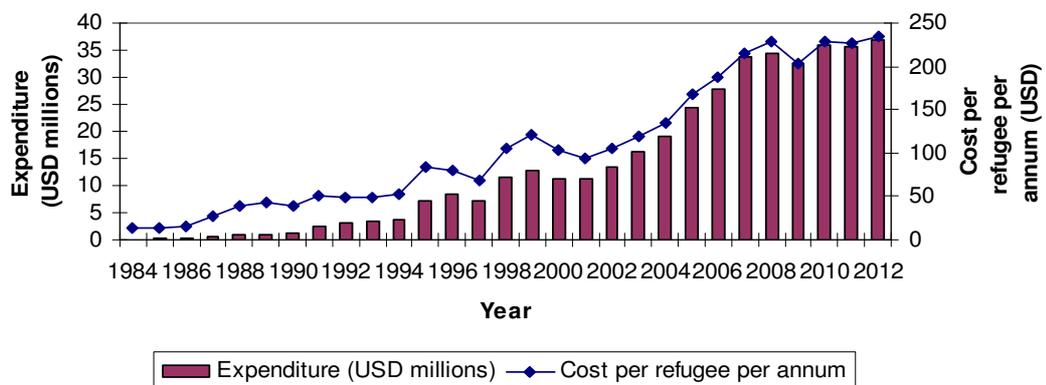
<sup>44</sup> Interview with Saw V (M, 32), a KNDO Officer, district KYO leader, KSCB staff member and KSCDC officer, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>45</sup> ODA in 2006 was US\$3 per person, but after Cyclone Nargis hit the country, it spiked at US\$10 per person in 2008. It then fell to roughly US\$6 per person by 2010. However, the UK and Australia governments, as well as The Global Fund, announced increases in aid budgets for Burma in 2011. By comparison, Laos and Cambodia received aid worth US\$47 and US\$51 per capita respectively (Kean, 2011).

ODA does not reach populations in borderland or conflict areas since international agencies are not permitted access to those areas by the Burmese military. Since the early 1990s, local Karen, Mon, Chin, Shan and Karenni groups have been providing humanitarian relief and some community development and education work from across the Thai border in what had once been ‘liberated zones’ but are now conflict zones or ceasefire areas (South, 2007b). Aid delivered across Burma’s land borders rather than through the centre (and therefore without the permission of the Burmese government) is termed ‘cross-border’ aid. Since these areas are often under the control of multiple armed groups, cross-border aid is delivered with their permission and often also with their armed guards and through their networks (South, 2008:17).

As a result of the increasing humanitarian crisis in the Karen borderlands there has been a more vocal campaign by aid activists<sup>46</sup> for increased funding of cross-border aid. Much cross-border funding is given through TBBC, which is a consortium of agencies working with Burmese refugees in Thailand, and Mae Tao clinic, a Burmese clinic and hospital in Thailand. Both have cross-border programmes, but donors have often been reluctant to fund cross-border projects. For example, the European Commission has refused to allow its funding to be used for cross-border aid since 2009 (Irrawaddy, 2010). TBBC reports that the current trend is for donors to give funding to less politically sensitive areas in central Burma and, as a result of funding restrictions, its budget for emergency relief was much lower in 2011 than in previous years (TBBC, 2011:11, 73). The following graph shows TBBC’s expenditure on Burmese refugees in camps in Thailand.

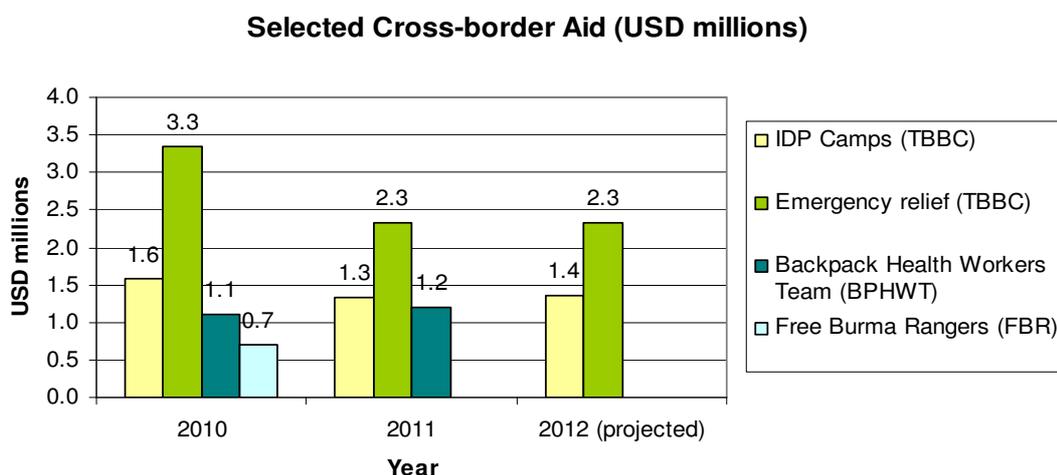
**TBBC Expenditure on Burmese refugees in Thailand  
1984-2012**



*Figure 3 TBBC Expenditure on Burmese refugees in Thailand (Graph created from data in TBBC, 2011:87)*

<sup>46</sup>For example, the Burma Campaign USA, UK and Australia

Around 10.8 per cent of the total of TBBC's expenditure in 2011 comprised cross-border aid (TBBC, 2011). The following table show cross-border aid figures provided by TBBC, Mae Tao clinic (Backpack Health Workers Team) and Free Burma Rangers (FBR), who are three of the biggest cross-border aid providers. This does not represent the total cross-border aid figure, but probably covers the majority. Specifically, it does not include funding to the KNU's welfare wings.

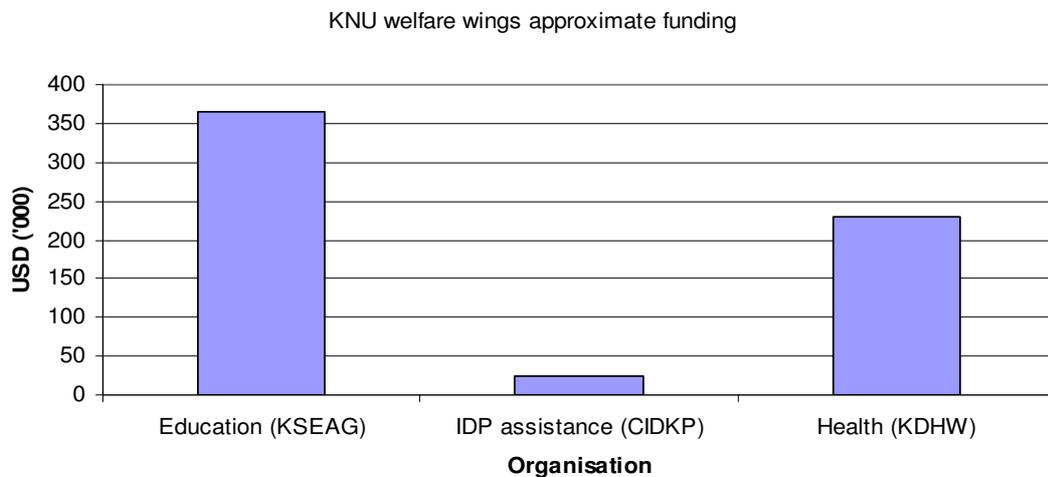


*Figure 4 Selected Cross-Border Aid (Graph created from data in TBBC, 2011:82; BPHWT, 2010, 2011 and FBR, 2010b:21)*

The activities of the KNU's education and health departments in Burma are co-ordinated with the National Health and Education Committee, which is an umbrella group set up in 1995 for the health and education departments within the (mostly ethnic) armed opposition groups in Burma. In 2010, the KNU's education department received the entirety of its US\$365,000 annual budget from external INGO funding (KSEAG, 2011). The KNU's IDP assistance organisation (CIDKP) also received its approximately US\$25,000 annual budget from external funding, as did the KNU's Health department's approximately US\$230,000 health budget.<sup>47</sup> All of these organisations have separated their operational work from the KNU in order to qualify for donor funding. Compared to the US\$6.7 million cross-border aid delivered by the three main NGOs detailed above in 2010 and the US\$371 million in aid delivered through central Burma, the approximately US\$620,000 total funding to the KNU's welfare wings is a very small amount, representing less than ten per cent of the cross-border aid delivered by the three main NGOs. However, it dwarfs the KNU's approximately US\$133,300 central treasury income from natural resource rents, small businesses and household tax. Perhaps reflecting the new importance of external funding to its welfare wings, in 2008 the KNU elected Zipporah Sein, formerly a top leader

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Saw AG, (male) a young CIDKP leader, Mae Sot, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

in the women's wing and a prominent figure in the Burmese women's rights and humanitarian aid community, to the position of General Secretary.



*Figure 5 KNU welfare wings approximate funding*

Finally, an additional spatial element of the KNU conflict is the Karen diaspora which has been identified as a growing source of remittances and political lobbying (Brees, 2009). As Hall and Swain (2008:113) argue, diasporas form an important aspect of new, globalised war economies, as well as providing political support to opposition groups and propagating exclusive ideologies. From 2004 to 2009, 57,000 Karen and Karenni people left the Thai refugee camps for resettlement in a Western country, over 80 per cent of them to America (IOM, 2009). This is a small percentage of the Karen population and the KNU have yet to develop strong diaspora revenue streams, but some overseas Karen organisations, such as Australian Karen Youth give a small amount of funding to humanitarian aid projects delivered by KNU-affiliated organisations. More recently, Karen Youth Organisation have set up overseas branches in the UK, USA, Canada, South Korea and Japan. Although these branches of KYO primarily work on social projects helping Karen youths with resettlement, they also engage in a small amount of political lobbying.

A small number of diaspora Karen are very active in political lobbying, for example, Zoya Phan, the 29-year old daughter of the assassinated KNU leader Mahn Sha, who works for the Burma Campaign UK. Her sister, Bwa Bwa, is the KNU's UK representative. The KNU also has representatives in the USA and Germany. While the broader Burmese diaspora have been influential in European government policies towards Burma, there have been no reports that the Karen diaspora have influenced the KNU's policies. The only report of significant diaspora influence came from leaders of the Burmese democracy movement in New York during the KNU's 1994 ceasefire discussions (Taw, 2005, in South, 2008:60).

#### 4 Conclusion

The KNU's conflict with the Burmese state is understood here as a strategic alliance of peasants and elites from both lowland and upland areas of central and eastern Burma, articulated around a vision of Karen nationalism and independence. As Skocpol (in Wickham-Crowley 1992) and Kalyvas (2003:476) argue, 'marginal political elites' excluded from power, may turn to revolutionary organisations and attempt to secure power through an alliance with peasants fighting more localised conflict, resulting in the "joint production" of action. Following the outbreak of conflict, this chapter argued that

In the first phase of the conflict, while the Burmese military sought to consolidate its control in the centre of the country in the immediate post-colonial period, the KNU attempted to secede from the Union of Burma and built up a *de facto* state in its 'liberated areas', providing extensive governance services and deploying the language and symbolism of statehood. As Mampilly (2007:31, 244) argues, secessionist and ethno-national armed groups intent on securing regional autonomy or secession are more likely to establish governance systems because they have to convince their target population that they offer a better alternative than the state and buttress their claims to represent the population. As such, this case indicates that where there is a weak central state which has limited territorial control, especially in the periphery, the limits of the state do not necessarily give way to anarchy and disorder. Alternative and competing political authorities may be present, often co-existing with customary authorities in a 'hybrid' order (Hagmann and Péclard, 2010:541; Boege *et al.*, 2008). In this case the KNU attempted to incorporate self-rule hill villages into its structures by forming a hybrid order which incorporated customary village leaders into its governance structures.

The KNU managed to achieve a certain amount of hegemonic status along Burma's eastern border despite great diversity and little prior history of unification among the Karen people, though mimicking the BSPP in the Burmese centre, it also effectively became a military dictatorship under the leadership of General Bo Mya. This stifled opportunities to voice grievances, especially among the youth cohort, and allow the organisation to reform, which, after the disastrous DKBA split from the KNLA, resulted in Bo Mya losing legitimacy and being sidelined in the KNU's leadership.

After the Cold War ended the geopolitical changes that ensued had enormous consequences for the KNU. Thailand sought bilateral agreements with the Burmese state instead of the KNU and China ended its support for the CPB, prompting its collapse and eliminating the most resource-sapping war front for the Burma Army (Kramer, 2009). The Burma Army then changed its strategy of state-making and control by pursuing military-

economic ceasefire agreements with the ethnic armed opposition groups and using the provision of limited access to rents to establish territorial control and re-calibrate the political economy of the borderlands. The new Burmese regime's seizure of the KNU's capitalist networks in the eastern borderlands heralded a period of rising strength for the Burma Army and the decline of the KNU, resulting in the exile of the organisation's headquarters to sanctuary in Thailand.

Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) argue that peripheral conflicts and intractable civil wars have markedly decreased in Southeast Asia following the end of the Cold War. In the Burmese borderlands, while conflict between opposing armed groups has declined with the establishment of military-economic ceasefire agreements, civil peace has not followed. In government-controlled areas, patrimonial politics and an obsession with military control over all aspects of life leads to impoverishment and has resulted in a mass exodus of the population to neighbouring countries (KHRG, 2009). Youths are part of the general exodus into migrant work and are active in underground political opposition activities in government-controlled areas of Burma. They are also coerced into supporting the Burmese regime's violent and non-violent methods of social control, through their recruitment into its militias, armed forces and GONGOS.

In partially-securitized areas, the presence of multiple armed groups with overlapping forms of sovereignty has heightened levels of insecurity for local people and, in DKBA-controlled areas, resulted in increased risk of conscription of male youths for the military or portering duties, and/or heavy fines in lieu of either. Understanding how this has happened requires a departure from Weberian models of the state which imagine the state to have sole monopoly over the means of coercion in a defined territory. Instead, it is necessary to take North *et al.*'s (2009) conception of developing states as 'limited access orders' which limit access to rents and use these to co-opt locally and regionally powerful armed actors, thereby reducing the threat of violence in the periphery. The state then relies on external legitimacy to profit from international capital, and patrimonial legitimacy from non-state coercive groups incorporated into its patronage networks.

Until the Burmese military attempted to integrate the ceasefire groups into its military structures with the establishment of the Border Guard Force (BGF) in 2010, the ceasefire groups were used as 'military entrepreneurs' as Gallant (1999) terms it, or proxy forces as an extension of the Burma Army in areas where it was unable to impose a monopoly of violence. Bandit-derived models of state-making argue that this is a common tactic; as Van Schendel and Abraham (2005:7) argue, "historically the boundary of illicitness has shifted back and forth as bandits helped make states and states made bandits". North *et al.* (2009)

argue that this type of state is unstable and often results in conflict because a temporary balance of interests is argued to be more typical than a perpetually organised state (as in the Western model), with control of violence dispersed throughout multiple dominant players. Thus, while the Burma Army have effectively consolidated its direct control or co-opted the coercive power of other armed actors in the 'white zones' and 'brown zones', the result is, as Kramer (2009) puts it 'neither war nor peace'.

In areas of Karen State still under nominal KNU control, conflict has increased as the Burmese state has further penetrated borderland areas and forcibly established its control over land and resources (Fink, 2008:447). This has resulted in increased internal displacement as villagers seek to hide in the jungle to avoid state reach, and increased refugee flows to Thailand.

For the KNU, while its loss of territorial control, revenue streams and depleted military capability means that it cannot possibly hope to gain a military victory, its non-military activities continue to be an important mode of contesting or undermining Burmese state-making practices. In order to do this, the KNU has transformed the way in which it delivers its welfare services, developed during its period of *de facto* statehood. The way in which this has been managed and delivered by youths in non-military roles in the KNU is discussed in more detail in chapter eight. A large part of its current activities are political and governance operations, thus there are potentially a number of important non-military roles for youths in the group. The following chapters explore the participation of youths in these roles, beginning with their mobilisation and recruitment.

## Chapter 6: Constructing ‘youth’ in the KNU

### Representing KYO

#### *Observation of a meeting between KYO and INGO donor representatives*

In 2003 I was working as a volunteer at the Karen Youth Organisation’s (KYO) headquarters in Thailand when the organisation participated in an INGO funding evaluation meeting. During the meeting a fervent argument ensued about the political affiliation of KYO. The foreign evaluators were probing the impact of KYO’s affiliation to the Karen National Union (KNU) on its activities, but the KYO leaders in the meeting denied any political affiliation and presented themselves as merely a social organisation, despite a poster on the wall declaring one of the organisation’s objectives was “self-determination for the Karen people”. In fact, the KYO is the youth wing of the KNU, which the INGO evaluators were fully aware of, but KYO representatives consistently attempt to de-politicise their activities in discussions with INGOs, having found in the past that INGOs are wary of funding a youth organisation with links to an armed opposition group.

During the course of the argument, both sides took increasingly strident and opposing positions. KYO insisted they only dealt in social work with refugee camp youths which the INGO evaluators, being very well versed in Burmese opposition politics, clearly disbelieved. Meanwhile the evaluators suggested that KYO was effectively a political tool of the KNU and their activities with youths, including which youths got to access them, were controlled by the KNU leadership - an accusation the KYO leaders vehemently denied. The argument ended in deadlock and as the evaluators left the office, we all wondered if the organisation would ever get funding from the INGO again (it did).

The argument itself was about two interconnected issues which INGOs working along the Thai-Burmese border are very conscious of: the political affiliation of the organisations they fund and how this impacts upon their activities. Yet although the political affiliation of the KYO is obvious to anyone who does some background research (despite their denials), what this means for power and control over the organisation’s activities is less clear and this is where the INGO evaluators lacked understanding. Being a youth wing does not necessarily mean that the parent party is pulling all the strings. In practice KYO operated with a lot of autonomy and the rejection by the organisation’s leadership that they were merely a political tool of the KNU reflected at least a partial truth. However, the degree of

autonomy KYO has, and the power that youths have within the KNU more broadly raises interesting questions about generational relations in an armed opposition group.

The argument in that meeting also raises the issue of *representation* of a youth wing. While the KYO's various *actual* roles resulted in multiple interpretations of its activities, its *represented* role is purposely constructed in multiple ways for different audiences. As this chapter examines, discussions with KYO leaders over subsequent years and during the course of the fieldwork reveal three main representations of KYO's role.

***Figure 6 Representing 'KYO': Observation of a meeting between KYO and INGO donor representatives***

This chapter seeks to address the question of how 'youth' is defined and why a specific 'youth' cohort was created in the KNU. It aims to understand issues of generational relations and social construction of age cohorts in an armed opposition group, as well as how the group organises itself internally to respond to different audiences and stakeholders. This analysis is based on a social constructivist approach that armed opposition groups are forms of social actors engaged in a continual process of re-creating social categories, norms and codes of action according to various factors, such as the exigencies of conflict and cultural climate of the time and space in which they operate. Understanding the social processes ongoing within an armed opposition group is an important part of understanding why and how they engage in conflict.

Section one examines why the KNU decided to re-create a specific 'youth' category at all after forty years of ongoing conflict with the Burmese state. It finds that a focus on youth political leadership regeneration became important to the KNU as a dearth of politically skilful young leaders became apparent and its authoritarian leadership suffered a crisis of legitimacy.

Section two examines the KNU's construction of a 'youth' category and finds that it is based on a pre-existing social category for young people in Karen villages. As the KNU has politicised this category, youth positions have been transformed from a narrative of 'serving the community' in rural Karen society to 'serving the revolution' in KNU institutions. Its youth category has also been influenced by the KNU's organisational history and leadership, gender norms and, since the exile of its headquarters to Thailand, contact with Thai and Western political culture. While the creation of a specific youth category for the achievement of an armed group's goals has been noted before in other studies, this study illuminates the factors which affect how a youth category is created and why it is deemed necessary. It also shows how youths present their organisational positions in different ways according to the political orientations of different stakeholder groups.

Section three analyses the effects of creating a youth category in the KNU on opportunities for youths to voice political opinions and influence KNU policy. It argues that a decline in the KNU's coercive power resulted in greater political voice for the youth cohort and opened up the civilian leadership structures of the KNU to younger generations. Sanctuary in Thailand has been a key factor in these changes.

### **1 Why did the KNU create a 'youth' category?**

Before examining how a youth category has been created in the KNU, this section briefly reviews how the need for a youth wing emerged in the KNU. It explains the multiple reasons that participants in this study voiced during interviews and focus group discussions, which were probed then tested and confirmed in interviews with other participants on separate occasions.

In brief, the background to the re-formation of the KYO is that during 1976 to 1995 when General Bo Mya led the KNU there was no leadership transition according to the rules in the KNU's constitution (Smith, 1999). The mass political uprisings in the Burmese centre in 1988 brought Burmese national politics back to the KNU and highlighted the weaknesses in the KNU's development of political leadership among the youth cohort. According to the KYO vice-chairperson at the time of research, the flight of large numbers of students and political dissidents to the KNU's 'liberated zones' in eastern Burma highlighted the relative lack of political knowledge and skill among Karen youths in the borderlands.<sup>48</sup> This view was supported by older KNU leaders interviewed in this research. Another reason, voiced by many of the participants who talked about why KYO was re-formed, is illustrated by the following quote from a young leader in the Karen University Students Group:

*"In the future we will have to sit around the table with the Burmese and talk politics so we need educated leaders who know about politics to protect our Karen people at that time."<sup>49</sup>*

This view demonstrates that in an ethnically polarised political context developing political leadership is considered important by participants for safeguarding the interests of the Karen people in Burmese political negotiations. An additional reason, admitted later in the fieldwork by several KYO leaders, was that the KNU was facing criticisms of gerontocracy from among Karen youths, since, by 1988, Bo Mya and other senior KNU leaders were in their sixties. Criticism of KNU leaders is frowned upon in KNU-affiliated institutions, thus, it took many months of discussion and trust-building with KYO leaders before some felt able to even implicitly criticise deceased leaders.

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with KYO central vice-chairperson on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>49</sup> Interview with a KUSG representative, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

The KNU re-convened the KYO in 1989 to act as its political youth wing and leadership development space:

*“The people working in KNU used to be young but then they got old and realised that the younger generation wasn’t prepared to take over. At the same time the youths started to ask for their rights. Also the students came up from Burma<sup>50</sup> and the KNU wanted to put more Karen youth at the same level as the Burman youth to work with them. Some districts had founded KYO before this in the 1980s because they realised they needed to work with the youths.”<sup>51</sup>*

The current Joint Secretary 2 of the KNU, Saw Dot Lay Mu, was one of the first KYO leaders at the time it was re-formed. His view is a particularly useful illustration of the perceived rationale for the reformation of KYO at the time. It also begins to indicate the institutional culture of the KNU:

*“When Manerplaw was established the leaders thought they should organise KYO to take a role to train and recruit more youth to become capable and have qualifications to take leading roles in the future. The leaders conducted education and political training for KYO. At that time I was KYO and I was sent by leaders to attend that political training. Our leaders wanted youths to have training and education and knowledge of our history so we will have spirit to love and serve our people in the next generation.”<sup>52</sup>*

The standing KYO chairman at the time of research added that the KYO was also re-formed to act as the KNU’s liaison with other youth wings of Burmese opposition groups on alliance politics. This was another reason that was supported by other KYO and KNU leaders. Alliances with other armed opposition groups had become an important political strategy for the KNU after 1988 because the organisation had taken a leading role in newly-created alliance groups:

Saw Z: *“KYO was re-formed because the KNU saw that they needed the new generation to come up. Also it is for linking with other ethnic youth groups.”*

Interviewer: *“Why is this important?”*

Saw Z: *“It is important because if we stay in the village and there is another house we have to have friendship with them. Also KYO has to have friendship with other groups and if they work together the ethnic leaders will understand and if we are leaders in the future with peace they will understand our work.”<sup>53</sup>*

In summary, recollections and oral histories recounted by KYO and KNU leaders indicated that KYO was re-formed to meet a number of the KNU’s political and organisational regeneration goals. First, the KNU had been struggling to incorporate younger generations into its political project and was facing youth criticisms that it was becoming gerontocratic. Secondly, the KNU’s legitimacy is built on its claims to protect

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<sup>50</sup> People from the highlands often refer to visitors from the Burmese lowlands as ‘coming up from Burma’, indicating their conception of the highlands as being a physical and political space distinct from the lowlands.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with KYO central vice-chairperson on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>53</sup> Interview with KYO central Chairperson on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

the Karen population from Burmese subjugation, but its future political leadership looked weak compared to the politically skilled Burmese student leadership. Thirdly, the KNU leadership was ageing and realised it needed to establish leadership regeneration processes. Fourthly, given the age difference between the KNU leadership and the Burmese student groups, as well as the workload the KNU leadership faced leading the alliance groups, it needed a youth wing to work alongside the younger generation of other opposition groups as their peers.

## **2 Who is a ‘Karen Youth’? Factors influencing the construction and representation of a ‘youth’ category in the KNU**

When the need for a youth wing emerged in the KNU, a particular ‘youth’ category was created. This section examines the factors that contributed to and continue to influence ‘youth’ actions and representations in the KNU.

### **a) Pre-existing ‘youth’ categories, gender norms and the influence of ethno-nationalism**

The category of ‘youth’ in the KNU was not created anew, this study found that it was influenced by a pre-existing youth category in rural villages, gender norms in the wider society and the KNU’s ethno-political construction of a ‘Karen’ identity.

#### ***Village youth category***

*“Youths organise festivals, celebrations and social work in the village. They share responsibilities together. Men and women have different responsibilities. For a happy celebration at night time they go and read a poem. For sad times, when someone dies, they go and stay with the family the whole night on a rota and read something, sing songs...If the community need help to build a house they go and help. Especially they have a youth leader, one for women and one for men and they organise the groups. For religious celebrations they go to the church or temple and cook, carry water, feed the visitors. Generally they do social work.”<sup>54</sup>*

Despite differences in the cultural practices of different Karen sub-groups and changing social roles over time, participants in this study said there is an identifiable youth category in many Karen villages, based around social work in the village. As the quote from Saw C above explains, young villagers organise themselves into work parties for the preparation of cultural ceremonies in their villages, such as weddings, funerals and festivals, and for the construction of new houses. Saw C referred to this cohort as *bwah tha sab* (in S’gaw Karen dialect) which participants in this study translated as ‘young people’ or ‘youth’.

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<sup>54</sup> Interview with Saw C (Male, age 29), a Burma Issues staff member and KYO member, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

According to one of the participants in this study, tasks for *bwah tha sah* are usually distributed according to cultural norms about gender roles, but some are conducted by males and females together, such as preparing the decorations and site for celebrations, and leading the singing, mourning or poetic recitals.<sup>55</sup> During the year, young people also organise themselves into work parties for the harvesting and planting cycles and tending of common areas such as school, church and temple buildings. An older leader in a trade union affiliated to the KNU described how in rural Karen villages in Burma parties of youths may also travel together on market expeditions to purchase their families' annual supplies of salt and other products.<sup>56</sup>

When asked about the age range of the term *bwah tha sah*, participants said they were unable to say exactly, going on to explain that the term was not age-defined. When probed for an explanation of who might be considered *bwah tha sah* one of the participants in this study explained that there is no upper or lower age limit but the term is usually used for adolescents and people in their twenties, although it may be applied to anyone up to the age of forty if they have youthful features, even if they are married.<sup>57</sup>

*“When I talk about ‘youth’ it is a teenager from about 13 to about 30, but it depends on the country, constitution, organisation and how they determine. For KYO it is 15 to 35. In Karen language ‘bwah tha sah’ usually depends on age, when the features look not too old but [the person is] already past puberty. If [someone is] married [they] can still be bwah tha sah because you look young. We usually call over 40 adults ‘bwah tha bwah’ or ‘luu gyi’ in Burmese.”<sup>58</sup>*

In essence, a Karen village youth category is based on social roles focused on community service. However, while young people's work in the KNU is very different from the social work of young people in Karen villages described above, young participants in the KNU participants were frequently observed using the terms ‘serving the community’ and ‘working for the revolution’ synonymously. This positioning of youth work in the KNU as a ‘community service’ is a linguistic tool that was also frequently seen in speeches to the local population by KNU leaders on special occasions. While it was not directly stated by participants as such, it may be interpreted as a way in which pre-existing social categories and communitarian ethos among young people are utilised to frame political or military ‘service’ in KNU-affiliated organisations. When a senior KNU leader was asked about this,

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<sup>55</sup> Interview with a Burma Issues coordinator and KYO member, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>56</sup> Discussion with a KEWU leader, Mae Sot, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008

<sup>57</sup> Interview with Saw C (Male, age 29), a Burma Issues staff member and KYO member, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>58</sup> Interview with Saw C (Male, age 29), a Burma Issues staff member and KYO member, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

he forcefully defended exhorting the local population to ‘serve the community’ by working for the KNU, arguing that it was vital for the survival of many Karen communities.<sup>59</sup>

This linguistic tool framing youth work was also seen to have another benefit in this study because it effectively mitigated claims for pecuniary benefits by emphasising the voluntaristic nature of ‘community service’. The nature of young participants’ financial recompense for their work within KNU-affiliated organisations was discussed both in focus groups and in individual interviews. Participants explained that when the KNU was based in rural Karen State, its treasury supported its staff and their dependents with basic necessities, but it did not institute a wage economy within its structures. However, when the KNU’s headquarters moved to Thailand after the fall of Manerplaw, the staff and organisations that moved with it became located in the highly capitalist wage-earning society of Thailand and some of its most able cadres became increasingly sought after by increasing numbers of INGOs operating in the refugee camps. This became a problem because the KNU’s income greatly declined after it lost control of the borderland economy, so it could even less afford any kind of pecuniary remuneration of its staff.

Participants talked openly about the problems that the KNU’s lack of financial recompense posed to themselves and their families, but they also stressed how voluntary participation in the KNU was vital to ‘serving the community’ and ‘winning the revolution’. What was particularly noticeable was that there was a remarkable consensus among participants with almost every interviewee stating that they were proud to be serving their community through the KNU. Furthermore, they compared their participation positively with those who ‘sold-out’ and went to work for INGOs or left for resettlement, though this could also reflect feelings of jealousy and even, as Hirschman (1970:92-93) argues, self-deception among members who have invested a great deal in the organisation.

Although it can be argued that the KNU effectively adapted pre-existing norms in many Karen villages of ‘serving the community’ for political purposes, the social roots of the youth category that it built upon have continued to shape its youth wing’s activities. Thus, while KYO partly acts as the political youth wing of the KNU, it also engages in a significant amount of peer group social work. The KYO Vice-Chairperson at the time of research estimated that 80 per cent of KYO’s activities were ‘social’ (meaning social welfare activities like support to boarding house students, or peer group activities such as sports competitions), while only around 20 per cent were ‘political’ (mostly political education and training activities inside Burma),<sup>60</sup> although as chapter eight will argue, an examination of

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<sup>59</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Saw AD (Male, age 32) KYO Vice-Chairperson, Mae Sot, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009

the actual activities of KYO at the central level indicates that at the time of fieldwork in 2008-09, political activities formed a greater proportion of the KYO's work than this. Regardless of the actual proportion of political and social work, the political activities of the KYO may not always be their primary activities and youth leaders themselves state that their political affiliation is not always clear to new recruits joining the KYO, who may base their understanding of the organisation on its social work in local communities. At the time of fieldwork, one of the leaders of the KYO at the central level had parents who both worked within the KNU, yet he said that even he did not perceive KYO as a political organisation at first:

*"When I was a teacher I thought only KNLA worked for Karen freedom - I thought KYO was just only a social organisation. When we stayed in Huay Galoke (refugee camp), when people did a wedding many youths served and worked together to help - also when the people died. I thought it was just social work, not about politics. Then I worked for many years (in KYO) and I knew."*<sup>61</sup>

### ***Influence of gender norms***

In the KNU, female political participation has been especially promoted by its women's wing, the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO). However, the success that the KWO has had in incorporating young women into its structures and work appears to have had a detrimental influence on the construction of a gender-neutral youth category in the youth wing. During the fieldwork, KYO leaders argued that both young men and young women are encouraged to participate in political activities in the KNU, but the youth wing is dominated by young men because young women are diverted into the women's wing by KNU leaders. For example, when a leader decides where to send a new young recruit who is interested in a political position within the organisation, Saw U said:

*"If they are interested in politics the leaders send them to KWO if they are a woman and KYO if they are a man."*<sup>62</sup>

A predominance of young males in the KYO then discourages young women from joining, either because they see no female role models in the organisation or because of misunderstandings about the division of labour in the KNU. As one young female former KYO staff member describes:

*"When I was in camp (Mae Ramoe Luang refugee camp) I thought that most of the KYO [staff] members are male. I think people in the camps also thought that most of the KYO staff should be male."*<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with a KYO central level leader, Mae Sot, 18<sup>th</sup> May 2009

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Saw U (Male, age 29), a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Naw G (Female, age 27), a former KYO central staff member, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> July 2009

During the course of the fieldwork the issue of female representation in KYO arose several times because it was an ongoing source of concern for KYO leaders. Constitutionally, the KYO should have at least 25 per cent of its leadership positions occupied by young women at all levels of the organisation and various efforts were clearly made to encourage and support young women joining KYO. For example, young female KYO leaders travelled to KNU-controlled areas of Burma and the refugee camps in Thailand to promote KYO and encourage other young women to join the organisation. Young female recruits, including those who were married with children, were observed being very well supported and trained at the KYO headquarters, where there was little evidence of a particularly masculine culture. However, both male and female KYO leaders said that although they have some success, the organisation competes for female recruits with the KWO, which, being financially better-off, can afford to offer its staff a small stipend. Although voluntary service is highly promoted in KNU organisations, in Thailand participants live in a capitalist society and many participants explained their desire to earn money for personal use. Almost all participants were keen to seek income to support struggling siblings and parents, especially those remaining inside Burma, so positions that come with some kind of financial stipend are highly desirable. This was a constant source of frustration for KYO leaders because they felt that the KWO was undermining their efforts to include more young women in the organisation, while at the same time criticising them for being dominated by young men.

### ***Influence of ethno-nationalism in the KNU***

**Interviewer:** “*Very few non-Karen seem to join the KNU. Why is this?*”

Saw D: “*The weakness is that the KNU doesn’t organise well for non-Karen people, they just focus on Karen people. They focus most on awareness among Karen people.*”<sup>64</sup>

The ‘youth’ category in the KNU is not ethnically-neutral; as the name of KYO suggests, the organisation specifically works for and with *Karen* youth. Being *Karen* is fundamental to individual and organisational identity in the KNU and can be seen as the result of ethnic politics in Burma and the promotion of ethno-nationalism by the KNU (especially during Bo Mya’s leadership from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s). As chapter five argued, American Baptist missionaries influenced the construction of *Karen* identity as an oppressed, suffering and victimised population, the continued promotion of which, by evangelical Christian cadres in particular, aims to bind disparate *Karen* communities together and build loyalty to the KNU (Horstmann, 2011). For *Karen* youths educated in Christian Mission schools in *Karen* State or in the refugee camps, this particular identity

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Saw D (Male, age 28), a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009

remains a powerful narrative in Karen identity. Karen nationalism and narratives of oppression in Burma and forced migration as a result of their ethnicity were extremely prominent discourses among participants prior to and during the fieldwork. Although the majority of Karen people are not Christian and do not receive their education in Mission schools, as the next chapter discusses, patterns of education in Karen State results in Christian educated, S'gaw speaking participants dominating the political leadership of the KNU. As such, among the participants in this study there was a clear over-representation of Christian (usually Baptist), S'gaw-speaking youths.

Ethno-nationalism remained heavily promoted in KNU-affiliated organisations at the time of fieldwork. During KNU 'national' days, a Karen national identity was observed being explicitly promoted and visibly linked to the political goals of the KNU by the its mass organisations. At the 2009 celebration of Karen Revolution Day, for example, the Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) sold T-shirts with a Karen flag on the front and Saw Ba U Gyi's Four Principles of the revolution on the back as well as traditional Karen clothes. Speeches by KNU leaders then exhorted the attending population to continue fighting for the 'revolution', while KNLA soldiers paraded around the parade ground and were honoured with garlands. Following the formal part of the ceremony, a series of Pwo Karen 'Done Dance' troupes performed dances which showcased Pwo Karen culture.



*Photo 3 KNLA soldiers parading during Karen Revolution Day ceremony, January 2009 [Photo: author]*



*Photo 4 Traditional Karen dancing display during Karen Revolution Day ceremony, January 2009 [Photo: author]*

### **Keeping the flame of Karen nationalism burning**

*Observation of KYO activities during the 60<sup>th</sup> commemoration of Karen Revolution Day*

The exhibition which KYO prepared for commemorations to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Karen conflict was its biggest yet. For a month prior to the ceremony, everyone at the KYO headquarters in Thailand participated in preparing a photographic display of past

and current KNU leaders, including ‘martyrs’ who had died during the struggle for Karen self-determination. KYO’s exhibition also included physical examples of traditional Karen artefacts which showcased Karen culture. It was displayed in a makeshift bamboo museum in the KNLA’s seventh brigade headquarters, across the border from Mae La refugee camp, on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2009, and provoked a lot of debate among the visitors. As well as showcasing Karen cultural artefacts, which may be interpreted as way to promote the KNU as a defender of the Karen’s cultural identity, the exhibition showed photos of Karen IDPs and human rights abuses committed against Karen villagers. These aimed to remind the museum’s visitors what the KNU is fighting for and attempting to protect Karen villagers in Burma from.

Most significant on the day were the images and brief biographies of former leaders of the KNU, including some non ethnic-Karen leaders, such as Dr. Singh. I spent some time observing the reactions of the (primarily Karen) visitors to the exhibition and saw that many seemed to have forgotten that the KNU also includes some non-Karens, including ethnic Burmans. I saw much debate among visitors to the exhibition about loyalty issues regarding former leaders who had splintered off from the KNU and signed ceasefire agreements with the SPDC. The photo of the most recent splinter group leader, General Htain Maung, was particularly contentious among visitors, being a hot topic in KNU politics at the time.

By preparing this exhibition, youths in the KNU may be seen as conduits of a particular ‘Karen’ identity, recreating ethnic identity and the KNU’s ideology on a continuing basis. The chairperson of the KYO at the time of research was a very vocal proponent of this view stating that: “*The KYO job is to make sure the Karen don’t disappear.*”<sup>65</sup> However, keeping the flame of Karen nationalism alive also appears to entail cultural assimilation practices. The KYO chairman went on to say:

*“The KYO have a duty. The other ethnic people, if they want to join we can make them to be KYO or Karen. If they join KYO it is better if they decide to be Karen so that the Karen don’t disappear. If the Karen marry with English, if the children are English the Karen will disappear. We have to try not to disappear.”*<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Interview with KYO central Chairperson on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>66</sup> Interview with KYO central Chairperson on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot



*Photo 5 Part of the KYO exhibition of KNU leaders during Karen Revolution Day ceremony, January 2009 [Photo: author]*



*Photo 6 KYO exhibition of traditional Karen artefacts during Karen Revolution Day ceremony, January 2009 [Photo: author]*

In reality, not everyone who joins the KNU immediately identifies with the KNU's articulation of a Karen identity, while some do not join precisely because they do not easily fit within the particular identity propounded. During fieldwork at the KYO headquarters a number of new recruits passed through the office, often spending several months there before finding a permanent position in one of the exile (not necessarily KNU-affiliated) organisations. One, a young male, was born of Karen parents but did not speak the language well as he had been brought up in a predominantly Burmese speaking town. He often talked about his frustration at the way other participants in the KNU sometimes looked down on him for speaking Burmese (considered the language of the oppressor by some) and how he felt at a disadvantage while working at KYO for not being able to read and write S'gaw Karen, the primary language of the KNU. However, he stayed in KYO and continued to work for the organisation. Another new recruit from a state-controlled area of Burma was born of Karen and Mon parents so had a mixed ethnicity. She felt that others in KNU institutions did not trust her because she was not completely Karen. Ultimately she found a training position at an exile organisation outside KNU institutions entirely, where she appeared to be happy mixing with people from multiple ethnic groups.

#### **b) Organisational history and leadership**

As chapter five discussed, KYO was initially formed as the youth wing of the Karen Central Organisation (KCO) and was one of the five founding members of the KNU. However, in the transition to Burmese independence, KYO leaders undermined the KNU's political position and aligned themselves with Aung San and the AFPFL in a strategy of compromise instead of confrontation. According to current KYO leaders, this organisational history has influenced the way in which KYO was constructed when it was

re-formed and continuing inter-generational relations. They explained in a focus group discussion that some of the elder KNU leaders continue to mistrust the KYO, fearing a youth revolt because of its prior split from the KNU and alignment with the AFPFL. As the KYO Chairman said:

*“One problem for the KYO work is that they joined with the pah sah ba lah [AFPFL]”<sup>67</sup>.*

By the time KYO was re-formed in 1989, the KNU had experienced several more power struggles between different factions and had either disbanded or brought under direct control all other organisations in the union. Probably as a result of this history, the KNU has never militarised its youth wing. The ‘youth’ category constructed by the KNU in 1989 was one of a nascent political leadership who were essentially the ‘children’ of the parent party. By this time, the KNU’s leadership was in its sixties so there was a much greater age difference between KYO and KNU leaders than there had been at independence. Saw D, supported by interviews with other participants, explained that this positioning of youths in the KNU builds on generational relationships in Karen society:

*“The Karen culture is that young people are inexperienced so when you are younger than an old man you have to listen to him and follow him.”<sup>68</sup>*

However, it could also be interpreted as a tool for political control of the youth cohort. More authoritarian leaders in the KNU often used this metaphor of a hierarchical and subservient parent-child relationship to explain how they see the position of the youth wing, indicating that control of the youth cohort is considered important by some, including the Chairman of the KYO at the time of research:

*“In one family, if the parents die the children will organise the family. If KNU elders die then KYO will take over. So at this time the KNU control KYO and KYO will become KNU leaders in the future. KNU train KYO in the future to be leaders... The Organising department support and guide KYO according to the guidelines. If KYO don’t agree with the Organising department it’s like they don’t listen to their parents so [I tell them] don’t work in KYO.”<sup>69</sup>*

It is important to recognise, though, that the KNU contains diverse opinions. While some leaders appear to view the KNU as a unitary party under which all other groups are politically and operationally subordinate, others view it as a union of different interest groups which aims to balance disparate ideas. Saw Hla Ngwe, the KNU’s Joint Secretary 1 on its Central Executive Committee is an example of the latter, stating that:

*“KYO and KWO are not under KNU control, they [KNU] only guide them to be the benefit of all Karen people, not to blindly follow the Karen [KNU] leadership. They [KYO*

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with KYO central Chairperson on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Saw D (Male, age 28), a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>69</sup> Interview with KYO central Chairperson on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

*and KWO] have a role and constitution laid down by their own congress. The KNU never dictates KYO do this do that, we only invite and discuss how to do and how do you assume this issue.’<sup>70</sup>*

Of course this statement could easily have been made simply to appeal to a Western researcher. Saw Hla Ngwe is very familiar with representing the KNU to Western organisations and is aware of the difficulties that KYO and KWO have with Western donors because of their affiliation to the KNU. However, other young leaders working in independent organisations also see the KYO demonstrating some operational independence from the KNU on a day-to-day basis. For example, a KSNG leader said:

*“Some people think that KYO is under the control of KNU but I see that KNU did not come and make decisions for them and they have to make by themselves. They work very hard and use their knowledge and make decisions themselves.’<sup>71</sup>*

This research found that the KNU’s youth wing was specifically re-formed as a leadership development space for youths in their twenties and thirties, to meet the organisational needs of the KNU. For the first time, ‘youth’ was given a defined age range and was intended to cover all males and females from age 15 to 35. From this point on, when the term ‘youth’ is used in this thesis, it refers to this KNU-defined category. Initially, the upper age limit was 40, but according to a KYO leader, after further criticism from younger Karen people that the KYO was dominated by people in their late thirties, whom they did not consider to be ‘youths’, the upper age limit was reduced to preserve the youth wing for younger cadres:

*“In the past the definition was older than 35 but people saw that older leaders had positions and younger people didn’t have positions. KNU want to have a youth wing who can be the strength of the KNU so they gave them some space.’<sup>72</sup>*

In practice, at least among participants based in Thailand, youths working within KNU-affiliated organisations appear to be constituted both as politically subordinate to KNU elders and as individual subjects capable of action and operational decision-making in their own right. However, since this research was unable to study the activities of KYO staff in Burma this may only be a feature of youth participation in Thailand.

### **c) INGOs and the KNU’s lack of coercive power in exile**

The KYO was re-formed in 1989 at the KNU headquarters in Manerplaw, but after the fall of Manerplaw in 1995 to the Burma Army and DKBA, KYO’s central headquarters moved across the border to the vicinity of Mae Sot in Thailand, along with the other KNU central organisations. The location in Thailand appears to have profoundly changed the structural

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>71</sup> Interview with Saw AB (Male, age 29), a KSNG and KHRG leader, Mae Sot, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>72</sup> Interview with a KYO district Chairperson / KNU district level organising department leader on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008

context of KYO's operations, having important effects on its work and relationship to the KNU. From the perspective of an outside observer, the most important aspects of the changed structural context appear to have been a decline in the KNU's coercive power and the influence and protection of INGOs working in the refugee camps. An in-depth interview with Naw H, a KWO leader, explained how this happened:

*“When we moved to Mae Sot the CBOs started growing. Before, it was just KYO and KWO but when we moved to Thailand...NGOs came and volunteers came and gave training, then our minds opened... In the beginning some (KNU) leaders were so strong in their power and when the CBOs started up there was some misunderstanding between the leaders...So they (the new CBOs and the KNU) had a meeting and explained and the leaders accepted (the CBOs)...They can do (CBO activities) if it does not affect the Thai law or KNU.”<sup>73</sup>*

The opening of political space for Karen youths resulted in the founding of the Karen Students Network Group (KSNG) and Karen University Students Group (KUSG), which although strong supporters of the KNU, are constitutionally and operationally independent, apparently causing some anxiety among KNU leaders. It also resulted in greater voice for the KNU's own mass organisations without retribution.<sup>74</sup> Naw H explained further:

*“Now we are in Thailand the KNU cannot be active on their policy, they cannot do anything...Some old leaders are not up to date and cannot accept the situation, but some leaders support the young people.”<sup>75</sup>*

While the KNU held sole coercive power and could effectively protect villagers from external aggression it commanded authority, but with rapidly shrinking liberated areas, an exiled headquarters and executive power increasingly curtailed by Thai authorities, its authority seems to appear to be more vacuous to exiled youth. Kuroiwa and Verkuyten, (2008:395) argue that the elder KNU leadership struggle to appease educated Karen youth in particular and convince them of the army's defensive military strategy. There is subsequently more criticism of the KNU leadership among young Karen people both in Burma and Thailand. As Naw H again explains:

*“In practice, they (youths) can complain but not against the KNU policy. They can complain about leaders and put information on websites or in the media. Some Karen young people may criticise and the KNU are angry but they don't give any punishment because it's not against KNU policy.”<sup>76</sup>*

It was clear from participant observation that Karen organisations based in Thailand at the time of research implemented some projects neither mandated nor approved by the KNU, essentially by receiving protection from their Western INGO patrons, whom, as chapter

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Naw H (Female, age 34), a KWO central leader, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Saw AB (Male, age 29), a KSNG and KHRG leader, Mae Sot, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Naw H (Female, age 34), a KWO central leader, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Naw H (Female, age 34), a KWO central leader, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

eight argues, the KNU increasingly relies on for material support to their welfare wings. As Saw B, a district level KYO leader, explained, although organisations like KYO are still compelled to follow KNU policies, they can also initiate their own activities and have a lot of operational autonomy. This view was supported by many young leaders both within and outside KYO. After the election of a new KYO leadership in 2000 in particular, KYO developed a range of new peer group social projects in the refugee camps in Thailand, building on the social roles of youths in Karen villages and working as implementing partners for the INGOs who supported the refugee camp population. Not all of these (especially HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns) were popular with more conservative elements of the KNU elder leadership. In effect, then, the INGOs appear to have usurped some of the KNU's coercive power over its youth cohort because the KNU-affiliated organisations they fund are now partially accountable to their INGO patrons, who in turn defend their operational neutrality, at least in Thailand.

#### **d) Representing 'KYO' to different audiences**

The KNU's organisational history, pre-existing social categories for youths, ethno-nationalism in the KNU, and the changed structural context of exile in Thailand were all instrumental to the creation of a youth category in the KNU. However, these multiple influences on the construction of a youth category have resulted in multiple, overlapping representations of what the youth organisation actually is. Through observation of the day-to-day interactions between staff at the KYO central headquarters in Thailand and their NGO patrons, KNU elders and local clients in the refugee and IDP camps, it became apparent that KYO staff at the central office in Thailand offer different representations of the organisation to different audiences based on the particular relationships they have. For instance, in interactions with the KNU, KYO staff assume the position of subordinate, politically-committed civil servants and emerging leaders. When KYO staff work with youths during the implementation of their socially-based projects, their work builds on a pre-existing village youth category and KYO staff portray themselves as community volunteers. With INGO donors, KYO staff adopt the position of project implementers with their political relationships very much downplayed and even deliberately obscured at times. This is because most of the INGOs working in the refugee camps and across Burma's eastern border are wary of engaging in Burma's complex and fractured political scene and strive to deliver projects based on operating principles of political neutrality. This representation was often also seen used when KYO leaders liaised with Thai security officials.

All three representations were used frequently throughout the fieldwork period and KYO staff slipped between them as they met people from each of the different audiences. The adoption of multiple representations was clearly a pragmatic response to the different mandates and expectations of each group KYO had a relationship with, but it also represented actual variations in KYO's operations; the representations were not entirely fictitious. A summary of the KYO's multiple representations is given in the table below:

<b>Representation</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Political representation</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Territory</b>
KYO as a CBO	INGOs	Neutral	Implementing partner of INGOs	Thailand
KYO as a KNU mass organisation	KNU, alliance groups and Karen youths	Political supporter of KNU	'Child' of the 'mother' KNU	Thailand and Burma
KYO as a social work group	Karen youths	Neutral	Peer/elder sibling of Karen youths	Thailand and Burma

*Table 6* Summary of three KYO representations to different audiences

### **3 Effects of creating a 'youth' category in the KNU**

This section analyses the effect the construction of a youth wing and a youth category in the KNU has had on opportunities for youths to voice political opinions and influence KNU policy and generational relations in the KNU.

#### **a) Negotiating hierarchies and social categories in the KNU**

This case demonstrates that while an armed opposition group may be militarily strong, weaknesses in political leadership skills, including the regeneration of political leadership, may be exposed as a result of critical events. The group may then seek to create a youth wing for political and organisational purposes. However, armed opposition groups may perceive politicised youth groups as posing a potential threat and purposely construct their position as politically subordinate to the elder leadership. In a group like the KNU which already contains cleavages and has experienced numerous military splits, it is important not to create the potential for a further cleavage along generational lines, thus the KNU's youth wing was not militarised.

As Parsons (2004) found in the Angolan conflict, youths may be constituted both as subjects of top-down discipline by leaders and as individuals capable of independent action. This case found that a pre-existing youth category in broader society as well as increasingly independent youth wing relations with external funders gave the KNU's youth wing a

degree of operational autonomy, though they remained politically controlled by the parent party.

Although the KNU created a specific youth category, it was not created anew. This case shows how social categories are built on pre-existing social norms. Furthermore, like many politicised ‘youth’ categories elsewhere, ‘youth’ in the KNU is not always a gender-neutral term. Although many young women do appear to identify with the term ‘youth’, the youth wing itself is dominated by young men despite efforts to incorporate more women in KYO. Paradoxically, though, this case indicates that a strong women’s wing in an armed opposition group can reinforce gender biases because it diverts politicised young women out of institutionalised youth transition processes. At the time of fieldwork, the youth wing and armed wings of the KNU remained the primary feeder organisations with successful leaders from the KYO, KNLA and KNDO transitioning into the Standing Committee and eventually the Executive Committee of the KNU. From discussions with KYO leaders, it appears that KYO leaders at the township, district and central levels also work very closely with KNU leaders. A KYO leader explained in a discussion about KYO’s operations one evening:

*“KYO works closely with KNU leaders. Some district KYO are also on the KNU committee. At the township level and district level they work closely with KNU leaders. [For example] some KYO members work for KED (Karen Education Department) and also take responsibility for the KNU organising and publications department. In fourth, fifth and sixth brigades, most KYO committee are also on the KNU committee.”<sup>77</sup>*

The women’s wing, by contrast, does not as regularly transition its leaders into the KNU’s central leadership structures; they tend to remain in the women’s wing (with a small number of exceptions). Thus, while the women’s wing is now large, well organised and financially stable, especially compared to the financially insecure youth wing, its success draws female recruits away from the youth wing and therefore away from the main transition point into KNU leadership roles. The institutionalised separation of women from the KNU’s political leadership is exacerbated by the diversion of new female recruits into the KWO by KNU and KYO leaders inside Karen state. A KYO central leader explained how this occurs:

Interviewer: *“Why don’t many young women join KYO?”*

Saw U: *“Some of the young women, if they come to KYO some of the KYO leaders do not know what the women need at the township or district level and cannot look after them. Sometimes they come to join KNU but the security is not good for them and they [KNU leaders] don’t know how to take care of them so they just send them to KWO.”*

Interviewer: *“I saw some young women in the KNLA.”*

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<sup>77</sup> Interview with Saw U (Male, age 29), a KYO central leader, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008, Mae Sot

Saw U: *“If women join the KNLA as soldiers they are just only medics. Most of them work as medic soldiers.”*

Interviewer: *“So what happens if a young woman wants to join the KNU in a political role?”*

Saw U: *“If they are interested in politics the [KNU] leaders send them to KWO if they are a woman and KYO if they are a man.”<sup>78</sup>*

Burgess’s (2002) study found that youth organisations in Zanzibar were important arenas for bridging ethnic divisions in society. However, in this case, the construction of a ‘youth’ category merely appeared to reinforce existing ethnic divisions. Observations of KYO activities showed that it perpetuated the promotion of a *Karen* youth category and attempted to unite youths from diverse Karen communities around a particular Karen identity as articulated by the KNU. Moreover, although KYO is involved in alliances with other political youth groups in Burma (through the umbrella groups SYCB and NY Forum), KYO leaders reported that ethnic distrust remains high among the youth groups. Indeed they were quite dismissive about the relevance of these groups as a political force, stating that they were merely ‘talking shops’ dominated by the exiled Burman students.

#### **b) Opportunities for youths to voice political opinions and influence KNU policy**

Although the KYO was re-formed in 1989 to address the need for political leadership development among the KNU’s youth cohort, it was not until the fall of the KNU’s headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995 and subsequent changes in the KNU’s internal practices that the youth cohort could claim greater political voice in the organisation. The following excerpt from Saw V’s life history illustrates the experience of being a youth in the KNU both before and after the fall of Manerplaw:

#### **Increasing opportunities for youths in the KNU**

*Life history interview with Saw V<sup>1</sup>*

Interviewer: *“When did you first join the KNU?”*

*Saw V: I joined the KNDO since 1992 (aged 16) and became a soldier. At that time I had just finished middle school, Grade Eight, in Burma. When I joined KNDO in the Third Brigade area, firstly I had to attend the military training. I was very young so I should continue my further study, so later I was sent back to school to continue my studies and I continued to study until I finished Grade Ten. On the one side I was a student and on the other side in the military. In the summer time I served as a soldier. After I finished Grade Ten I went back and served there in the front line as a soldier for two or three years and then I asked permission from my leaders to get a chance to study further study and then I studied community management in the DEP [Distance Education Programme]. After finishing DEP...I went back to my battalion and worked there for two or three years and then later my leader sent me to come and work with Padow Htoo Htoo Lay as an intern to learn everything from him. Gradually I improved some of my education and I got more experience in working with other leaders in the central level so later I was appointed to serve as a Karen State Constitution Drafting Committee member.”*

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Saw U (Male, age 29), a KYO central leader, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

Interviewer: *“How did you come to be working in KYO?”*

Saw V: *“In 2008 I was elected to the district level committee of KYO. I already served as a member of KYO as a young man.”*

Interviewer: *“Do the KNU allow youths in KYO to have much power or responsibility?”*

Saw V: *“The KNU are good at giving responsibility to the youth. The situation has changed a lot. Before, it was a little bad when I first joined with KNU. I didn’t know exactly but most of the people talked about this and everyone said there is no more space for the young people... At that time, the KNU, most of the leaders are not quite old and they see that they can do everything but after that we left some of our areas and the leaders got older and older and the situation got worse and worse, so we could see that if there is no space for the young people to be involved in the movement, or if they are not empowered to get more experience or high education, one day there will be a gap between the young people and the old leaders. We saw some of our leaders one by one pass away.”*

Interviewer: *“How do you know the situation for youths in the KNU has changed?”*

Saw V: *“After the fall of Manerplaw I see the situation changed because myself I feel like that. Whenever we worked along with the leaders we could say whatever we wanted... The KYO tried to strengthen the youth movement and activities so now we see that the young people are more empowered and more involved in organisations and got more skills and education. At the same time the KNU try to encourage the youths to get empowerment.”*

Interviewer: *“What do the KNU do to encourage the youths?”*

Saw V: *“Only the KYO deal with the young people directly out of the KNU because some leaders are very old and they have a lot of experience and some young people are not experienced in any movement so they dare not approach the old people to work together. So later [there was] this gap and KYO tried to deal directly with the young people. Later, the young people got more encouragement and got more empowerment and they are more motivated and inspired to work and create their personal involvement.”*

Interviewer: *“Are there many youths involved in the work that you do?”*

Saw V: *“KSCB was formed from a load of Karen organisations. Seventeen people were selected to be members of the KSCB. Most of them are youth...sent by their organisations. They want to promote more youth involved in the organisation work or in the political movement. Otherwise most of the leaders are very old and they lead everything and do everything and sometimes they know everything. Later there is a gap between the youth people and the old people so they need to work together with the young people to train them to work together in the movement so later they will take the position of the old leaders.”*

**Figure 7 Increasing opportunities for youths in the KNU: Life history interview with Saw V<sup>1</sup>**

As Saw V explained, patterns of youth participation and political leadership within the KNU appeared to change significantly after the fall of Manerplaw. The loss of significant territory and splintering among the KNLA resulted in a leadership crisis because it became clear that KNU leaders could neither protect its claimed constituency nor unite its members. As chapter five argued, the defeat reflected serious rifts in the military wing, particularly along sub-ethnic and religious lines, as well as grievances over corruption and abuse of authority by both civilian and military leaders. Thus, according to Zipporah Sein, while the KNU’s leadership was militarily skilled, politically it was weak.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, KNU General Secretary, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

With the subsequent decline of Bo Mya's influence in the KNU leadership and the rise of Ba Thein to the position of Chairman and Mahn Sha to the General Secretary position in 2000 there was a noticeable change in the character of the KNU's behaviour towards its youth cohort, according to many participants in this study. A second generation of leaders took on powerful military and political roles at the 2000 and 2004 KNU elections and youths under the age of 35 became significantly better represented among the lower leadership levels. A KYO leader explained in a discussion about youth leadership training programmes:

*“Before, KNU had a good policy about youth roles, but in practice they didn't implement and it didn't really happen. Some districts now do leadership training. Under Mahn Sha, KNU central had a leadership training programme. Now KNU sees it is not enough to have a good policy regarding youths, they also need to implement it practically with training, capacity building and transition to suitable roles. However there is lots more still to be done. They (KNU) need to be more open, more encouraging and put more youths in leadership positions.”<sup>80</sup>*

A number of youth participants argued that the implementation of youth political training and leadership development programmes was a direct result of the changed KNU leadership, in particular the increasing importance of Mahn Sha, who had long been a supporter of the youth cohort:

*“When Mahn Sha got the General Secretary position the youths grew up a lot, since 2002. We were lucky we had Padow Mahn Sha supporting us because the other leaders could not say anything, and now they see that the youth are active and they agree.”<sup>81</sup>*

Mahn Sha was General Secretary of the KNU from 2000 until his assassination in 2008 and possibly the most significant figure in the KNU during this period, especially after the death of Bo Mya in 2006. Several years before the KNU instituted a centrally-based youth leadership training programme, he established a one to two year training programme for youths at Lay Wah in Karen State, which fed politically-trained youths back into KNU structures. A number of participants spoke very highly about Mahn Sha's young leadership training programme. Discussions with the leaders of several KNU-affiliated organisations revealed that Mahn Sha also nurtured the KYO, KWO and other youth-orientated groups (including the KSNG and KUSG), providing computers, assistance with office rental start-up costs, organisational administration advice and mentoring to the young leaders. This was evident during my own work as a volunteer at the KYO headquarters in 2003-2004 when Mahn Sha would come to the office approximately once a month to discuss current

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with a KYO district Chairperson / KNU district level organising department leader, Mae Sot, 1<sup>st</sup> December 2008

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Naw H (Female, age 34), a KWO central leader, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

Karen affairs with the KYO leadership. He was also a key supporter of independent Karen NGOs, such as KHRG.

In 2008, Zipporah Sein was elected to the General Secretary position left vacant by Mahn Sha's death. As well as being the first female, civilian General Secretary of the KNU, Zipporah was also a supporter of youth, particularly young women. At KWO, for example, she oversaw the institution of two leadership development training centres for young women.

Young leaders interviewed as part of this study argue that a decline in the KNU's coercive power has opened up the political space for youths to voice their opinions without retribution. The organisational style of the KNU also appears to have changed as a result of changed leadership, bringing about a greater tolerance of dissent in the KNU in general and political patronage of youths by powerful KNU leaders. Thus, as Clapham (1998) argues, organisational ethos and individual leadership styles are important factors in the behaviour of armed opposition groups.

Many participants stated that these changes have resulted in more youths taking on leadership positions in its civilian structures since 2000 so the actual numbers of youths working in key non-military KNU departments and affiliated organisations, at both the leadership and general staff level was collected during the fieldwork period. Analysis of this data showed that at the district level of the KNU bureaucracy all departments contain youths working at leadership levels, particularly the fourth, fifth and sixth districts. The Standing Committee of the KNU also now contains many second and third generation KNU leaders, though none are aged under 35.<sup>82</sup> The following table indicates the proportions of youths (as defined by the KNU) within different KNU-affiliated organisations at the leadership level and the general staff level.

<b>Youth (aged 15-35) participation in key non-military KNU organisations</b>		
<b>Organisation / Department</b>	<b>Youths in leadership positions (as a percentage of all leaders)</b>	<b>Youths in general staff (non-leadership) positions (as a percentage of all staff)</b>
KYO (Youth wing)	100	100
KWO (Women's wing)	20	80
CIDKP (IDP relief)	13	77
FTUK (Trade unions)	57	60
Forestry department	40	66

<sup>82</sup> Interview with a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2008

Organising department	45-75	100
Education department	11	52
Health department	8	unknown

**Table 7 Youth (aged 15-35) participation in key non-military KNU organisations<sup>83</sup>**

According to Saw Hla Ngwe, Joint Secretary of the KNU, it is the second and third generation of KNU leaders, those between the ages of 35 and 60, who now wield effective power while the elderly first generation of KNU leaders are now primarily figure-heads, some of whom remain involved in policy-making, but in a reduced capacity:

Interviewer: *“Why are the senior KNU leaders so old?”*

Saw Hla Ngwe: *“Most of the leaders over age 60 are not active, they are retired... Only five of the top leaders are over age 70. Old leaders are just policy makers, not practically active. The '49 generation<sup>84</sup> will reach their expiry date this term. They have a strong determination and are committed to the war so we let them work to their last breath. It's not that we like so much the old leaders. For old leaders to lead their people is a great burden for them and for us. Between the ages of 35 and 60 we have many people. They are the middle aged people. Since 2004 [13<sup>th</sup> KNU congress] more and more younger generation have taken leadership roles in comparison to the past, in all spheres.”*

The degree of power youths under the age of 35 possess to influence KNU policies and strategic direction was difficult to gauge in this study, but it can partly be measured by analysis of the KNU's internal voting system. In the four-yearly congress which sets policies, guidelines for working and strategies, official youth representatives are guaranteed seven per cent of the votes available on all decisions, however, in reality both KYO and KNU leaders stated that more youths than this are actually represented voting in their capacity as women representatives, district level representatives and other departmental representatives. The table below shows the vote allocations of the KNU at its four-yearly congress, according to the KNU's central level organising department<sup>85</sup>:

<b>Vote allocations in the KNU Congress</b>		
<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Number of votes</b>	<b>Number of votes as a percentage of all votes</b>
Central Executive Committee	30	23%
Standing Committee	15	11%
District leaders	7	5%

<sup>83</sup> These figures are based on my interviews with officials from each organisation during 2008-09. The percentage of youths in leadership positions is based on exact numbers in all organisations except the Organising department. The percentage of youths in staff positions is based on exact number in FTUK, CIDKP and KYO and estimates in the other organisations.

<sup>84</sup> The '49 generation refers to people who joined the KNU in its early years when it first took up arms against the central government in 1949.

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with KYO central leaders and KNU central level organising department staff, July 2009, Mae Sot

Township leaders	7	5%
KNLA	30	23%
KNDO	7	5%
KYO	9	7%
KWO	9	7%
Education department	7	5%
Health department	7	5%
Overseas Karen	3	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 8** Vote allocations within the KNU’s four-yearly congress

As the table indicates, the armed wings of the KNU continue to wield significant power, with the KNLA allocated 23 per cent of votes and the KNDO five per cent. Moreover, KNLA leaders are also represented in the Central Executive Committee and Standing Committee. The reason for their continued power in political decision-making, according to Saw B, is their remaining coercive power in Karen State and history of factionalism as this excerpt from an interview demonstrates:

Interviewer: *“Who has most power in the KNU?”*

Saw B: *“The army are still the most powerful because they have the potential to give the most problems to the KNU.”<sup>86</sup>*

Despite the increased presence of youths in the KNU’s decision making structures, young leaders say that they still find it difficult at times to voice their opinions and concerns and have them received without suspicion or criticism, they have had to rely on key backers from within the KNU leadership to advance their interests and, in general, they are not the decision makers at the policy level. They are completely absent from the Central Executive body which makes day to day decisions and the extended Standing Committee which is involved in more strategic or politically significant decisions. Thus, while no longer as marginalised in the group as they appear to have been before, youths are still dominated by their elder counterparts in the KNU.

### **c) Generational relations**

When KYO was re-formed, it was created as the ‘child’ of the ‘parent’ KNU and youths were expected to be politically subordinate to KNU leaders. This was presented and justified by reference to a culture of deference to elders in Karen society. In practice, older leaders are positioned to act as advisers to younger leaders within the KNU. Indeed, almost

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Saw B (Male, age 33), a KYO district leader and KNU Organising department leader, Suan Pueng, 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2010

every day a very elderly KNU leader, Saw Thamein Htun, would cycle over to the KYO office and spend a few moments talking with the staff at the office before taking a nap. Saw Dot Lay Mu explained how this advisory role works:

*“The older people become the leaders in their level. Those who are older age (not youth age) are not very active in the service, but usually they take the leadership role at their level and they take the training and become advisor of youth, whereas the youth do actively in their service. In the military older people become leaders and take guardianship of the youth.”<sup>87</sup>*

However, for an armed opposition group straddling a border, different structural and cultural conditions on each side of the border can cause a number of organisational difficulties. Participants in this study explained that youths in the KNU living and working in exile on the Thai side of the border are socialised in a very different political and cultural context from their elder counterparts. In particular, they said that many youths working along the border have contact with Thai and Western political cultures (both in the refugee camps and outside the camps) as well as access to the internet, which has resulted in a great deal more open debate and critique of Burmese politics and the KNU. Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, explained how this affects generational relations from the KNU leadership’s perspective:

*“When the youths have experience, sometimes they have different ideas, not like the KNU ideas. When they learn about things like democracy and freedom of speech they want to speak freely and it is not appropriate for them to speak like this. Even the Kwekalu (a Karen-language news outlet) editor, he is educated and he wrote the article blaming the leaders. Sometimes there are different ideas between youths and elders and they write articles from different perspectives. Sometimes they fight each other on the internet (blogs). But we understand them, they want to express their opinion even though it is not appropriate. When we meet them we try to ask them not to write the letters that become the pleasure of the SPDC, try to avoid this. The appropriate way should be to discuss privately and negotiate and share our opinions together. When Mahn Sha was still alive, if KYO or KWO organised a workshop or seminar they invited us and if they had any questions they asked us or if they wanted to know something they asked us. But now we don’t do like this so much anymore.”<sup>88</sup>*

Youth leaders also confirmed that generational relations are sometimes tense among participants in Thailand due to differences in political socialisation, though they were keen to stress that this did not cause any great problems in the KNU. The KYO leader and Kwekalu news editor mentioned in the quote above argued that voicing criticism to KNU leaders can be very frustrating because of the organisation’s historical political culture and the influence of a wider culture of subordination to elders in rural Karen villages. However, he also stated that there are opportunities for youths to voice their opinions to some of the second generation of KNU leaders:

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

*“The Karen culture is that young people are inexperienced so when you are younger than an old man you have to listen to him and follow him. Also when you are young people today, some educated people try to speak out and make suggestions to the older people and the old people don’t understand. They think you got brainwashed by foreign culture. But if you really try to speak with them they understand.”<sup>89</sup>*

This case demonstrates the complexity of generational relations in an armed opposition group. While youths may be constituted as subordinate to elders and politically marginalised by some leaders, other leaders may have different attitudes towards the youth cohort and changes in leadership and organisational style can empower youths. Furthermore, an armed opposition group operates in a local and national context that is to a certain extent out of its control. Changes in this context can alter the balance of power among participants in the group. Following its exile in Thailand, for instance, the KNU’s coercive power declined resulting in greater freedom for the youth cohort to express political opinions and criticise the parent organisation, though there are some limitations to this. As a young KWO leader explained:

Interviewer: *“Can youths in the KNU criticise KNU policies or actions?”*

Naw H: *“In practice, they [youths] can complain but not against the KNU policy. They can complain about leaders and put information on website or in media. Some Karen young people may criticise and the KNU are angry but they don’t give any punishment because it’s not against KNU policy. Now we are in Thailand the KNU cannot be active on their policy, they cannot do anything. It depends on the leader – their personality and their view, their background. Some old leaders are not up to date and cannot accept the situation, but some leaders support the young people.”<sup>90</sup>*

In Hirschman’s (1970:92-93) theory of exit, voice and loyalty in institutions, although loyalty-promoting organisations may promote an ideological agenda, they are not necessarily interested in the opinions of their members because their short-term interest is to act as they wish, unconstrained by complaints and desertions. Therefore, they often seek to repress members’ voices and aim to develop unconscious loyalty (Hirschman, 1970:92-93). However, instituting mechanisms for members to voice their opinions is actually in their long-term interest because it enables the group to respond and adapt to changing concerns as necessary (Hirschman, 1970:92-93). Hirschman’s theory suggests that greater youth voice within the KNU may signal a broader opening of political space within the KNU and may also enable the KNU to adapt and respond to the opinions of its members better. However, as yet there is no evidence to suggest that this will prevent factionalism or serve to reunite very disparate Karen communities.

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<sup>89</sup> Interview with Saw B (Male, age 33), Mae Sot, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Naw H (Female, age 34), a KWO central leader, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

## 4 Conclusion

### a) Constructing 'youth' in an armed opposition group

This chapter began by examining how and why a specific 'youth' category is created in an armed opposition group. It argued that a youth wing may be formed for political and organisational expediency as a result of internal and external pressures. In creating a politicised youth category, pre-existing narratives around youth roles in the community may be politicised to frame youth participation in the group. The construction of a youth category was also influenced in this case by the armed group's organisational history of factionalism, gender norms and, since the exile of its headquarters to Thailand, contact with Thai and Western political culture. However, this case demonstrates that youths themselves are not passive in the construction of their cohort in an armed opposition group, they play a part in continually re-creating it according to the political and cultural climate of the time and space in which they live. Thus, while they have reproduced the group's ethnonationalist discourse in the case studied here, they have also fought for greater political voice. Despite some efforts to alter the effect of gender norms on youth participation in the group, they have not significantly altered the gender bias in the KNU's political leadership.

Interestingly, this study found that multiple influences on the construction of a youth category in the KNU has resulted in multiple representations of the youth wing as an organisation, according to the political orientations of different stakeholders, and a broader array of activities than the purely political role the group anticipated when it created the youth wing. For a youth wing funded externally by INGOs, in order to qualify for external funding for their social projects, young leaders in the KYO are compelled to downplay their political affiliations and emphasise their social activities to international funding agencies.

### b) Claiming 'youth' political voice in the KNU

This chapter examined generational relations and opportunities for youths to voice political opinions and influence KNU policy. It argued that the decline in the KNU's coercive power and a change in leadership resulted in greater political voice for the youth cohort and opened up the civilian leadership structures of the KNU to younger generations. With patronage from senior leaders within the KNU, greater political voice for youths has been supported by the KNU's executive and institutionalised by the transition of youths into more of the leadership positions within the bureaucratic and political structures of the organisation from the district level down since the KNU's congress in 2000.

Sanctuary in Thailand has been a key factor in these changes, because the KNU has less coercive power in Thailand, youths have increased access to other political cultures and participants have more opportunities to leave the organisation if they feel their voices are not being heard. While youths in the KNU are arguably much less marginalised than they were before the re-creation of KYO, they are still subject to a degree of domination by their elder and military counterparts. They continue to struggle to present their opinions and those of the youth cohort whom they formally represent at the highest levels of the organisation and while they have some voting power in KNU's decision making system, the armed wings of the KNU continue to retain the most internal power.

## **Chapter 7: Youth recruitment, progression and exit in the KNU**

The last chapter argued that youth participation and political leadership development became more important to the KNU in 1989, resulting in the creation of a ‘youth’ category, reformation of the KYO to act as its political youth wing and the establishment of leadership development processes for its defined youth cohort. This chapter seeks to understand how young people are mobilised and recruited into non-military roles in the KNU. Furthermore, it examines how they are matched to roles and the factors that influence their career progression. Finally, it seeks to understand why those categorised as ‘youths’ stay in non-military roles or leave the KNU.

As chapter five identified, the KNU is active in four areas with different patterns of governance and control: government-controlled ‘white zones’; partially-securitised areas controlled by multiple armed groups; KNU-controlled or influenced areas (‘black zones’) and exile space in Thailand. This chapter begins by examining recruitment from each of these areas. The second part of the chapter examines career progression patterns among youths in non-military positions in the KNU. The third part of the chapter examines youth exit patterns from the KNU. The fourth part of the chapter analyses the implications these findings have for theories of youth participation in armed opposition groups.

### **1 Recruitment patterns in different zones of control**

Chapter five argued that since the decline of the KNU’s ‘liberated areas’ and the rise in ceasefire agreements between splinter factions from the KNLA and the Burma Army, patterns of sovereignty and control over land and resources in Karen State have become very complex. Four spaces of sovereignty and control were identified: government controlled ‘white zones’; partially-securitised areas with multiple, overlapping claims to authority by different armed groups; KNU-controlled areas; and exile spaces in Thailand.

This chapter examines the different logics of youth recruitment and participation resulting from the different governance regimes in each of these four spaces. The following table summarises the different factors found to affect youth recruitment in this study.

Area	Individual factors	Political, economic and social structure factors	KNU organisation factors	Types of recruits
<b>State-controlled</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revenge</li> <li>- Political ideology</li> <li>- Educational opportunities</li> <li>- Family links to the KNU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Poor quality state education</li> <li>- State exploitation of civilian resources</li> <li>- Local military malgovernance</li> <li>- Youth emigration for work in neighbouring countries</li> <li>- Rural, open villages have better connections to the KNU than urban or enclosed villages</li> <li>- Some villages have a recent cultural memory of KNU rule</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educational recruitment</li> <li>- Links with charismatic leaders</li> <li>- District office outreach work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Medium to high levels of education</li> </ul>
<b>Partially-securitised</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revenge</li> <li>- Political ideology</li> <li>- Educational opportunities</li> <li>- Family links to the KNU</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Multiple authorities making demands on villagers resources</li> <li>- State-making projects of land and labour control and consolidation</li> <li>- Youth emigration for work in neighbouring countries</li> <li>- Local history of KNU governance</li> <li>- Multiple Karen armed groups claiming authority results in some villagers disengaging entirely</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Educational recruitment</li> <li>- Links with charismatic leaders</li> <li>- District office outreach work</li> <li>- Villagers may choose political allegiances on the basis of armed group behaviour in the local area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Medium to high levels of education</li> </ul>

Area	Individual factors	Political, economic and social structure factors	KNU organisation factors	Types of recruits
<b>KNU-controlled</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Revenge</li> <li>- Political ideology</li> <li>- Educational opportunities</li> <li>- Family links to the KNU</li> <li>- Personal security needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High level of grievances around counter-insurgency and state-making practices by the Burma Army</li> <li>- Increasing poverty reducing youth availability for recruitment</li> <li>- Long history of KNU governance</li> <li>- Participation may be considered akin to civil service</li> <li>- ‘Self-rule’ societies have ambiguous and conditional support for any public authority but may support the KNU in an alliance to drive the common enemy out of the land</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical protection of ethnic kin</li> <li>- Grievance framing</li> <li>- Ethno-nationalism</li> <li>- Political ideology</li> <li>- ‘Heroic’ participation and community pride</li> <li>- Educational recruitment</li> <li>- ‘Serving the community’ rhetoric</li> <li>- KNU conscription practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low to Medium levels of education.</li> <li>- Youths with low education become soldiers, those with higher education become officers or admin staff</li> </ul>
<b>Exile spaces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of recent experience of abuse diminishes grievances and motivation</li> <li>- Educational opportunities</li> <li>- Parental pressure not to participate out of security fears</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Thai policies prevent recruitment from Thailand</li> <li>- Increased refugee resettlement opportunities</li> <li>- Thai youth gang culture</li> <li>- Influence of Western culture (particularly individualism) promoting free-riding</li> <li>- INGO influence prompts unviable salary demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- IDP exposure trips</li> <li>- Ethno-nationalist education in schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High levels of education</li> <li>- Most become admin staff</li> <li>- High exit levels</li> </ul>

*Table 9* Summary of youth recruitment patterns in KNU-affiliated organisations

A map showing the different areas is not available and would be far too complex to produce because local patterns of armed group control are highly dynamic, have significant overlap and change seasonally. However, the following map of internal displacement gives some indication of where the different zones lie. Brown shaded IDP hiding areas in northern Karen State and Tenasserim Division indicate the areas the Burma Army is currently trying to penetrate to eliminate KNU control. Purple shaded areas indicate spaces that are partially-securitized and under the control of armed 'ceasefire' groups. Relocation sites tend to be in state-controlled 'white zones'. There remain considerable areas unshaded on the map. Areas of Karen State and Tenasserim division closer to the Thai border are broadly more under the control or influence of the KNU, while areas towards the centre are more under state control.

## Internal Displacement in Eastern Burma, 2010



Map 8 Map showing internal displacement of the civilian population in eastern Burma

a) Government-controlled areas



*Photo 7 Naw E working at KYO Central office in Thailand, February 2009 [Photo: author]*

**Why does a young woman studying at a Burmese university join KYO?**

*Life history interview with Naw E*

Naw E is a 23 year old Baptist female from a prosperous village in Thaton district where most people are farmers. Her family was relatively wealthy because they had a sawmill which her Father employed people to work on. Before her Mother married, she was a nurse in the KNU. The village used to be in the KNU's 'liberated zones' but is now partially-securitised, coming under the control of both the DKBA and the Burma Army. As a result of the conflict, however, Naw E was sent to live in a boarding house in a government-controlled town so that she could continue her education. As she explains:

*"I just attended Grade One in my village then went to study in Thaton [town] because in my village we always had war. When we were children the war always happened but when we were not children (teenagers) the war just sometimes happened. I stayed in a boarding house until Eighth Standard then for Ninth and Tenth Standard I stayed at my Auntie's home. I enjoyed school. I finished school in 2003 and started university directly for three or four months. Then I came back to my village and one of the KWO women said that KYO need one or two people to attend their school in Thailand. A lot of my friends and the young people joined KWO."*

Although her village was controlled by the DKBA and Burma Army, Naw E explained that the KNU still retained a strong presence in the village and most families had members in either the KNU or DKBA. Despite the fact that many years previously a KNU soldier had killed her Grandfather, who was the village head at the time, Naw E's family continued to support the KNU and her brother was a KNU soldier.

When Naw E went back to visit her family in the village, a particular combination of factors led to her joining KYO. At the time, the DKBA were threatening and extorting money from her father because her brother was a KNU soldier. Her father became afraid

for his life and fled to Mae La refugee camp in Thailand, leaving her mother behind. The family already had a link to the refugee camp because another of Naw E's brothers had already moved to the camp to attend school while Naw E was studying in Thaton town. Attending Burmese university costs a lot of money and the family's wealth had dwindled so returning to her studies in Thaton became less viable for Naw E. Moreover, her mother had decided to join her husband in the refugee camp taking the remaining children with her, so Naw E decided to take the opportunity to study at the KYO school in Thailand. This marked the beginning of her career at KYO.

Naw E attended the KYO's leadership and management training school in Mae Sot for one year then attended Politics training organised by the KNU's former General Secretary, Mahn Sha, in Lay Wah. After this, Naw E went back to Thaton district where she worked for KYO for one year. In 2005, she attended the KYO congress as a district representative and was asked to work at the KYO central office. She agreed and attended the Nationalities Youth Forum as the KYO representative for one year before returning to the KYO central office to take over the management of a peer support for youths in boarding houses project, which was funded by an INGO. She also then took responsibility for a multi-organisational adolescent reproductive health network, also supported by an INGO. Naw E explains her career ambitions:

*"I will work for an organisation and if we do [the work] better the people will respect [us]. I want to be a leader, a good leader. I don't have plans to go to a third country [on the refugee resettlement programme]."<sup>91</sup>*

**Figure 8 Why does a young woman studying at a Burmese university join KYO? Life history interview with Naw E**

### **Grievances**

As chapter five discussed, grievances among the civilian population in government-controlled areas are widespread. Primarily, they concern forced labour, extortion, land confiscation and coercive assimilation under the 'Burmanisation' policy. In areas which have only recently come under consolidated state control, however, the local population often has a recent memory of more violent abuses conducted as part of 'Four Cuts' counterinsurgency tactics and state penetration strategies. Saw B, a KYO district leader and youth mobiliser in the KNU's Organising department, explained that the high level of grievances is often the primary motivation for youths joining the KNU, despite the lack of pecuniary benefits the KNU can offer and often no real knowledge of what participation

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Naw E, (female aged 23) a KYO central staff member, Mae Sot, 4<sup>th</sup> July 2009

will entail. Saw X's stated reasons for joining the KNU are typical of many young people interviewed as part of this study who joined from these areas:

*"When I was aged eight or nine I saw ten villagers being tortured to death by SPDC soldiers. They put plastic bags on their heads and also dunked their heads into the river. My uncle was also killed by the SPDC. At 13 I left home in an SPDC-controlled village and joined the KNU."*

During life history interviews with participants, it was common for people to talk firstly and most vehemently about the grievances they felt against the Burma Army, however, I felt that this was not necessarily a good indication of the factors that compelled them to join the KNU at the time. The KNU has a strong discourse of grievance and many participants hear horrible stories of human rights abuses once they start working in one of its organisations. From my prior work at KHRG I found it was common for participants to talk about abuses they had heard about from others, even going back to events that occurred during the Second World War. Therefore, I probed extensively about what they knew about the KNU and the Burma Army at the time of their recruitment, what local living conditions were like and what their actual route into the KNU had been, step by step.

What was clear from research elsewhere, was that although grievances are common, most aggrieved youths do not join the KNU and migration to a neighbouring country or to other parts of the country (including to hiding areas outside state control) is actually a far more common occurrence. As chapter five pointed out, there are an estimated 3.5 million migrants from Burma in neighbouring countries, 20 per cent of whom are young people between the ages of 15 and 17 (KHRG, 2009:2-3; Burma Human Rights Yearbook, 2006, in CPPCR, 2009:12). Considering there are estimated to be around nine million youths between the ages of 15 and 24 in the Burmese population, youth migration is clearly massive and a far more prevalent response to poor living conditions at home than participation in any kind of opposition politics. Among the young people interviewed in this study, more proximate factors, such as a personal link to the KNU or an event that put them in contact with the KNU, explained their actual recruitment path.

### ***Proximate factors***

In the case of Naw E, detailed above, family and village links to the KNU directly facilitated her recruitment. Naw D's recruitment, however, came about through the KNU's proximity in a neighbouring village. Naw D lived in a state-controlled village in Toungoo district and had never encountered the KNU before, although she was aware of the conflict. Upon a visit to a nearby village, the KNU's department for health and welfare (KDHW) was conducting basic health training for the villagers. The opportunity arose for

Naw D to pursue further medical training with the KDHW at the 'Toungoo district headquarters. From there Naw D found further work at the KNU's district office and with KYO, where she was then elected on to KYO's central committee. She explained that although she had no prior knowledge of the KNU's political goals, once she heard about them they resonated positively and she had no qualms about working for an organisation which was using armed force to contest the Burmese State. She explained that her only encounters with the Burmese State had been at school, seeing her father imprisoned for two years for suspected KNU involvement and being forced to labour on road construction by the Burma Army. Thus, she felt no loyalty towards the state.<sup>92</sup>

Conversely, Saw AD explained that fewer youths join the KNU from trading areas, towns and enclosed villages because of the lack of proximity to KNU networks. Likewise in the Irrawaddy Delta, Karen youths are located far from KNU networks, thus a parent from Irrawaddy division, who was visiting the KNU headquarters in Thailand to investigate options for his sons to join the KNLA, said:

*"Many young people want to join KNU to make a revolution but they can't come because it is very far away. If they come the SPDC know and will arrest them."*<sup>93</sup>

Despite losing control of the delta area of Burma, much of the lowland plains areas and the towns, the KNU still has an underground presence in some of these areas and Karen youths can seek out the KNU through underground networks if they wish to join. However, underground networks to the KNU are partly mediated by ethnicity since political affiliation is assumed to be partly driven by ethnicity in an ethnically politicised context. The parent quoted above explained:

*"Many young people in my village join with KNU. SPDC control this area. If they want to join the KNU the villagers have to do it very secretly, it is not easy for them, but they are Karen also so it is easy to contact the KNU"*<sup>94</sup>

### ***Education***

As chapter five highlighted, Burmese students have a history of political activism. The military regime has attempted to eliminate student protest by limiting the acquisition of political knowledge through heavy censorship of the curriculum, minimising the use of universities as organising spaces by closing universities and promoting distance learning courses instead, and pacifying students by giving out exam passes to anyone who attends

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<sup>92</sup> Interview with Naw D, (female aged 27) a KYO central staff member, Mae Sot, 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Saw AE, (male) Mae Sot, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>94</sup> Interview with Saw AC, (male) Mae Sot, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009

75 per cent of classes (Beatty, 2011:183; Aung Thet Wine, 2009). The Burmese education minister himself stated in 2009:

*“Education authorities hand out cheap degrees to daytime (regular) students as well as distant learning students, since they make it a policy of letting every student pass exams if they attend over 75 percent of their class hours. I say this even though it is belittling and embarrassing for our own education system”* (Aung Thet Wine, 2009).

Lack of political awareness among youths is a result of the censorship of education and news in Burma, but youths who migrate out of the country are able to access information leading some to become politically active (Beatty, 2011). One of the youths in this study had worked as a migrant labourer in Malaysia and Thailand and became politically aware after demonstrating outside the Burmese and Russian embassies with the NLD-LA and Burmese student groups. On his return to his village, he joined an underground branch of the KNU and began political campaigning work in SPDC-controlled areas.<sup>95</sup>

Poor quality or non-existent education provided by the Burmese state<sup>96</sup> is frustrating for some youths and those with links to the KNU may choose to access alternative education through KNU structures, or facilitate the access of others. For example, Saw E was interested in teaching and working for the educational development of young people and joined KYO after graduating with a BA in Burmese at Pa-an university because he believed it offered an opportunity to work in this area:

Interviewer: *“Why did you join KYO?”*

Saw E: *“So many youths who work in KYO have weak points and lower education, just only Fourth or Third Standard. I joined KYO to encourage and organise youths with lower education for the new generation to get higher education...I am most interested to be a teacher but if we look at the organisation it is not strong for the youth so I joined KYO.”*<sup>97</sup>

Accessing education provided by the KNU can then lead to a youth’s recruitment, although this may not have been their goal at the outset, as Saw U’s life history excerpt illustrates. Saw U was educated through the Burmese monastic tradition and finished Grade Ten in Pa-an town before starting university there, but he quickly became disillusioned with his studies and instead chose to attend a training course provided by the KYO. This then led to his recruitment:

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<sup>95</sup> Interview with Saw X, (male aged 32) a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>96</sup> The Burmese government’s spending on education is one of the lowest in the world at less than US\$1 per person per year (KHRG, 2006:20)

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Saw E, (male aged 28) a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009



*Photo 8 Saw U at KYO Central office in Thailand, April 2009 [Photo: author]*

### **Disillusion with the Burmese education system**

#### *Life history interview with Saw U*

Interviewer: *“What did you do after you finished school?”*

Saw U: *“I joined Pa-an college – part of Moulmein university. Pa-an college had only been set up for a few years, not a long time.”*

Interviewer: *“What did you study?”*

Saw U: *“I studied History.”*

Interviewer: *“What did you do after you finished university?”*

Saw U: *“I didn’t finish it, I only finished second year and then I did not continue to the final year.”*

Interviewer: *“Why didn’t you finish it?”*

Saw U: *“At that time most of the students who finished university could do nothing and had no experience to work. The government worries about the students. If they do not pass the university they will protest against them, like that, so they just easily pass them, but it is not useful because they cannot get a job. The university has so many books but they just only teach two or three paragraphs and then in the examination they pass [the students]. When we finish university we don’t know anything. It is like corruption education, it is not good so I left.”*

Interviewer: *“So what did you do after you left university?”*

Saw U: *“When I stayed in Pa-an, I already decided if I got the MA [degree] I would join the KNU.”*

Interviewer: *“Why?”*

Saw U: *“Because in our village we saw often the SPDC come to catch the porters to go to forced labour.”*

Interviewer: *“Did you know the KNU was fighting the SPDC?”*

Saw U: *“When we stayed in the village we just only know we hate the SPDC and have to go to fight. Everyone who is young has strong thinking like that. They don’t know the real situation they just know*

*that fighting is strong. I did not know of the NGOs and I never heard of the refugees. Most of the people who stay in the town have not heard of the refugees.”*

Interviewer: *“So how did you contact the KNU to join them?”*

Saw U: *“One of my friends told me if you go to Mae Sot you can learn more English and Computers for one year and after that you can go back to study your degree. So I followed my friend and came to KYLMTC. When I arrived at KYLMTC they taught the Politics and Karen history: why the Karen are fighting, why the revolution started. It was good for me and opened my mind.*

Interviewer: *“What did you do after KYLMTC?”*

Saw U: *“When we finished we just only know KYO and KWO and KNU and we are the youth so we need to join the KYO”<sup>98</sup>*

**Figure 9 Disillusion with the Burmese education system: Life history interview with Saw U**

### ***Discourses framing youth participation in the KNU***

As Saw U’s experience detailed above indicates, youths who access training or education provided by the KNU are not necessarily seeking to join KNU-affiliated organisations and many who go through education or training programmes provided by the KNU do not subsequently join. However, once young people are in the KNU’s education system, they encounter an alternative discourse of Karen ethno-nationalism and politics, which frames youth participation as a community service and encourages them to join. Furthermore, the KNU retains authority in some areas despite losing territorial control and some villages retain a cultural memory of KNU ethno-nationalism and KNU participation as a public service. Moreover, as the next chapter discusses, KNU organisations conduct considerable community outreach work explaining and building support for the KNU’s political goals. Saw D is from a government-controlled town in Dooplaya district. He joined KYO through his own underground links with KYO leaders in the area. His explanation of his reasons for joining KYO are typical of the discourses of many recruits once they are in the KNU. His responses also indicate the difficulty in interviews in getting beyond these discourses to a deeper understanding of why and how the participant actually came to be working in the KNU or one of its affiliated organisations. In this case, I did not know the participant well. This probably resulted in him being reticent during the interview, while I was reluctant to probe further.

Interviewer: *“Why do you work with KYO?”*

Saw D: *“I came here to work for the people.”*

Interviewer: *“Why didn’t you get a job in the town where you live?”*

Saw D: *“If I choose the way in the town it will benefit only myself. KYO has to work for the Karen people for freedom, I know about that and came to join KYO.*

Interviewer: *“Why didn’t you join DKBA?”*

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<sup>98</sup> Interview with Saw U, (male aged 29) a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

Saw D: *“DKBA only work for income and have no policies and future plans for Karen people, they just only work for SPDC and follow their policies.”*

Interviewer: *“But this work is very dangerous for you. Why didn’t you look for a safer job where you could live close to your family?”*

Saw D: *“If we don’t do this work, the Karen people will disappear because the SPDC doesn’t allow them.”<sup>99</sup>*

## **b) Partially-securitised areas**

In partially-securitised areas, grievances remain high and the KNU is in closer proximity to civilians in many areas. Interviews with participants revealed many of the same factors involved in recruitment as in government-controlled areas. However, the splintering of the KNU’s armed wing into multiple armed groups with overlapping zones and ceasefire agreements has heightened insecurity and complicated political allegiances as civilians face demands from multiple groups all claiming authority on the basis of ethnic allegiance. As chapter five discussed, some villagers appear to be disillusioned and attempt to disengage from the conflict, while others appear to support whichever group they perceive to be the most legitimate. There are indications that legitimacy and youth participation from partially-securitised areas may be decided by the relative behaviour of the Karen armed groups, as Saw X explains:

Interviewer: *“Why didn’t you join the DKBA?”*

Saw X: *“When they [DKBA] came to stay in the village they implemented Buddhist law - none of the villagers can keep the animals in their house or eat them. At the time the DKBA told everyone to be vegetarian and the villagers didn’t like that...Nobody in my village joined the DKBA because they don’t like them. Now so many N--- villagers are in KNLA and KNU.”<sup>100</sup>*

In the absence of free and fair elections, it is impossible to say which, if any, group has a legitimate claim to public authority and this study does not seek to speculate. What is clear from independent human rights reports, however, is that the KNU is often seen as a more legitimate authority than the Burmese State as a result of villagers’ experiences of abuse by the Burma Army (Hull, in KHRG, 2010:85), Karen nationalism; or calculations about which group offers the best livelihood security (KHRG, 2010:85). Among the Karen armed groups, although all groups vary in their behaviour in different areas, the KNU is differentiated by its far greater longevity and at least partial reliance on continued voluntary civilian support. It is also differentiated by its political leadership, including a number of civilian leaders, under which its armed wing is at least nominally controlled. This does not mean that the KNU has not been involved in coercive recruitment. Prior to 1995, the

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Saw D, (male aged 28) a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Saw X, (male aged 32) a KYO district leader, Mae Sot, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2009

KNU had a conscription policy, which some commanders reportedly continued to implement at the time of fieldwork.

Although the KNU receives some support from other ethnic people, a small number of whom have become senior leaders in the group, it does not focus on mobilising support from members of other ethnic groups. For example, a KYO leader in Mutraw district said that he recruits ethnic Karen youths from partially-securitised areas but not youths from other ethnic groups because he fears they may be spies.<sup>101</sup>

**c) KNU-controlled areas**

KNU-controlled areas include the remaining ‘liberated areas’ of eastern Burma that are firmly under its control and experience relative stability as well as areas that were formerly within its liberated areas but are now conflict zones with most of the population internally displaced.



*Photo 9 Saw A at the KYO office in Ler Per Her IDP camp, Burma, February 2009 [Photo: author]*

**‘Civil service’ in the KNU**

*Interview with Saw A*

Saw A is a 25 year old Baptist male from Dooplaya district. His father is S’gaw Karen and worked as a Quarter-master in the KNLA. His mother is Pwo Karen and worked for

<sup>101</sup> Interview with KYO Mutraw district chairperson, Ler Per Her, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2009

KWO. While Saw A was growing up, he moved around Dooplaya district following his parents' work. His parents were based at KNU headquarters, but since the Burma Army frequently attacked, his parents moved around frequently until finally Manerplaw fell and the entire KNU headquarters relocated across the border. From then on, Saw A has been based in Noh Poe refugee camp, though much of his work is conducted inside Karen State.

During the school holidays in the last years of his high school, Saw A stayed with the KNLA across the border in Burma because:

*"I had a mind to follow my father. I thought that I would be a soldier or a medic, but later I thought it is not good for me because if I do that I don't have a chance for further study. When I got a chance to study at KYLMTC [Karen Youth Leadership and Management Training Course] I decided to work for KYO after I finished my studies."<sup>102</sup>*

Saw A joined KYO in Dooplaya district then later also started working for Burma Issues and CIDKP because there is some overlap in the work and a KNU leader asked him to help those organisations. Many of his friends and family work in the KNU too.

***Figure 10 'Civil service' in the KNU: Interview with Saw A***

Recruits from stable areas that are firmly under KNU control tended in this study to explain their participation in KNU-affiliated organisations as a normal career choice that is akin to governmental civil service. Saw P, for example, explained that he joined the KNU Customs department in Manerplaw as soon as he finished school at age 18 and has built a career within the department ever since.<sup>103</sup> Since the KNU has essentially been the primary provider of governance in KNU-controlled areas for around sixty years, youths indicate that they view their participation within KNU-affiliated organisations as simply conformity to the labour needs and political aims of an internally legitimate public authority.

***Discourses framing participation***

In stable areas firmly under KNU control, a political consciousness and 'Karen' identity distinct from the ethnocentric Burman state are deliberately nurtured enabling the KNU to maintain control over the means of social reproduction and inculcate loyalty to the movement (Grundy-Warr *et al*, 1997:85). The portrayal of KNLA soldiers as heroes and martyrs appears to be a particularly strong influence on young people and Karen nationalism is encouraged. During the fieldwork period, famous Karen 'martyrs' who died in the KNU's struggle against the Burmese state were remembered in speeches on Karen Revolution Day (January 31<sup>st</sup>) and Karen Martyrs Day (August 12<sup>th</sup>), and Karen youths (both male and female) were eager to have their photo taken with KNLA soldiers in

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Saw A, (male aged 25) Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Saw P, (male aged 36) Ler Per Her, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2009

uniform during these commemorative occasions. Upon their return from such occasions, some male youths working in non-military roles in the KNU were particularly excited to show me photos of them donning soldiers' uniforms and brandishing a gun while striking a macho pose.



*Photo 10 Photo showing KNLA soldiers honoured with garlands during Karen Revolution Day commemorative celebrations in Karen State, 31st January 2009 [Photo: author]*

A young participant explained how cultural framing of participation encourages youths to join the KNU. In this case, Saw C joined as an underage soldier in the KNLA before transferring into a non-military role with an independent NGO called Burma Issues:

Interviewer: *“Why did you join the KNLA?”*

Saw C: *“If you are born in that area (KNU-controlled area) your environment supports you to join the struggle. When you see the soldiers in the uniform with a gun you feel like you are a man, very brave, smart so if I grow up I want to have a thing like that. If I cross in front of the girls I feel proud. You are proud of yourself for fighting to protect your country, you are like a hero.”<sup>104</sup>*

Not everyone joins the KNU, though. As chapter five argued, when the KNU controlled large areas unchallenged, and particularly during the leadership of Bo Mya, KNLA brigades operated autonomously and sometimes corruptly. An indicator of the difficulty which the KNU had with recruitment in the past was its conscription policy whereby one child in each family in KNU-controlled areas was obliged to join the movement in any capacity (teacher, soldier, medic or administrative staff, for example). Youth conscription into the KNLA in some areas was continuing in 2007, although recruits under age 18 have been banned altogether since 2000 (HRW, 2007:102-104). However, Saw AB, an independent human rights worker, notes that although abuses have decreased in KNU-controlled areas,

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with a Burma Issues coordinator / former KNLA soldier, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

some Karen people continue to complain of KNU abuse and prevent their children from joining the organisation.<sup>105</sup>

### ***Internally displaced people (IDPs) in conflict zones influenced by the KNU***

In IDP areas, youths join the KNU for a number of reasons. Some IDPs are actually people who have chosen internal displacement over life in a state-controlled relocation site because they believe it offers better livelihood security (KHRG, 2010b). Often they describe grievances around very violent state-making practices perpetrated by the Burma Army. As chapter five argued, Karen people in the borderlands often support the KNU as part of a strategic alliance to prevent Burmese state-making and retain self-rule. The KNU's goal of self-determination, combined with ethnically polarised politics and the violence of Burmese state-making continues to resonate in borderland areas according to Saw B, who stated that most recruits from these areas are unaware of the actual political aims of the KNU:

Interviewer: *“Do people support the KNU because they are the same ethnic group or because they agree with its political goals?”*

Saw B: *“Ordinary people will support the KNU because they are Karen and they fight for the Karen, they don't really know its goals and objectives.”*

Interviewer: *“Are youths politicised as a result of joining the Karen revolution or did they join because they were already politicised?”*

Saw B: *“They know about the Karen struggle because everyone is part of it, but when they join the KNU they learn about the structure, aim and objectives, regulations. When you have not joined you just know that you are fighting to defend yourself from Burmese oppression.”*

Interviewer: *“Do they join other Karen organisations, like the DKBA?”*

Saw B: *“It's obvious, you join the organisation that treats you well. If the Burmese army treats the Karen people well and nicely they will follow them, but the issue is that they don't treat them well so they (the villagers) are not stupid, they are more wise than us.”<sup>106</sup>*

Human rights reports indicate that in many cases there is co-operation between hiding villagers and the KNU with protection (or the means to build protection, such as through musket and landmine making techniques) exchanged for political, logistical or material support (KHRG, 2010). The civilian population also manages its own security by forming their own village guard groups (KHRG, 2010). However, some youths appear to make a strategic choice that joining the KNU offers better security than not joining:

Interviewer: *“Why did you join the KNU?”*

Saw R: *“I joined the KNU because the Burmese came to my village and I fled and didn't eat for one day and one night, then I joined the KNU.”*

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<sup>105</sup> Interview with a Burma Issues coordinator / former KNLA soldier, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>106</sup> Interview with Saw B, (male aged 33) a district KYO and KNU Organising department leader, Mae Sot, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

Interviewer: *“Why didn’t you go back to your village after the Burmese soldiers left?”*

Saw R: *“I couldn’t go back to my village and I was separated from the other villagers so I joined the KNU for my security and because I hated the Burmese soldiers.”*<sup>107</sup>

The violence of Burmese state-making in the borderlands, combined with an ethnically polarised context, appears to be one of the most effective motivators of overt and covert support. IDPs bear the brunt of violent state-making, having been forced from their homes and in to ‘free fire zones’ where their lives and livelihoods are constantly under threat. According to the KNU’s Joint Secretary One, this group of people form the backbone of support for the KNU:

*“The IDPs in Karen State are our fundamental structure of the Karen revolution. Without their support there would be no Karen revolution. They are civilian freedom fighters. The people left behind [in Karen State] collect money, buy walkie-talkies and carry bundles for the KNU.”*<sup>108</sup>

However, a KYO youth leader stated in a group discussion in an IDP camp one evening that while it has traditionally been easy to recruit IDPs, who tend to be more willing to join the KNU than people living in other areas, the food crisis in northern Karen State following extensive Burma Army operations since 2006 has reduced the number of participants available to join the KNU.<sup>109</sup> Naw B explained that since the KNU’s income has declined with the loss of territory, it cannot support the dependents of participants. Therefore, in Karen State, participants usually maintain their farming livelihoods in addition to their work within KNU structures, but the result is often impoverishment:

Naw B: *“..if you go to the township and district level, most of the soldiers families who work in the KNU, their families are poor because they cannot take care of the family”*<sup>110</sup>

The group then went on to explain that the economic imperative tends to force the poorest and landless into wage-labouring, often including migrant work in Thailand, rather than into the KNU. A KYO leader based in the KNU’s seventh Brigade area went on to explain about the situation among youths in his area:

Saw L: *“Now most of the youths have family problems about income and food so they just focus on family income, they cannot join KNLA or KNU. They want to join but their family situation is more important.”*<sup>111</sup>

This view was echoed by Saw K, who is the KYO district leader for the area encompassing the IDP camp where the discussion took place:

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<sup>107</sup> Interview with Saw R, (male aged 27) Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>108</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>109</sup> Interview with Naw B, (female aged 27) a KYO central leader, Ler Per Her IDP camp, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Saw U, (male aged 29) a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>111</sup> Interview with a township level KYO Secretary in Pa-an district of Karen State, Mae Sot, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009

Saw K: *“The real situation is it’s difficult to recruit the youths because they have to find income so they don’t have time to work for KYO or KNU. Some people are willing to work but we cannot support them, so many of them just try to find the way themselves.”*<sup>112</sup>

The food crisis among the KNU’s primary support base has culminated in a youth recruitment problem which Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, quantified in a surprisingly frank interview:

Interviewer: *“Do you face any problems recruiting youths for the KNU?”*

Saw Hla Ngwe: *“We have many problems recruiting youths – we need more recruits. Yearly we want at least 500 recruits in all fields but we can’t get, maybe only 150-200. Some people participate part-time on a rotation basis because if they don’t do this they will have no condition to be alive. They may be students, teachers, staff in department and at the same time semi-militia.”*<sup>113</sup>

### **Education**

Although focus group discussions and interviews revealed a general pattern that the economic imperative to provide for the family drives the poorest recruits away from the KNU, this is not always the case. Some of the poorest young people (such as those for whom one or both parents were working for the KNU and were killed or died from natural causes) are educated and financially supported by the KNU and then join the movement through the KNU’s education structures. This is both a formal and informal recruitment strategy. Formally, the KNU has always had a policy that students directly supported by the KNU must repay the cost of their schooling through seven years service in any KNU-affiliated organisation, not necessarily the army. Saw V’s experience is typical of several male participants who explained how they had tried to join the KNLA (often underage) and been sent back to school first, while maintaining contact with a local KNLA unit:

*“I joined the KNDO since 1992 and became a soldier (aged 16). At that time I had just finished middle school, Grade Eight, in Burma. When I joined KNDO in the Third Brigade area, firstly I had to attend the military training. I was very young so I should continue my further study, so later I was sent back to school to continue my study and I continued to study until I finished Grade Ten. On the one side I was a student and on the other side in the military. In the summer time I served as a soldier. After I finished Grade Ten I went back and served there in the front line as a soldier.”*<sup>114</sup>

Discussions with both KNU leaders and young participants themselves revealed that informally, non-military students who attend any KNU school or further training provided by KNU-affiliated organisations, such as the KYO school, are encouraged, but not obliged, to work for a KNU-affiliated organisation. Saw R explained:

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<sup>112</sup> Interview with Saw K, (male aged 35) Ler Per Her IDP camp, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Saw V, (male aged 32) Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2009

*“Sometimes, the KNU organise the villagers and find educational opportunities for the youths. After they have finished the school or training they work for KNU.”<sup>115</sup>*

Not all ex-students join the KNU, though. The KNU has also traditionally recruited youths through specific political and leadership training courses. As Saw Dot Lay Mu, Joint Secretary 2 of the KNU explained:

*In Manerplaw we (KNU) recruited youths through political and leadership training courses, like me. In different districts we also did like this...In the past Mahn Sha’s school (at Th’Bay Hta) recruited youths – 50 to 60 per year. We recruited for specific trainings, for example, computer, diplomacy and when they finished the training they came back to work. All were IDPs. The girl who got the Phan Foundation (young leadership) award attended Mahn Sha’s school. Now she is also elected to the KNU district committee at Nyaunglebin (as well as being KYO secretary in the district).”<sup>116</sup>*

However, with the loss of territory, a large number of KNU schools have closed and IDP youths seeking education are migrating to the refugee camps. Saw K explained that villages in Klerlwehtoo (Nyaunglebin) district in northern Karen State have been so decimated by the loss of their young people to refugee camps for education that the villagers have urged the KNU to re-form a high school with boarding facilities within the district so that their children can remain close by and return to work in the villages.<sup>117</sup> Education migration also impacts upon KNU recruitment because, as many young and older leaders argued at the time of fieldwork, residents of the refugee camps tend not to join the KNU:

*Saw Hla Ngwe: “Before the fall of Manerplaw we had many high schools and middle schools but after these schools shifted to the refugee camps. The teachers, pupils and parents only come into the refugee life. Youths have an education problem and those who are in the camps don’t want to participate because it’s a very hard life.”<sup>118</sup>*

#### **d) Exile spaces in Thailand**

*“Very few [camp-based youths] join KNU, only about 1-3 per cent of recruits are from camp. Most camp youths work with NGOs, resettle or work in Thailand. KNU recruits are mostly from villages inside Burma and have lower education.”<sup>119</sup>*

In Thailand there is a very different context influencing youth participation in the KNU and as a result, very few youths are recruited from Thailand for most types of work within the KNU, though there continues to be some recruitment for teaching and health care work in the KNU’s welfare wings. This section examines recruitment patterns among Karen youths from Burma who live inside and outside the refugee camps.

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<sup>115</sup> Interview with Saw R, (male aged 27) Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Saw K, (male aged 35) a KYO district leader, Ler Per Her IDP camp, 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009

<sup>118</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>119</sup> Interview with a KYO district chairperson / KNU district level organising department leader on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008

### *Youths living outside the refugee camps*

There are very high numbers of Karen migrant workers in Thailand, far more than in the refugee camps since the number of migrant workers from Burma is estimated to be up around 3.5 million people (KHRG, 2009:2-3). A report by KHRG argues that there is often little difference in the reasons migrant workers leave Burma and the reasons refugees leave, but the KNU (including the KYO and KWO) does not target them for recruitment. They state two reasons for this: firstly, the migrant workers are tired of the conflict and tired from working long hours to remit money back to families in Burma. A KYO central level leader who spends time talking to local migrant workers said:

*“Migrant workers don’t want to get involved in politics. It is not that they don’t support the KNU, in the past they support with one soldier per family, but the Karen revolution has been going on for so long, 60 years, that they are tired. So now they just want to get money for their family and fill their stomach.”<sup>120</sup>*

Saw Hla Ngwe confirmed that the KNU does not attempt to recruit from the ranks of migrant workers in Thailand:

*“The migrant workers are very tired. Their families are left behind in Burma and they are very poor. They are like ants having to survive each day. We don’t want to disturb them. Even in Thailand their lives are very hard, so we are not in touch with them.”<sup>121</sup>*

Secondly, KYO and KNU leaders state that KNU sanctuary in Thailand is conditional upon them not interfering with Thai business interests, which are heavily reliant upon Burmese migrant labour in the border areas. Moreover they are warned not to let the conflict in Burma extend in to Thailand or foster social unrest on Thai soil through political activism.<sup>122</sup>

A further factor mitigating participation among teenage Karen youths in Thailand is the influence of Thai culture, especially the youth gang culture. This is prevalent both in the larger refugee camps and in the vicinity of Thai towns. Thus, although their parents may work for the KNU, children socialised in Thai culture rarely join:

Interviewer: *“Do Thai-Karen youths join the KNU or the KNLA?”*

Saw L: *“Now the Thai-Karen youths don’t want to join KNU/KNLA because they have so much freedom and opportunity to find money...Some of the youths’ parents are KNU/KNLA but their children don’t want to join, they just join Thai gangs and fight each other.”<sup>123</sup>*

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<sup>120</sup> Interview with a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2010

<sup>121</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009 and Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>123</sup> Interview with a township level KYO Secretary in the Pa-an district of Karen State, Mae Sot 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2009

### *Youths living inside the refugee camps*

Although the Karen refugee camps in Thailand are influenced by the KNU, they are not directly controlled by them and KNU military recruitment from the camps or political campaigning is officially banned by Thai policies. Recruitment for the social welfare activities of KYO and KWO in the camps is generally unproblematic as participants do not leave the camps and the projects are separated from the more political work conducted outside the camps, however recruitment from the refugee camps for activities conducted inside Karen State is far more difficult. Youth recruiters say that many parents, including those who worked in the KNU themselves, dissuade their children from participating in KNU-affiliated work outside the refugee camps out of fears for their safety:<sup>124</sup>

Interviewer: *“Why don’t many refugee youths join the KNU?”*

Saw C: *“Their parents influence (refugee camp youths). They say “don’t join the revolution because if you join you will suffer poor food, stay in the jungle, get no pay”. They don’t want their children to suffer like they suffered.”*<sup>125</sup>

For female Karen youths, gender norms about their mobility and hardiness results in even greater worries for their safety and contributes to reduced female participation in the movement. As the participant above went on to explain:

Saw C: *“Even my sister wanted to go inside (Burma) for a short trip to teach but as a parent you worry about the fighting, disease, malaria for your children. She was not allowed to go.*

Interviewer: *“But why were you allowed to go?”*

Saw C: *“The difference was she was a woman. My mother didn’t want me to go to a troubled area inside Burma because all the news talks about fighting, landmines, dangerous things, disease, malaria, but I decided [and went].”*<sup>126</sup>

One of the key factors prompting recruitment inside Burma has long been thought to be the experience of human rights abuses by the Burma Army, but in the refugee camps many youths have little recent experience of such abuse. Discussions with KYO leaders during the fieldwork showed that they perceive this to be an obstacle to recruitment and try to overcome it by taking refugee youths on relief trips to IDP areas to expose them to the plight of the IDPs.

However, a critical difference affecting youths in Thailand is their location in a different context. Many KYO and KNU leaders argue that the presence of Western INGOs in the refugee camps has greatly influenced the culture of the camps, promoting individualism, rather than communitarianism, which encourages youths to ‘free ride’ on the backs of

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<sup>124</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Burma Issues staff member / former KNLA soldier, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Burma Issues staff member / former KNLA soldier, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

active participants in the pursuit of a lasting resolution to the conflict. The structural context of enclosure in the camps, lack of self-reliant livelihood options and refugee aid is also perceived by both KNU and KYO leaders to be fostering apathy and dependency among youths. In an interview at his office, Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, stated:

*We realise the NGOs are providing a different kind of knowledge...I want them (youths) to struggle to overcome their difficulty, not just stay in the refugee camp...We think if they want to work and serve they should try and do now not wait for the time of peace...Now the youths who grow up in refugee camps don't have experience as youths before who were fighting, working together. They grow up easier than youths before and got good education.*<sup>127</sup>

A KYO leader in Mae La camp also argued that the influence of NGOs and Western culture encourages youths to expect monetary salaries in return for work, which the KNU is unable to provide:

*Saw X: "Most of them [youths] are not interested to work in the [KNU-affiliated] organisations, just only in their minds they are interested in going to a third country so it is very difficult to organise them... They also know one day they need to get money so most of the youths don't want to work for the organisation. They just compare with the NGO salary, so they ask for a salary like the NGOs pay."*<sup>128</sup>

As Saw X indicates, resettlement to Western countries is now a primary concern of many refugee youths. Since the increase in resettlement to Western countries from 2003, recruitment from the refugee camps has all but ceased since youths are much less interested in joining the KNU. Moreover, as chapter six identified, KNU-affiliated organisations are not interested in training new recruits who will soon leave for resettlement to another country.

## **2 Youth role allocation and career progression in the KNU**

### **a) Matching recruits to roles**

The KNU does not keep headcount records outside its armed wings and would not make these publically available if it did, but during the course of the fieldwork, interviews with representatives from each of the main departments and affiliated organisations gave a good estimation of the headcount. These indicate the spread of roles youths are recruited into.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>128</sup> Interview with KYO replacement Chairperson in Mae La camp, Mae Sot, 14<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>129</sup> Numbers in blue are estimated numbers of staff at all levels of the organisation by KYO central level staff and staff within KNU departments at the time of research in 2008. Numbers in black font are exact numbers at the time. Numbers do not include membership numbers of the KNU and its mass organisations.

<b>KNU Organisation/Department</b>	<b>Headcount</b>
KNU central, district and township leaders	74
<b>Departmental staff</b>	
Education department (KED)	77
KED-supported teachers in Karen State	3,503
Health department (KDHW)	100
KDHW Medics	248
Karen Office for Relief and Development (KORD)	60
Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP)	71
Forestry department	30
Organising department	108
Agriculture department	30
Treasury department	5
Customs department	20
Transport department	20
Foreign affairs department	4
Alliance Affairs department	4
Justice department	30
Fisheries department	10
Interior department – Police force	unknown
<b>Defence</b>	
KNLA	<3,000 <sup>130</sup>
KNDO	580-850 <sup>131</sup>
<b>Mass Organisations</b>	
KYO	Approx. 2,946 <sup>132</sup>
KWO	Approx. 2,946 <sup>133</sup>

*Table 10 Estimated KNU headcount in 2009*

<sup>130</sup> Estimated by KNU leader, David Taw, in an interview with the Irrawaddy in 2009.

<sup>131</sup> KNDO headcount estimated by a KNDO officer during a fieldwork interview in Mae Sot on 11<sup>th</sup> July, 2009

<sup>132</sup> See APPENDIX D for a breakdown of estimated KYO staffing levels in 2009.

<sup>133</sup> KWO staffing levels were estimated by KYO central leaders at the time of fieldwork to be roughly comparable to KYO staffing levels

As the table indicates, with less than 3,000 soldiers in the KNLA, plus a further 580-850 in the KNDO, the KNU's troops are matched by the number of KED-supported teachers in Karen State (3,503) (this does not include teachers in the refugee camps) and the estimated numbers of active staff in the KYO and KWO throughout its structures (around 3,000 each). Furthermore, there are approximately 350 health department staff and medics, excluding medics in the refugee camps, and hundreds more non-military staff in other KNU non-military departments. Thus, it may reasonably be expected that more youths are recruited into non-military roles than into military ones.

Once new recruits have joined the KNU, the role they are placed in appears to depend on their education and skills, their individual desire and local needs at the time. A KYO recruiter for the KNU explained the typical pattern of matching recruits to roles, which was confirmed in interviews with KNU recruiters in other areas:

Interviewer: *"How is it decided what a young recruit will do when he or she joins the KNU?"*

Saw U: *"If the youth are interested in working for the revolution and they come to the revolution area, when they give their name the leader asks them 'what do you want to do?'. Some of them say 'I want to be a soldier', like that, but if the leader sees they have high education they ask them to work for the police or work another way."*

Interviewer: *"What if they don't have high education?"*

Saw U: *"If they have no school they send them to stay close to the leader like a bodyguard and the leader teaches them about politics. It depends on their interest."*<sup>134</sup>

In its early days, the KNU leadership (the Central Executive Committee and the heads of all seven departments) was comprised of university-educated Karen elites, and since it had a strong presence in the towns and cities of Burma, it could draw from the ranks of educated youths, especially those around Insein, Rangoon and the Delta area.<sup>135</sup> However, sixty years later the KNU has only a minor presence in urban areas and most of its support comes from rural farming communities with lower levels of education.

This study found that recruits with higher levels of education are often diverted out of the military and into political or other non-military roles. Saw X's experience is illustrative of this. Despite his request to join the KNLA at age 13, Saw X was deemed too young and was sent back to school as a military student until he finished Grade Ten. Then he was diverted into a political role with KYO:

Saw X: *"I did soldier training in summer school as a volunteer soldier, then I went to Mission school in Dooplaya district until I finished Tenth Standard. After finishing school, I*

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

*trained as a medic at Dr. Cynthia's clinic. I worked for two years as a medic at the KNU health department in the district then was asked to work for KYO."*

Although Saw X was supported through school by the KNU, most families have to finance their children's education themselves and as a result, youths with higher levels of education than the norm are generally from families which can afford to educate their children rather than have them working on the family farm and then can further withstand the loss of labour by allowing one family member to join the KNU as unpaid staff. Although most participants in the KNU could hardly be described as wealthy, there are some who are from families with more resources than others and it is these youths who tend to attain higher levels of education. As well as being directed into non-military roles by KNU officials, more educated youths appear to self-select non-military roles. A KNLA commander explained the division of roles in the KNU's fourth brigade:

*Interviewer: "What is the difference between educated and un-educated youths who want to join the KNU? Do they do different jobs or the same?"*

*Saw AF: "The ones who join KYO are more educated than the youths who join KNLA. Also some educated people don't want to join KNU at all. Most of the soldiers are people who have experienced atrocity and they want to fight back. Most people who join KYO seek more education and want to help their people."<sup>36</sup>*

A KYO leader in Klerlwehtoo (Nyaunglebin) district estimated that only around five per cent of people in his district pass Grade Ten schooling and one per cent finish university. Although the official literacy rate is 84 per cent, as with all data generated by the Burmese government, it is an unreliable indicator and a report by HRDU (2006) argues that illiteracy in rural areas is increasing. UNICEF (in HRDU, 2006) estimates that only around 55 per cent of Burmese children nationwide ever enrol in school and a further fifty per cent then drop out before completing primary school (fourth standard) due to financial difficulties. Meanwhile, in Thaton district of Karen State, KHRG (2006 in HRDU, 2006) estimates that only seven per cent of children who finish primary school go on to middle school and only 14 per cent of middle school completers then go on to high school. KYO and KNU recruiters explained that the effect of such low levels of education among the population, especially those in rural areas, is that recruits from the KNU's main recruiting grounds tend to have very low levels of education.

#### **b) Career progression**

Within the KNU's non-military structures, young participants in this study argued that career progression is based on a meritocratic system. As a staff member within the Forestry department in Klerlwehtoo (Nyaunglebin) district explained:

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Saw AF, (male) a KNLA commander from the KNU's 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Suan Pueng, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2010

Saw R: *“If someone is good at their job they get promoted or elected into higher positions. [For example] the head of the district forestry department was a township head of department prior to being district head.”*<sup>137</sup>

This seemed surprising to me, considering the KNU’s history of nepotism and patronage, so I probed further. A number of participants explained that being good at one’s job would mean that someone is more likely to be chosen as a representative of their office at congress. They explained what this means in more detail. Every department and member organisation of KNU sends a quota of representatives to the township, district or central congress. From these people, some are nominated for certain positions – usually the people who have demonstrated that they work well according to youth participations interviewed in this study. They are then elected by the congress participants to be leaders of the department. In this way, one gets promoted up the administrative and party hierarchy. Conversely, Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2 said that participants who do not demonstrate leadership skills are not promoted:

Saw Dot Lay Mu: *“We don’t all have the same ability so those who do not have much ability at leadership stay at the low level in their work. Those who have ability in leadership take responsibility and are promoted to the upper position. Those who do not have more knowledge or education and face troubles or withdraw back they feel backward and don’t want to struggle (feel ashamed) and they went back to refugee camps. Some work and give assistance to their leaders but some are called back by their children to become house keepers and take care of their grandchildren.”*<sup>138</sup>

In terms of political leadership progression, as chapter six discussed, progression is not entirely based on merit. The youth and armed wings of the KNU have traditionally been the primary ‘feeder’ organisations for the regeneration of the KNU’s political leadership, resulting in a male bias and sidelining able young women in the women’s wing. Being sceptical that career progression within the KNU would be based entirely on merit, I probed further with life history participants and found that youths are also appointed into new roles which emerge. Since these are appointed rather than elected roles they are subject to some bias. A soldier in the KNDO described during his life history interview how his career progressed into political roles within the administrative apparatus:

Saw V: *“...I asked permission from my leaders to get a chance to study further study and then I studied community management in the DEP (Distance Education Programme). After finishing DEP...I went back to my battalion and worked there for two to three years and then later my leader sent me to come and work with Padow Htoo Htoo Lay<sup>139</sup> as an intern to learn everything from him. Gradually I improved some of my education and I got more*

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<sup>137</sup> Interview with Saw R, (male aged 27) Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>139</sup> Saw Htoo Htoo Lay was formerly Joint Secretary 1 of the KNU and temporary General Secretary after Mahn Shaw was assassinated. He retired from the leadership of the party after the 2008 congress due to ill health.

*experience in working with other leaders in the central level so later I was appointed to serve as a Karen State constitution drafting committee member*<sup>140</sup>

As Saw V's personal experience demonstrates, military and non-military roles within the KNU are fluid. Several male youths in this study had moved from the KNLA into non-military roles apparently quite easily.

In the same way that recruitment is linked to wealth, with poverty preventing participation among recruits for whom the economic imperative means daily labouring for income or subsistence farming is essential, leadership progression is also linked to wealth, though this was not directly stated by participants. In discussions with young leaders at KYO, people felt that higher levels of education resulted in increased political knowledge and capacity to analyse situations, which resulted in better decisions and more effective work. It also generated more confidence at work. As a result, it was clear that KYO tended to recruit only the most educated youths into its political leadership training programmes (with the exception of refugee youths who had applied for resettlement), resulting in leadership and management positions being dominated by middle class Karen youths. This is less true for KWO because, as chapter six discussed, work experience and loyalty to the organisation are deemed more important than education level when selecting young women for political leadership training.

### ***The influence of religion***

As many commentators on the KNU have previously identified, progression into the highest leadership positions appears to be influenced by religious networks since Christians are disproportionately over-represented at the upper leadership levels. Conversations with both Buddhist and Christian KYO and KNU leaders suggest that since the DKBA split and the change in KNU leadership, the KNU has attempted to eliminate patterns of religious patronage in leadership progression. For example, officials and KNU staff, including teachers in KNU schools, are ordered not to proselytise at work or allow religious bias in work decisions.<sup>141</sup> However, disproportionate numbers of Christians are likely to remain in the KNU's leadership because of the primacy of education level in promotion and career progression patterns and the ongoing influence of religion in education networks in Karen State. In Karen State, many of the High schools producing more highly educated youths are private Christian mission schools. This was highlighted in an interview with the KYO Chairperson:

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Saw V, (male aged 32) Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010 and interview with KYO leaders during 2009

*“A lot of people who wanted to study further attended mission school so these people have knowledge more than others and they are Christian. In the congress they don’t discriminate about religion and they choose who will be the best and have more knowledge. The ones who attend the mission schools have more knowledge than Buddhists so that is why they become the leaders.”*

These comments reveal a complex intermingling of education, religion and ethno-nationalism in Karen State in which American Baptist missionaries have left a legacy. Thus, although Christians comprise possibly only 25 per cent of the Karen population, they tend to have higher literacy rates, which explains their dominance in Karen politics (Freston, 2004:100). Naw Zipporah Sein, General Secretary of the KNU argues that the Christian missionary legacy has resulted in a greater availability and continued prioritisation of education among Christian communities as well as ongoing campaigns of religious conversion through the Mission schools:

Interviewer: *“Why are there more Christians than Buddhists in the higher levels of the KNU?”*

Naw Zipporah Sein: *“It depends on the election results. But I think one reason we can say is because they have more education they get elected in to the positions.”*

Interviewer: *“Why do they have more education?”*

Naw Zipporah Sein: *“The Buddhists have lower education because they are more interested in business and economics. The Christians are more organised and interested about education from when the American missionaries came. They are not so interested in business and economics. They have the mission schools and private schools. The Buddhists only have the monastery, not the high school. In Kawthoolei they can go to the government [KNU] school, but not the mission school, so the Christians have more opportunity to go to school. The missionaries send their teachers but they are also sometimes working in evangelism, so they convert the animists. This is the plan of the Christian church groups.”*

A further reason for the disproportionate numbers of Christian leaders in the KNU, according to Naw Zipporah Sein, is that the Christian churches place more emphasis on organising community projects than the Buddhist monasteries, which develops community mobilisation and organising skills among Christian youths. Since these are also deemed to be important skills for KNU work, Christian youths who participate in church community projects tend to have an advantage and are more quickly elected into leadership positions.

Interviewer: *“So if someone has a higher education level they are more likely to be elected to the EC?”*

Naw Zipporah Sein: *“The EC come from the districts and elections – they are nominated by the district... People are elected based on their skills. It is related to education and community respect. Community respect is related to those who have higher education but can also be given to people who can organise the community well, regardless of their education level. The Christian Karen are more organised to do the community work and they get the funds from the church collection each week. We also try to promote the monasteries to do the social work. We try to find the funding for the monasteries to do this. We also try to support the monasteries to teach their members more about their religion. We see the Christians go to*

*church often and are very strong in their religion but the Buddhists don't do much about their religion."*

### 3 Youth exit from the KNU

Investigations into why youths leave the KNU revealed that it appears to be a result of one or more of four issues: lack of energy and interest due to the need to work long hours and the length of time the conflict has been going on, poverty, staff poaching and refugee resettlement. All of these are directly related to the KNU's loss of territory. The effect, according to KNU and KYO leaders is that the most educated participants, essentially the small Karen middle class, have tended to leave first.

#### ***"Only uneducated people remain"***

*Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, Joint Secretary 2 of the KNU's Central Executive Committee*<sup>142</sup>

Interviewer: *"Does this mean that it is usually the most educated people who work in admin roles?"*

Saw Dot Lay Mu: *"Those who are educated usually come from the Delta region and gradually move step by step to the revolution area. The original KNU CEC were all university graduates and all heads of seven departments were uni graduates. Now in years gone by, the resistance struggle has faced suffering and many people lost their hope. Many of them do not believe we can gain (defeat) the military regime and they abandoned the revolution and left for third countries. Even Htain Maung has been leading Seventh Brigade (KNLA) since the revolution erupted but now he gave up and made peace with the SPDC. Now very few KNU CEC are university graduates. Most of the KYO leaders who were elected in Manerplaw have now resettled to third countries... Uttaca, Australia! Due to the difficulties and because battle broke out in Manerplaw, many people, including youth leaders left here and resettled in third countries.*

*...The educated people, when they have graduated they have spent a lot of money to become educated and they have to work very hard to look after their people. They just reside in the towns and cities and listen to the KNU struggle. Only the rural people can support KNU. Some educated people, when they face difficulty struggling with IDPs they run away to the towns and work for themselves. Only uneducated people remain! During the Four Cuts, those who remained in difficult areas are only rural people. The rich people with buffalo and plenty of land left. We don't blame them, the towns and cities are white areas so not more atrocities by SPDC...Now we just have IDP youths who only passed grade three or four join as soldiers but they cannot even read a map so it is difficult to fight against SPDC. So we still need capable people to join our force. Some of them, even if they want to join, their parents don't want them to join even if they themselves worked in the military service. Now we want them to have political perspective."*

***Figure 11 "Only uneducated people remain" Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, Joint Secretary 2 of the KNU's Central Executive Committee***<sup>143</sup>

According to KNU and KYO leaders, loss of territory continued to be the primary reason for youth exit from the KNU in Burma at the time of fieldwork. From 2006 to 2009 the KNU has lost large areas to SPDC and DKBA troops in districts two (Toungoo), three (Klerlwehtoo/Nyaunglebin) and five (Mutraw/Papun) in northern Karen state and district seven (Pa-an) in the border area with Thailand. However, just as recruitment levels have declined because of more pressing economic needs, KYO leaders argue that poverty is the

<sup>142</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>143</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

primary reason for exit from these areas, although it is difficult to attribute causes directly. Saw O explained during a discussion one evening in Ler Per Her IDP camp:

Interviewer: *“Why do young people leave the KNU?”*

Saw O: *“Some leave because they do not have salary so they don’t want to do [the job anymore]. They go to find money day by day.”<sup>144</sup>*

In a separate interview in Mae Sot, Saw R explained that following the loss of KNU-controlled areas, many KNU staff have become displaced in the jungle or fled to KNU-controlled IDP camps along the border or refugee camps in northern Thailand, which then often results in their exit from the KNU:

Interviewer: *“Why are young people leaving the KNU in the northern areas?”*

Saw R: *“In 2006 many people left because of the SPDC offensive. Some people went to send their families to the border and never came back.”<sup>145</sup>*

In-depth discussions about the linkages between education, recruitment and participation with KYO leaders revealed that the decline in educated recruits was compounded when many of the KNU’s own schools closed after the fall of Manerplaw and the loss of significant territory. As a result, there has been increased ‘education migration’ among rural Karen youths to the refugee camps in Thailand. Many young people who leave their home in Karen State to seek education in a refugee camp in Thailand are unaccompanied by their parents and end up living with relatives or other foster carers in the refugee camps. A smaller number reside in youth boarding houses. In the seven Karen refugee camps in Thailand, there were 116 youth boarding houses registered by TBBC with 3,756 young residents (TBBC, 2011:61). Of these, 93 per cent stated that accessing education was their primary reason for moving to the camp, with over 90 per cent stating that there were no education opportunities where they lived in Burma (TBBC, 2011:61). Despite the proximity of the refugee camps to the KNU’s headquarters and remaining base camps, recruitment into KNU organisations from the refugee camps is low. Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1 confirmed this explanation stating:

*“Before the fall of Manerplaw we had many high schools and middle schools but after, these schools shifted to the refugee camps. The teachers, pupils and parents only come into the refugee life. Youths have an education problem and those who are in the camps don’t want to participate [in the KNU] because it’s a very hard life.”*

As chapter six discussed, exit from the KNU as a result of loss of territory and the migration of KNU staff to Thailand has been a common occurrence since the fall of its headquarters at Manerplaw in 1995. Partly this has been attributed to INGO poaching of highly educated Karen-speaking staff. However, when I worked at the Karen Human

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<sup>144</sup> Interview with KYO Mutraw district chairperson, Ler Per Her, 26<sup>th</sup> May 2009

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Saw R, (male aged 27) Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009

Rights Group (KHRG) and was seeking to find highly skilled Karen staff to apply for vacancies in the organisation I found it remarkably difficult to persuade staff in KNU organisations to apply for any of the positions. Although KHRG was highly respected, many appropriately qualified staff in KNU organisations would not think of leaving their current post with little monetary income to work in an organisation outside the KNU that paid much more.

Since the KNU's income greatly declined after it lost control of the borderland economy, it could even less afford any kind of pecuniary remuneration of its staff. To maintain loyalty, participation in the KNU continues to be framed as 'serving the community', compared to a discourse which frames Karen staff working with INGOs as 'selling out' for individual gain. This discourse continued during the course of the fieldwork in 2009, but while it appeared to increase loyalty and impede NGO poaching, it did not prevent exit entirely.

One of the disadvantages of using Thailand as a base for the administrative centre of KNU operations is that upwardly mobile participants have access to much more lucrative opportunities and participants can opt out. Furthermore, since it is the most educated and skilled participants who tend to be found working at the highest level of KNU organisations in Thailand, the KNU's most skilled staff gain more access to other opportunities and refugee resettlement programmes than its staff at the district, township and village levels. Since 2003, refugee resettlement to Western countries of up to 17,000 Burmese people per year, most from the Karen refugee camps, has, according to a number of staff from KNU-affiliated organisations, been the single biggest reason for exit from the KNU (IOM, 2009).

Saw Dot Lay Mu: *"Now the resettlement programme is the main challenge for us. Many capable and experienced youths already left for third countries with their families."*<sup>146</sup>

A KWO leader explained that refugee resettlement has had a great impact on the staffing and capacity of KNU-affiliated organisations based in Thailand because despite being based outside the refugee camps, many staff maintained refugee status in one of the camps as a security strategy.

Interviewer: *"Is it easy to organise the youth to do the KNU work?"*

Naw H: *"From 2002 to 2006 the youth and students were active a lot but when resettlement came a lot of young Karen people who were active in the Karen community resettled to third countries. Here [in Thailand] now it's a little bit quiet, not like before. Now we want to do activities and have meetings, forum, discussion about them, but we cannot find people."*<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>147</sup> Interview with Naw H, (female aged 34) KWO Central leader, Mae Sot, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009

The refugee resettlement process has affected the KNU's non-military and civilian leadership staff disproportionately due to their higher levels of educated staff and the location of the central KNU offices in Thailand. A report by a consortium of NGOs found that 11.5% of refugees with a post-10 education had resettled compared to just 2.4% of those with no education (CCSDPT, 2007). Additionally, those working for NGOs have left in higher proportions than the rest of the population, which has a knock-on effect on the KNU (CCSDPT, 2007). Research on the impact of the resettlement process suggests that NGOs who search out the best qualified staff will increasingly turn to Karen CBOs (including the KNU's mass organisations) and poach staff by offering far higher salaries (Banki & Lang, 2008). Both of these factors have resulted in a significant loss of skilled staff from KNU structures, according to a KNU official.<sup>148</sup>

#### **4 Youth participation patterns in the KNU**

The KNU is active in four areas of Burma and Thailand with different patterns of sovereignty and state-making in each. As this chapter illustrates, this results in different logics of youth participation in non-military roles in the KNU. However, a number of patterns are identifiable as a result of this study and are summarised in table nine, presented at the beginning of this chapter.

##### **a) Recruitment of youths into KYO**

In all areas of Burma, grievances over Burmese state-making practices are widespread, with many participants citing these as reasons for participating in the KNU. In IDP areas in particular, where state-making is at its most violent, high levels of serious human rights abuses (usually but not solely) perpetrated by the Burma Army combined with an ethnically-polarised political context have long been argued by KNU officials to be the primary factor driving youths into the KNU in any role. However, despite grievous living conditions throughout the country, grievances have been found to be far too widespread to explain micro-level youth participation in the KNU, as critics of grievance theories of conflict argue (Kahl, 2002). Most youths in all areas do not participate in the KNU, despite opportunities to do so as well as high levels of deprivation.

As previous studies of conflict have found, only a small proportion (estimates range from five per cent to a third) of the population ever participate directly in armed opposition groups, even in cases of mass mobilisation (Lichbach, 1995:18 and Wood, 2003 in Mampilly, 2011:54). In Burma, a KHRG (2009) report indicates that migration is much

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2 and Chairperson of Agriculture department, Mae Sot, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009

more common than participation. Youths are estimated to form 18 per cent of the population in Burma, which is a high proportion compared to Western countries but about average for Asia, however this case indicates a relative lack of propensity among youths in Burma towards contesting the state whether through violent means or non-violent participation in an armed opposition group. Therefore, in this case the 'youth bulge' thesis, grievances and relative deprivation theories of conflict, upon which much of the academic literature on youth participation in armed opposition groups has been based, hold little explanatory power.

As Stavrou (2004) and Fithen and Richards (2005) note, a decline in educational opportunities provided by the state has been found to prompt youths to access education provided by armed opposition groups instead. The Burmese education system has decayed since the socialist period and now does not cover minimum societal needs (Lall, 2008:128). As a result, various forms of private supplemental education are accessed by the small Burmese middle class (Lall, 2008). However, this is only available to the small proportion of the population who have finances available for education. In this case, although most youth recruits come from KNU-controlled/IDP areas, some Karen youths who have managed to attain an unusually high level of education from state-controlled or partially-securitized areas choose to access free further education or training provided by KNU-affiliated organisations, such as KYO. This indicates that they may be motivated just as much, and possibly more so, by personal interests than political convictions, as Kalyvas's (2003) study of political violence suggests. However, once they are in the KNU education system, youths are subject to an alternative discourse of Karen nationalism and the KNU's political ideology, which frames participation in the KNU as a community service. The evidence presented here suggests that although these types of youths may not have intended to join the KNU, the context of their lives in Burma, their links to the KNU and discourses framing youth action within KNU-affiliated institutions influences their eventual course of action.

As Jabri (1996:62) argues, conflict is an inherently social phenomenon which is affected by social discourses. But this does not mean that individual choice is entirely absent and youth behaviour is structurally determined; this study also found that some youths who access education through KNU-affiliated organisations do not subsequently join, thus external factors only influence youth behaviour, they do not entirely direct it.

Scholars of terrorism have found that education provided by armed groups is an important means by which youths are socialised into the group's values and groomed for violence (Levitt, 2004; Grynkewich, 2008; Flanigan, 2008; Laitin & Berman, 2008), however, this

case demonstrates that education may also be used to recruit and socialise youths for non-violent roles in armed groups. In this study, 54 per cent of youth leaders interviewed received further education through KYO after finishing High school. This is not a representative sample, but taken together with evidence from interviews with KYO and KNU leaders, it indicates that the provision of educational opportunities is an important strategy to KNU recruitment and retention as well as crucial to the development of a skilled political leadership and managers to work on INGO-funded projects, as chapter six discussed.

In KNU-controlled and influenced areas in the borderlands, chapter five argued that grievances over violent practices of state-making combine with political desires among communities long accustomed to self-rule to seek an alliance with the KNU in order to drive the common enemy out of the land. Thus, despite sometimes very little knowledge of the KNU's political goals, Karen civilians in borderland areas have formed the backbone of support to the 'Karen revolution'. In terms of youth motivations in these areas, a statement by a military leader from the KNU's Fourth Brigade area neatly summarised explanations also given by KNU and KYO recruiters:

Saw AF: *'The youth don't understand (the KNU's political goals) but they have hope that the KNU will work for their people to be free.'*<sup>149</sup>

What 'freedom' means to the youths who join the KNU may, of course, be quite different from the goals pursued by the KNU. The following chapter examines in more detail how civilians are socialised into the KNU's political ideology by the youth wing.

Humphries and Weinstein (2006:449 in Mampilly, 2011:218) argue that when individuals have community ties to a rebel group they are more likely to join. The findings of this study support their argument because in state-controlled and partially-securitized areas, more proximate factors explained the actual recruitment paths of youths, such as individual, family, friendship or village networks to the KNU. Beatty's (2011:289-290) study of youth political activism in Burma also found that family links were important to recruitment in political opposition groups. There was evidence of this in this study, however, a family history of participation in the KNU was also found to preclude recruitment. For youths with links to the KNU or one of its affiliated organisations, framing processes and discourses in the KNU did appear to orientate some youths towards eventual participation, though not all.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Saw AF, (male) a KNLA commander from the KNU's 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Suan Pueng, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2010

In areas under or recently under KNU control, proximity to the KNU and its discourses results in some youths from these areas viewing participation in the KNU as conformity and a normal career choice akin to civil service. However, this study found that refugee camps which have close proximity to the KNU and retain a strong grievance narrative do not actually produce many willing volunteers for work outside the refugee camps. This is surprising given the number of academic studies in the ‘refugee warriors’ literature arguing that refugee camps provide base camps and a pool of recruits to armed opposition groups (Lischer, 2005; Loescher *et al.*, 2007). In the Karen case, the lack of refugee recruitment into the KNU appears to be due to a different context of youths’ lives, with the border playing a key part in the development of different conditions. Thai policies prevent open political campaigning, the context of refugee aid is perceived to increase apathy and dependency and the opening of resettlement opportunities to third countries has resulted in many refugees either thinking about leaving or actually going to third countries. Furthermore, youths face parental pressure not to join out of fears for their security, even among parents who worked for the KNU themselves. Finally, INGO influence on the culture in the camps is believed to be driving ‘free riding’ and youth demands for salaries that KNU-affiliated organisations cannot afford. The result, according to one KYO recruiter is that:

Saw B: *“Very few [camp-based youths] join KNU, only about one to three per cent of recruits are from camp. Most camp youths work with NGOs, resettle or work in Thailand. KNU recruits are mostly from villages inside Burma and have lower education.”*<sup>150</sup>

Even in areas controlled or closely influenced by the KNU, increasing impoverishment with the loss of territory and Burma Army attacks on civilian livelihoods as part of its state-making campaigns has reduced the number of youths joining the KNU. Loss of territory has increased insecurity in the borderlands as the KNU’s former ‘liberated’ areas have become conflict zones or partially-securitized areas. However, Kalyvas and Kochar’s (2007) suggestion that participation may be preferred in such a situation has, in general, not been borne out in this case, primarily because of the KNU’s inability to support the dependents of participants. KYO and KNU recruiters indicate that the immediate economic imperative to find food for family survival takes precedence over the desire to drive the Burma Army out of the area. Thus, this finding supports the argument that absolutely deprived people rarely participate in conflict because they are too preoccupied with merely surviving (Mason, 2004; Ghimire, 2002).

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<sup>150</sup> Interview with a KYO district chairperson / KNU district level organising department leader on 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008

As Migdal (1974) argues, civilians are often apolitical and primarily motivated by their own immediate survival and security needs. KYO recruiters in this study concur, explaining that youths in all of the areas where they recruit are more often than not disinterested in politics and the KNU's ideology and too preoccupied with their daily survival to participate. This inhibiting factor in recruitment may also be known to the Burmese regime since impoverishment of the civilian population has previously been argued to be a deliberate strategy of the Burmese regime in state-controlled areas to prevent the organisation of political opposition to its rule (Beatty, 2011).

Previous studies have argued that an armed opposition group's declining coercive power will result in more predatory behaviour towards civilians (Wood, 2010). However, there was no indication in this study that the KNU's declining territorial control and lack of recruits was resulting in increased forced conscription. Sporadic youth conscription was continuing in 2007 as a result of the KNU's previous conscription policies (HRW, 2007:103), but a more active conscription practice occurred when the KNU held extensive territory, up until 1995, not when it lost territory. Thus, this study indicates that declining power does not necessarily result in more coercive youth conscription by an armed opposition group.

In all areas, non-participation is an option and the one pursued by most youths, but in areas where multiple Karen armed groups vie for political authority and claim allegiance based on ethnicity there is some evidence that youths may choose their allegiance based on the behaviour of each group towards the local community. As several scholars have already identified, behaviour may be judged by the provision of public goods which help to build the internal legitimacy of groups claiming public authority (Wood, 2010; Mampilly, 2011). This study found that the Burmese State's lack of legitimacy and lack of provision of appropriate governance services occasionally results in youth participation in non-military roles in the KNU even when they have little previous awareness of the group. In this case, governance services, particularly education, offered by KNU-affiliated organisations appeared to be a factor in youth recruitment.

Understanding non-military youth recruitment into the KNU is complicated by the variety of roles that they are being recruited into. This study was limited to a primary, though not exclusive, focus on youths joining KYO, although it included some who had first joined in other roles (soldiering, for example) then moved across to KYO or a Karen NGO. The findings are therefore limited and do not seek to represent all youths who join the KNU. It cannot be assumed that the same patterns of participation are present among youths who join as teachers or soldiers, for example. Even within KYO, youths are recruited to work in

a variety of roles, some more politically-orientated than others. As chapter six discussed, none are military roles, while social projects form a large proportion of KYO's activities at the central level and almost the entirety of activities in the refugee camps. It is also limited to some extent by a reliance on the reasons that participants and recruiters offer themselves. Often, answers to questions posed were probed, rephrased and asked in a different way on later occasions in order to gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the actual steps participants took when joining the KNU and moving in to different roles.

#### **b) Matching recruits to roles**

This study illustrates the micro-level processes by which youth recruits are matched to non-military roles in an armed opposition group, which have received little if any previous attention in academic studies. It found that in the KNU, the actual role a youth takes on depends on a number of factors including their education level, gender norms, individual interest and local organisational needs at the time. For example, gender norms tend to divert young women into KWO, health work and teaching and away from political leadership roles.

The relative weight each factor has in determining a recruit's role is not accurately known, however, in this study, the education level of each recruit appears to be very significant. Youths with lower levels of education join lower levels of the KNU and are directed into lower-skilled or soldiering work. More educated youths join higher levels and are directed into managing and leadership roles, political roles or work within the KNU's welfare wings. As a result, youths from more stable areas and/or more wealthy family backgrounds dominate in non-military leadership roles while youths from conflict zones/IDP areas appear to be more prevalent in lower skilled and military roles, despite forming the majority of recruits. Essentially, this means that the KNU is led by the small Karen middle class supported by the larger peasant class. Since education and even community mobilising skill are connected to religion in Karen State, this has also been explained as the reason for the religious imbalance in the KNU's leadership.

#### **c) Career progression**

The KNU has not been an economically-endowed armed group since it lost control of the borderland economy, thus, it cannot afford to pay participants and most effectively work as unpaid volunteers. Weinstein (2005) argues that armed groups which are more socially than materially-endowed tend to be staffed by participants with non-pecuniary motivations. In the KNU's case, although some youths are initially incentivised by educational

opportunities, those who stay and participate in KYO employ the KNU's discourse of participation as a community service when explaining their reasons for participation. This discourse appears to be reasonably effective in maintaining loyalty, at least among participants without refugee status and the chance to apply for refugee resettlement, because participants do not always leave when offered far higher salaries in NGOs. This finding supports Hirschman's (1970:80-81) theory that generating loyalty is most critical in organisations which cannot provide benefits and compete for the loyalty of staff with other organisations or opportunities.

Loyalty is partly rewarded in the KNU by opportunities for career progression, though this is mediated by a youth's demonstrated skill, experience and popularity in the KNU's internal elections. It is also partly influenced by education level. Youth recruiters and leaders in this study indicated that it is more common for youths with lower education levels to spend more years working at lower levels of the KNU, often as soldiers if they are male, rather than at the leadership levels.

#### **d) Exit**

This study found that youth exit from the KNU is primarily a result of one or more of four factors: lack of energy and interest and poverty were significant in explaining youth exit inside Karen State, while staff poaching and the refugee resettlement programme were more significant among youths exiting from Thailand. Thus, exit is fundamentally linked to territorial control, as Kalyvas (2006) argues. Exit levels have increased as the KNU's territorial control decreases because participants become impoverished as a result of attacks on their livelihoods. Since the KNU are no longer able to offer protection, youths migrate to seek income, education or security elsewhere. The exile of the KNU's headquarters across the border with Thailand has also prompted the exit of its more highly educated participants in particular because once they are in Thailand, exit on the refugee resettlement programme becomes an option, displacing loyalty. Thus, while an armed opposition may seek to prevent exit by increasing loyalty through the promotion of an ideological agenda, it cannot control exit without stringent territorial control. In the presence of other opportunities exit occurs even among the highest levels of an armed opposition group's leadership.

Exit and declining territorial control have been linked to a decline in the overall education level of the KNU's management and leadership in this study. In the past, the KNU leadership was comprised almost entirely of university-educated people and had a strong presence in urban areas where it could draw on the ranks of educated youths for recruits. However, as it has lost control and influence in urban areas, the numbers of university-

educated recruits have greatly declined and the KNU has long found that its more educated cadres are more likely to vacillate (Smith, 1991). Moreover, since exit for resettlement has disproportionately been taken up by more highly educated and skilled refugees, the KNU has likewise lost a disproportionately high number of its more educated and skilled staff, both to resettlement and work in INGOs. This makes the KNU's political leadership training schools discussed in chapter six all the more important if, as they believe, being knowledgeable and skilled (in politics especially) is essential to effective leadership of the KNU and the ultimate achievement of its political goals.

## **5 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a detailed account of youth recruitment into the KNU for non-military roles, primarily, but not exclusively, in the KYO. Discussion then turned to an examination of how non-military recruits are matched to roles and the factors that influence their career progression in the KNU. Finally, this chapter examined exit patterns among young participants. Given the KNU's declining territorial control and resultant problems recruiting and retaining participants, especially those with higher levels of education, it is interesting to question how its strategies of contesting Burmese state-making may be changing. The next chapter seeks to illuminate some of the KNU's changing strategies by focusing on the changing activities of youths in non-military roles.

## **Chapter 8: Non-military youth roles in the KNU amid changing strategies of contestation**

When I worked at KYO in 2003, the central level of the organisation ran projects mainly inside the refugee camps. The majority were youth peer to peer social activities including HIV/AIDS awareness, drugs awareness, a newsletter project, youth notice boards, drawing and story writing competitions. It also ran a further education school outside the refugee camps, which trained youths in English language and computer skills, as well as teaching Karen history and politics as part of its political leadership regeneration programme. By the time I returned in 2008, both the target group and the content of KYO's activities had undergone some change. The target group had increasingly become Karen youths inside Burma instead of those in the refugee camps, while the activities were more humanitarian, such as IDP relief work, or politically orientated, such as political education and youth leadership skills development. While the KYO continued to be based in Thailand and continued to run its social projects in the refugee camps, its projects inside Burma increased, supported by INGO funding. Groups of youths regularly crossed between Thailand and Burma conveying political ideas and material assistance to civilian communities in hiding, in partially-securitised areas and in State-controlled areas.

This chapter argues that this shift in KYO's central activities is shaped by changes in the KNU's political and strategic goals. By harnessing the funding power of INGOs familiar with working through KNU structures in the refugee camps, the KNU's welfare wings have managed to compensate for the decline in their own revenue streams as a result of the KNU's loss of territory. However, INGO funding has its own effects on the KNU-affiliated organisations it funds. Moreover, with the loss of territory, welfare services cannot simply be delivered in fixed locations within the KNU's 'liberated zones', they have to be delivered in a much more mobile way. By examining the changing nature of KYO's activities in this chapter, as well as those of youths working in non-military roles in the KNU's welfare wings, the roles of youths in the KNU are analysed in relation to the group's changing political and strategic goals.

The first part of the chapter examines three key non-military roles that the KNU's youth cohort is involved in. The second part of the chapter analyses the significance of both the activities themselves and youth roles in their delivery. The third part summarises the factors that enable or constrain youth work in these roles.

## 1 Non-military youth roles in the KNU

This study found three, key non-military roles that the KNU's youth cohort are involved in: political leadership training of selected youths, political outreach and mobilising programmes among the broader Karen youth population, and social welfare roles within the KNU's governance structures.

### a) Youth political leadership training in the KNU

Chapter six discussed how the KNU re-formed its youth wing to regenerate its ageing political leadership. With a reformed leadership the KNU encouraged its youth and women's wings to carry out political leadership training for the youth cohort.<sup>151</sup> The KNU's Joint Secretary 1, Saw Hla Ngwe, explained that the purpose of this is to develop a politically skilled future leadership to lead the KNU:

*“The KYO/KWO need to upgrade their awareness, their capacity so that they can understand what’s going on in the whole world, what kind of revolution is successful, what kind is failure, for example the Tamil Tigers. The KNU enhances and promotes those two organisations to train their leadership.”<sup>152</sup>*

This is deemed particularly important because the declining education level of recruits is perceived to be affecting the regeneration of the KNU's political leadership. While discussing leadership regeneration processes in the KNU as part of this research, a KYO leader stated:

*“The Karen struggle for self-rule but to do this we need good leaders to lead the people to this goal. Leadership is very important for the struggle for self-rule. The main problem is that most who join (KNU) are not well educated and may not even have basic literacy. They (KNU) don't have regular capacity building programmes and skills development so it takes a long time to develop leadership.”<sup>153</sup>*

During the fieldwork, I examined the ways in which KYO and KWO have attempted to develop young political leaders in practice, using discussions with teachers and leaders in each organisation, observation of lessons and analysis of curricula.

#### ***Case study 1: Karen Women's Organisation (KWO)***

Women have always been active in the KNU including its armed wing, the KNLA (usually as army medics), however they have been under-represented in the political structures of the group. According to Zipporah Sein, who was General Secretary of the KWO before resigning to take up the KNU position of General Secretary, KNU leaders encouraged

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<sup>151</sup> The student groups, KSNG and KUSG, are not part of KNU structures and are therefore not expected. However, as yet, there is no common understanding of what constitutes appropriate political leadership training for the development of future KNU leaders to produce the next generation of political leaders.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>153</sup> Interview with a KYO district Chairperson / KNU district level organising department leader, Mae Sot, 30<sup>th</sup> November 2008

KWO to re-form in 1985 to represent women in the KNU and work on socio-political issues affecting women arising as a result of the conflict in Karen State.<sup>154</sup> While this has resulted in a number of social programmes for women, it has not resulted in many young women entering the political leadership structures of the KNU.

Zipporah Sein and the General Secretary of the KWO at the time of research, Nan Dah Eh Kler, argue that the fundamental reason behind the lack of women in the KNU's political leadership is a cultural norm that views political leadership as a man's role. The way in which they have attempted to redress the domination of the KNU leadership by men is by campaigning for fixed quotas of leadership positions to be reserved for women, but this has not yet been approved by the KNU congress. Nan Dah Eh Kler explained in depth during an interview for this study:

Interviewer: *"Why aren't there many women in the KNU's political leadership?"*

Nan Dah Eh Kler: *"In the world there are very small numbers of women participating in leadership and politics. When I was young, the head village leaders were men and only men did the leadership role. Traditionally people believe that the leadership role should be men, so we need to change that kind of thinking."*

Interviewer: *"What is the traditional role for young people in Karen villages?"*

Nan Dah Eh Kler: *"In the village (it is a bit different from village to village), some have a young group of people to be involved in social ceremonies. We are not used to seeing youths involved in leading roles like Village Head. Very few numbers are Village Heads – at least they are forty years old. They don't write down that the Village Head should be this age but it's a kind of cultural thinking. If they are very young it's difficult for people to believe and respect them and maybe they will see she or he has not much experience. But we do have women village chiefs now."*

Interviewer: *"How have traditional roles for young people changed?"*

Nan Dah Eh Kler: *"For other organisations, not much has changed, but KWO has changed. For example, we train young women to take a leadership role but it's very hard for them because sometimes they feel that people don't respect their point of view. But they still struggle and young women try very hard."*

Interviewer: *"How has KWO tried to get more young women into leadership roles in the KNU?"*

Nan Dah Eh Kler: *"For the draft Federal Constitution of Burma we asked for at least 30 per cent of the people should be women in leadership positions. We also try to encourage women to be in the constitution drafting committee...For the KNU election, we also requested at least 30 per cent of women, but at that time we were not ready for 30 per cent at every level. They (KNU leaders) don't completely agree with us, because although we asked for 30 per cent, we are not ready to send our representatives, but we are in the process, that's why we try to get our Emerging Leadership school."<sup>155</sup>*

In addition to campaigning for quotas of female representatives in the KNU's leadership structures, the KWO trains a small number of its most able female cadres in leadership and

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<sup>154</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, KNU General Secretary, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Nan Dah Eh Kler, KWO General Secretary, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2009

management through two training centres. The Young Women's Leadership and Management school is based in one of the refugee camps but recruits are sought both from the refugee camps and inside Karen State. When asked about youth representation in the leadership of KWO, Nan Dah Eh Kler explained that the school has been effective at increasing youth representation within KWO's own management structures:

*“After 2004 there were more youth representatives on the Executive Committees (at all levels of the KWO) because in 2001 we started our young women's leadership school so we trained more young women to work with the community and leadership. After they graduated they went home and were elected into positions.”*

However, Nan Dah Eh Kler also went on to say that the school was less effective at producing political leaders for the KNU, since the curriculum was more geared towards developing the skills needed for management of KWO's INGO-funded social programmes. Thus, in 2008 KWO also set up its Emerging Leadership School to focus specifically on training young females in political leadership. Recruits for this school are primarily drawn from IDP areas in Karen State, not from the refugee camps because of the high loss of skilled KWO staff from the refugee camps to resettlement in a third country. As a result, KWO devotes its training resources to recruits from inside Karen State who are believed to be more likely to stay and actually become KNU leaders. Furthermore, KWO selects its recruits based on their experience and demonstrated aptitude in community organising work, rather than education level.

### ***Case Study 2: Karen Youth Organisation (KYO)***



***Photo 11 Youths on graduation day at the KYO's Karen Youth Development Centre in Ler Per Her IDP camp, February 2009 [Photo: author]***

From 2000 to 2007, KYO ran ten-month leadership and management training programmes close to its headquarters in Mae Sot. An examination of the stated curriculum of the KYO

school from 2003 to 2007 in funding proposals, as well as discussions with former teachers at the school, revealed that the KYO school was also focused more on building the skills necessary for work on INGO-funded social programmes than on developing political leadership for the KNU. Additionally, the school had an explicit aim to unify Karen youths from diverse backgrounds around the political project of the KNU and a single, pan-Karen ethnic identity (Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008:397).<sup>156</sup> Thus, the KNU's version of Karen history and politics, as well as IT skills and English language training formed the main subjects in the KYO school's curriculum.

Like KWO, KYO found that its students from the refugee camps tended not to transition into work within the KNU's administrative apparatus but instead found work or further education opportunities elsewhere. Saw U, who was quite disgruntled about this during the fieldwork period, said:

*"The youths learn office structure, office work, politics, then leave because if they can do (office work) they don't want to come back to help. Those who go to university in Bangkok, like N-, KYO find the way and send them to the university, but they do not come back to work in KYO."*<sup>157</sup>

By contrast, KYO leaders who organised the school argued that recruits sent from the districts inside Karen State were found to be more likely to go back to work with the KYO district office because they were already committed to the job, often having several years' work experience in the area, as well as family and friendship ties to return to. In an informal group discussion one evening at KYO headquarters, KYO leaders were quite scathing about youths from the refugee camps, reserving their praise for IDP youths who they perceived to be the 'real' freedom fighters.

The entire youth political leadership training programme at KYO underwent a significant re-design in 2008. The new programme aimed to be more focused on political leadership training and targeted towards the KNU's primary support base among IDPs in Karen State. To this end, at the KNU congress in 2008, youth representatives pushed the KNU leadership to approve the creation of a youth leadership and management programme organised and supported by the highest levels of the KNU. The KYO central leader responsible for the creation of the school explained the new structure:

*"The New Generation KNU programme has two steps. One step is if the district can do [training] they will do, but some districts already started; Fourth Brigade, Dooplaya and*

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<sup>156</sup> The school's report from 2003-2004 (in Kuroiwa & Verkuyten, 2008:397) details its aims as follows: "(1) to provide educational opportunities for Karen youth; (2) to unify Karen youth of different backgrounds and coming from different regions such as the conflict zone, the refugee camps, and central parts of Burma; and (3) to educate future Karen leaders so that they can work for the Karen community and succeed the former generation of Karen nationalists".

<sup>157</sup> Interview with Saw U (Male, age 29), a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

*Mutraw [districts] started. This includes KYO and KWO training. It's like a university; it is one or two years at the district level. If they pass, they send to the central level. At the central level we will have one or two further years. We will teach Politics, History, English, International Law and Constitution, Communication, Media and Management. When they have finished they will work in the Organising department at the central, district and township levels. Some may go to be soldiers or other things. If they finish they should work in the KNU.*"<sup>158</sup>

Since KYO's New Generation school is geared towards building the capacity of young leaders and managers within KNU organisations inside Karen State, the selection of participants is based on demonstrated prior commitment to working within the KNU. This selection criteria aims to eliminate the problems of 'brain drain' that KYO have encountered in the past. A KYO central leader explained:

*"[For the] youth training centre we order youths from all seven districts to come. We have criteria about the youths who attend this training must have worked for KYO one year or two years already. At the annual meeting we have one reason [objective]: to make a school for capacity building because the townships and districts need more capacity. The ones who attend training must already work for the township or district.*"<sup>159</sup>

At the time of research, youths from the refugee camps were only admitted to any kind of training (KYO, KWO or KNU) if they had not applied for resettlement to another country. A KNU leader explained in more detail about the selection of participants for the school, indicating the priority given to those with higher levels of education and those from areas loyal to the KNU:

*"Now [we] aim for thirty students at the New Generation School. We want equal numbers of men and women, but we don't get; usually one third are women. To choose the students, the district leaders select eligible people. We give criteria: aged 18 to 30, should have Eighth Standard education, men and women, usually equal numbers per district. Also Karen, Burmese and English languages...They need Burmese language because some of our former leaders speak only in Burmese...We cannot recruit from DKBA areas – we are careful because we don't know what is in their mind [where their loyalties lie]. We inform leaders to give recommendation about only those who they trust to send to the training.*"<sup>160</sup>

KYO leaders explained that the New Generation school aims to be entirely funded by the KNU's central treasury and run in KNU-held territory in its fifth brigade area of Mutraw (Papun) district. This is because KYO found that the running costs of its school were 50 per cent lower on the Burmese side of the border. In the past, leadership schools run by Mahn Sha and the KYO were based in Thailand because of the superior communication and IT facilities, photocopying and stationery resources, access to trainers (both KNU and foreign volunteers) and physical security. However, informal discussions with KYO and KNU leaders and participant observation of KYO's daily activities indicate that declining

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<sup>158</sup> Interview with Saw Z (Male, age 39), a KYO central leader, 29<sup>th</sup> July 2009, Mae Sot

<sup>159</sup> Interview with Saw H (Male, age 34), a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009

<sup>160</sup> Interview with Saw Dot Lay Mu, KNU Joint Secretary 2, 12<sup>th</sup> June 2009, Mae Sot

security for the KNU in Thailand and more restrictions on the group's activities by Thai authorities are diminishing the value of Thailand as an organising and training space. All forms of political training by KNU organisations conducted in Thailand are subject to local Thai policies and security arrangements. Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, explained that these are based on maintaining political stability and economic opportunities along the border. Thus, as long as the KNU does not interfere in Thailand's domestic politics or economy, and provided they pay an appropriate bribe, they are usually permitted to run non-military trainings for KNU cadres:

*"If necessary, they [youths] attend training in Thailand: Mae Sariang, Mae Sot, Chiang Mai. Trainings about human rights, democracy, constitution, ICRC, Geneva Call... but military trainings are held in our own side. We can give the Thais tea money to organise trainings... The Thais want the whole world to belong to the market economy. They want to create stability for the benefit of the Thai people. Thais don't want the fighting to spread to their soil and affect the stability of Thailand. Sometimes the DKBA enter Thai side so it's a problem. We never interfere in Thai sovereignty. We educate our members: don't comment, we must abide by Thai Law, Thai customs and the good will of the Thai people."*<sup>161</sup>

Although youth training is theoretically allowed, participant observation showed that in practice it has to be negotiated with local Thai officials and is severely constrained by travel restrictions imposed on KNU organisations by the Thai Border Police. This greatly increases the transportation cost of students to the training venue due to the need to pay bribes<sup>162</sup> for access.<sup>163</sup> Throughout the fieldwork period in 2009, a complete travel ban made travel in KNU cars almost impossible for several months.<sup>164</sup> Thus, despite the greater security risk posed to the location of the school in KNU-controlled territory, the reduced costs and greater political freedom to run the school as they wish are deemed by KYO leaders to outweigh the security problems they face.

## **b) Youth Political Education and Community Organising**

A second, key role that the KNU's youth wing is engaged in is building support for the KNU among Karen communities inside Burma. KYO had long been engaged in 'community organising' work with youths inside Burma, but this activity became the primary focus of the organisation at the central level, more than doubling in size by 2008.

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<sup>161</sup> Interview with Saw Hla Ngwe, KNU Joint Secretary 1, Mae Sot, 13<sup>th</sup> June 2009

<sup>162</sup> Most difficult and expensive is travel from Suan Pueng, opposite the KNU's fourth brigade, because it is so far south. For a young person to travel north to Mae Sot for trainings or meetings, the cost was around 15,000 Thai baht for a one-way trip.

<sup>163</sup> Interviews with KYO leaders and observation of bribery transactions while travelling with KYO leaders in KNU cars along the Thai-Burma border area.

<sup>164</sup> For staff in KNU-affiliated organisations without a legitimate form of identification in Thailand (around 95% of all staff) the only way of travelling safely around the border areas is in official KNU cars, usually with a travel permit issued by a local Thai official. A list of KNU cars is kept by Thai authorities and KNU travel in Thailand is regulated by liaison between KNU and Thai officials.

KYO states in its organisational mandate that “Community Organization and supporting community organizations are the most important work that KYO carries out” (KYO, 2007), which does not necessarily mean political organisation and mobilisation for the KNU. However, when this work was discussed with the KYO’s community organisers and the organisation’s project plans for community organising projects analysed during the fieldwork period, it was clear that this primarily involves educating villagers about the KNU’s and the Burmese military’s political ideologies and strategies and encouraging youths to support the KNU.

According to youth leaders within the KNU, educating and negotiating with the civilian support base is considered important for building support for the KNU’s political ideology and strategies. The Organising department of the KNU is formally tasked with this responsibility, but with a lack of staff, this work was often delegated to the armed wings of the KNU, the KNLA and KNDO, who tended to have the greatest reach and presence throughout Karen State.<sup>165</sup> However, since the armed wings have now also declined in reach and size, and because of the age gap between KNU leaders and the grassroots Karen population, the KYO has taken on a large proportion of this work for the KNU.

In-depth discussions with KYO leaders during the fieldwork revealed that community organisers from the KYO are responsible for reaching out to villagers inside Karen State (and in Thailand), representing the KNU and its political objectives to the younger generation, mediating the demands each group makes on the other and effectively building the KNU’s internal legitimacy among civilians. As one KYO leader succinctly put it: “*We are a bridge*”.<sup>166</sup> Naw Zipporah Sein, the current KNU General Secretary, confirmed in an interview that this is how the KNU leadership also see the role of KYO:

Interviewer: “*How do you see the role of KYO?*”

Naw Zipporah Sein: “*KYO prepares youths politically. They have a responsibility to organise and mobilise young people, to educate young people to take part in politics and the Karen struggle.*”<sup>167</sup>

The KNU coordinates its political ideology and some of its civilian outreach activities with umbrella alliance groups such as the Ethnic Nationalities Council (ENC) and National Council for the Union of Burma (NCUB). As a result, KYO’s political education and community organising work has formally been coordinated within the framework of action agreed by the ENC since 2007. The background text to the Karen State Coordinating

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<sup>165</sup> Discussions with KYO leaders and Organising department district staff between 2003 and 2009

<sup>166</sup> Interview with a KYO leader, Mae Sot, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2009

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

Body's (KSCB) funding proposal for 2009 explains the new position of KYO's political outreach and community mobilising activities:

“The country's youth needs to play a vital role in mobilizing the various stakeholders in the communities. The In-charge of Youth Affairs, under the Karen State Coordinating Committee, is also General Secretary of the Karen Youth Organization and has come up with a program approved by the Karen State Coordinating Body to mobilize the community and help in implementing some the ENC's objectives” (KSCB, 2008).

The ENC objectives referred to above are the establishment of a democratic, federal union form of political system in Burma. KYO's funding proposal to the National Reconciliation Program, through the KSCB, indicates the objectives of its youth political training programme:

- “The majority of youth in Karen State will know and understand the ENC's structure, political agenda, policy and programs
- To be able to participate in the political development in Burma and to be well prepared for Tripartite Dialogue which is the ultimate goal of ENC.
- To understand the concept of federalism which has been supported by ENC
- To organize of the youths to increase youth's participation on the ethnic movement.
- To build up political knowledge, leadership and management skills among youths in Karen State.
- To equip youths in Karen State to be able to mobilize and raise political awareness to grass-roots people community stake holders on the ENC political agenda” (KSCB, 2007)

In-depth interviews with Saw U, one of the KYO leaders responsible for managing and delivering community organising programmes, reveal how this political education and organising of the civilian population is carried out in practice and how youth leaders from KYO mediate between the KNU leadership and the ENC in Thailand and young Karen villagers in Burma.

Saw U explained that in each township within Karen state, KYO organises workshops for youths and explains the KNU's political agenda and ideology, in particular the new KNU constitution for Karen State and how this fits within the Burma constitution written by the ENC. Essentially, Saw U said the goal is to mobilise political support for the KNU and its political agenda within alliance groups among the civilian population, but this chapter argues that this activity also serves a number of strategic purposes. Political support may be transferred into material support or direct participation in the KNU, while it also indicates the mobilising power of the KNU to the Burmese regime. Civilian support may also serve to increase the credibility of the KNU externally. Finally, increased political awareness among the civilian population can undermine Burmese state-making practices and claims to political authority.

During the fieldwork period I worked with KYO leaders on the writing of their community organising and political training project proposals and funding reports. During these processes, they explained that the objectives of KYO's political training programme are re-defined each year taking into account the current political context within Burma, political activities of the KNU and alliance groups in Thailand, objectives of external funders and any related training the KYO staff have received in the year. Thus, each youth workshop contains a number of different goals set by different stakeholders, whom KYO is funded by and/or accountable to. In 2008, with the ratification of a new Burmese constitution produced by the SPDC and the National Convention, and elections looming, the training also included explaining the Burmese election process and training youths on non-violent methods of political resistance. This last element is part of a broader programme of underground political resistance activities co-ordinated by a youth umbrella group in Thailand (SYCB) with INGO assistance.

**KYO's Youth Political Training Programme: Contesting Burmese state-making and building support for the KNU**

*Case study of Saw U*

Saw U is a young Sgaw Karen man, who is Buddhist, aged 30. He is a senior leader in KYO. Every year Saw U writes and submits a funding proposal to an INGO for a youth political education and community organising programme inside Burma. He then meets with the INGO staff in Thailand and negotiates funding for the programme. Once funding is received, the programme works on a 'train the trainer' principle, whereby a core team of KYO trainers train district KYO teams who then conduct roving workshops around their home districts. Saw U conducts the training workshops and some of the village workshops in a series of trips. Each trip takes several months and involves long walks through the jungles and mountains to reach the villages where he holds workshops.

In 2008, with a looming referendum on the new Burmese constitution, the focus of Saw U's trips was explaining the Burmese constitution to local youths and comparing it with the alternative constitution drafted by the opposition groups through the ENC and the KNU's constitution for Karen State. Saw U and his staff also explained the KNU's political ideology and strategies and compared these with the Burmese military's policies and strategies. This aimed to build support for the KNU's political strategy and authority and undermine the Burmese military's efforts to legitimise its political authority through the new constitution and elections.

During the training, the KNU's flag was displayed and the KNU's national anthem sung. To further undermine Burmese state-making, Saw U and his team shared with the young participants the non-violent resistance principles they had learnt through an INGO training in Thailand. Saw U also listened to the views of the civilian youth cohort on the KNU's ideology and strategy, their complaints about the different armed and political groups in the local area and general difficulties the villages were facing in order to represent the civilian youth situation back to the KNU leadership.

The problems Saw U said he encountered were political apathy and low levels of education preventing the grasping of more complex principles. In particular, he said there is a reluctance among civilians to let go of ethno-nationalism and secession in favour of the federal union principles now advocated by the KNU. He explained that although the political ideology of the KNU has theoretically transformed, ethno-nationalism remains the most convenient organising and recruiting principle among communities aggrieved by ethnocratic Burmese state policies. Many civilians then support the KNU because they believe it fights for 'Karen freedom' without fully understanding the group's political ideology.<sup>168</sup>

*"Most of the Karen people, they stay not active. If they got enough food that is enough for them, they do not want to think about the politics and they do not want to think far into the future. If they got enough food and sleep well and stay well that is enough for their life... Our villagers, maybe seventy to seventy-five per cent have lower education so educating them is very difficult. Sometimes if we go to talk about and give the information for them, we need to explain very slowly and very detailed because they do not know nothing and they do not know firstly because they have lower education level. Sometimes we have no time to discuss with them if we stay in the jungle, just only we can take one hour, fifty minutes, like that, and we cannot explain all of it."<sup>169</sup>*

The relatively easy aspects of conducting the workshops were organising the training venue and security with local support, even in areas not under KNU control, and mobilising civilian youth to attend the workshops. The villagers and KYO staff face severe penalties in partially-securitized and state-controlled areas for running political training programmes such as this but KYO's local networks were able to organise workshops wherever the training team travelled and large numbers of youths reportedly attended.

***Figure 12 KYO's Youth Political Training Programme: Contesting Burmese state-making and building support for the KNU: Case study of Saw U***

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<sup>168</sup> Interview with a KYO central leader at KYO headquarters, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009

<sup>169</sup> Interview with a KYO central leader at KYO headquarters, Mae Sot, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2009



*Photo 12 A KYO political training workshop in Kawkaeik township, Pa-an district conducted from 10th-19th October 2007. The KNU's Karen State flag is displayed above the banner. [Photo: KYO, 2007]*



*Photo 13 The writing on the blackboard behind the speaker shows that KYO is teaching public defiance tactics in the workshop in Kawkaeik township, October 2007. [Photo: KYO, 2007]*



*Photo 14 KYO central and district staff conducting peer support to boarding house youths during a political education and community organising trip. [Photo: KYO, 2007]*



*Photo 15 KYO central and district staff taking a break while travelling through the jungle during a political education and community organising trip. [Photo: KYO, 2007]*

### **c) Youth providers of governance services**

The third non-military role that the KNU's youth cohort is involved in is the provision of social welfare programmes as part of a transformation of the KNU's governance services. This chapter examines two case studies: KYO's involvement in humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and youth involvement in the transformation of the KNU's welfare wings in eastern Burma.

#### ***Case study 1: Youth assistance to IDPs***

As chapter five discussed, since 1995 the KNU has lost territory to the Burma Army and Karen splinter groups from the KNLA, resulting in over one million internally displaced people (IDPs) (UNDP, 2009; TBBC, 2008). In recent years, the humanitarian crisis has escalated. In one year from August 2010 to July 2011, TBBC (2011:18) estimates that at least 112,000 people were forcibly displaced in the border areas. Many entered the refugee camps in Thailand but with Thai pressure not to allow any more new arrivals into the camps, a number of IDP camps were instead set up on the border line, but just inside Karen State. Some of these had been in existence for many years as civilians had moved and set up villages around KNLA base areas for better protection from Burma Army incursions. The IDP camps were heavily guarded by the KNLA but material assistance came from INGOs working in the nearby refugee camps.

With the escalation in the humanitarian crisis and a new willingness among INGOs funding the refugees to fund relief programmes delivered inside Karen State from across the border with Thailand, KYO set up two social welfare programmes: distribution of IDP relief supplies and peer support to IDP boarding house students. Both of these programmes had previously been funded by the KNU as part of its social compact with the civilian population, but since the KNU's income streams had greatly diminished with the loss of territory, funding was sought from INGOs instead. KYO central staff submitted a funding proposal to several INGOs for just under half a million baht to support seven IDP student boarding houses in six different IDP camps during 2009-10. Meanwhile, KYO's IDP relief work was funded by a Thai NGO and run in co-ordination with the KNU's relief department (KORD), an independent Christian relief agency (FBR) and KNU district leaders.



*Photo 16 KYO central staff distributing IDP relief assistance in Karen State [Photo: KYO, 2009]*

KYO was not the only organisation affiliated to the KNU to seek INGO funding for the KNU's social welfare programmes, the KNU's education, health and relief departments operating inside Burma all successfully reformed their funding streams, becoming entirely funded by INGOs. They also developed new ways of delivering humanitarian aid and social welfare programmes in a changed context of declining territorial control by the KNU, as the next case study demonstrates.

### ***Case study 2: Youths and the transformation of the KNU's governance services***

Chapter five discussed how cross-border aid funding for IDPs in Burma increased from 2002 to 2005 but decreased from 2009 as donors preferred to give funding to less politically sensitive areas in central Burma. Part of the decline stems from donor concerns that assistance delivered through organisations affiliated to armed opposition groups may impact upon equity of access for all ethnic, religious and political groups (DfID, 2008:21). A senior staff member of the KNU's education department (KED) explained in an interview in 2010 that KED struggled to source INGO funding because UNICEF and USAID did not want to support an organisation with links to the KNU. To mitigate this issue, two separate organisations were created from the KED to present themselves as operationally distinct from the KNU and its armed activities inside Karen State. The Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity (KRCEE) was created for education services in the refugee camps while the KED joined together with an independent NGO (KTWG) and an

international funder (Partners Relief and Development) to create the Karen State Educational Assistance Group (KSEAG) for an education service inside Karen State. This separation proved to be successful in gaining funding from INGOs for the KNU's education service in Karen State.

Youths in the KNU's education department are involved in a number of roles delivering the education service in eastern Burma with INGO funding, but one of the key roles that they play as a result of the change in revenue streams is brokering the policies of the KNU and the local needs of schools inside Burma with international donors.

### **Delivering the KNU's education service in Burma with INGO funding**

#### *Case study of Saw T*

Saw T is an Animist believer, aged 34, who works in the Education department of the KNU. He comes from an IDP area in which multiple armed groups are active and joined the Education department as an intern. He has worked his way up the organisation to become the IDP Education officer in the new consortium (KSEAG) which links the KNU's Education department local and international NGOs.

Saw T manages the KSEAG's relationship with schools in Karen State including registering new schools, managing the distribution of stipends and resources and reporting upwards. He speaks excellent English and is adept at the technocratic project management necessary for working with INGOs, easily managing complicated spreadsheets, proposals and reports. He is also familiar with the politics of the KNU's education department and the political sensitivities involved in delivering the KNU curriculum in partially-securitised or government-controlled areas of Karen state.

Crucially, Saw T is able to interpret schooling situations to donors, funding realities to local schools and KNU education policies with both groups of stakeholders. He also negotiates the distribution of school materials with other armed groups in the local area, such as the DKBA and KPF. To do this, he adopts a strategic stance of independence and humanitarianism towards international donors, while being positioned as a KNU civil servant in his relationship with the KNU and the local population.

#### ***Figure 13 Delivering the KNU's education service in Burma with INGO funding: Case study of Saw T***

The transformed revenue stream for the KNU's education service is remarkably successful despite the decline in cross-border aid since it enables KSEAG to deliver possibly the largest education service in a conflict zone in the world, covering 1,041 schools (96 per cent of the total schools in Karen State) and 93,842 students in Karen State, some of which

are mobile village schools in hiding (KSEAG, 2011:11-12). All school supplies (140,000kgs worth in 2010) are distributed from Thailand, some by road under cover of other Thai imports, but most by a large network of community volunteers who carry the supplies on their backs through the jungle (KSEAG, 2011).

The KNU's health department has also successfully transformed its revenue streams from the KNU treasury to INGOs. It is now entirely funded by INGOs and reaches around 110,000 internally displaced villagers in Karen State through 37 semi-permanent health clinics, each staffed by approximately ten local health workers. It also co-ordinates its work with an indigenous NGO, the Backpack Health Worker Team, who provide mobile health services with over 70 health work teams (Lee *et al.*, 2009:3; KDHW, undated). Meanwhile, mobile humanitarian relief is delivered by KORD and CIDKP (both KNU-affiliated organisations) in Karen State. Although CIDKP, KDHW, KED and KYO sources interviewed in this study acknowledged that the KNU provides armed protection of aid delivery, they explained that all other funding and resources are now sourced not from its treasury but from INGOs.

Chapter five discussed how as a result of the transformed revenue streams for the KNU's welfare services in Karen State, the entirety of the education, IDP assistance and health budgets now come from international donors, dwarfing the KNU's central treasury income from natural resource rents, small businesses and household tax. A young leader within the KNU's Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) explained the organisation's changed funding streams:

Interviewer: *"Does CIDKP get any funding now from the KNU?"*

Saw AG: *"Funding comes from outside donations, like NGOs and a small amount from individuals like the Karen community abroad, not from the KNU."*

Interviewer: *"Is it a problem getting NGO funding if you are linked to the KNU?"*

Saw AG: *"We operate as a humanitarian CBO even though we are linked to KNU. We have to sign agreements that aid will not be made conditional upon support for anyone and we will not be biased in our delivery. We also have to explain that we are not KNU and we wear our hats or T-shirts with our logo to show we are CIDKP."<sup>170</sup>*

The following section analyses the implications of these changed funding streams among the KNU's mass organisations and welfare wings and relates them to other academic findings.

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<sup>170</sup> Interview with Saw AG, (male) a young CIDKP leader, Mae Sot, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

## **2 The importance of youth roles in the KNU amid changing strategies of contestation**

This chapter examined three key roles that the KNU's youth cohort is involved in. While training youths to regenerate the KNU's political leadership was the role originally anticipated for the KNU's youth wing, KYO has also built up its social activities to include IDP assistance with INGO funding. In addition, it has taken over a large part of the community mobilising work of the KNU's Organising department, which is important for building and maintaining local legitimacy and support for the KNU in Burma. Youths in other KNU-affiliated organisations are also involved in delivering the KNU's governance services which have transformed since the KNU has lost territory and financial resources.

### **a) Youth political leadership training**

By examining actual practices of youth political leadership training and progression in the KNU, this chapter illuminated the micro processes of political leadership regeneration in an armed opposition group. Clapham (1998) argues that education is necessary for organisational effectiveness and formulation of the political agenda in an armed opposition group. However, this case demonstrates that putting education and training policies to improve political and organisational effectiveness in the group into practice are fundamentally dependent upon the skill and style of a group's political leadership. Political training and incorporation of the youth cohort into the KNU was not centrally instituted until patrons of the youth cohort took on more powerful positions in the KNU's central leadership (although some districts had instituted their own youth training processes). Even then, youth leadership and management training provided by KYO and KWO produced staff with skills more geared towards management of INGO-funded projects than political leadership, reflecting the operational needs of both organisations, rather than the needs of the 'mother' party. More recently, however, they have focused specifically on training youths in political leadership skills.

In this case, a changing context of the armed group's operations has affected the selection of youths for political leadership training as well as the content of the curriculum and the training location. High levels of exit among participants with refugee status in Thailand has led to a greater focus on training youths from inside Karen State who do not have refugee status, especially those with previously demonstrated loyalty to the group. With a perceived need for more highly educated participants in particular, KYO selects partly on the basis of education level (although KWO does not). There is also a bias towards ethnic Karen recruits from loyal KNU areas due to security considerations.

While sanctuary in Thailand has granted some advantages to the youth cohort in the NU, there are also disadvantages. Increased costs, difficulties negotiating travel with Thai officials and the refugee resettlement programme have all had negative impacts on youth political training programmes. As a result, the KNU's New Generation school for youth political training aims to be run in KNU-controlled territory in Karen State to mitigate these problems

### **b) Youths as 'brokers of meaning' in the KNU**

This study found that youths in KYO and other KNU-affiliated organisations have increasingly been involved in building the KNU's internal political legitimacy among the civilian Karen population, undermining Burmese state-making processes and building the external legitimacy of KNU-affiliated organisations among their external donors. While youths are particularly suitable to an internal brokerage role, external brokerage is not necessarily a youth role.

#### ***Building the KNU's internal political legitimacy***

Boudreau (2002) and Winthrop and Graff (2010) argue that education is central to any effort to mobilise people to 'national' action and adapt local perceptions and those of armed opposition groups to each other. Maoist guerrilla warfare strategy also argues that devoting personnel to political mobilisation is essential to educate civilians about the group's intentions and build local support (Mampilly, 2011:218). This is because relying on force alone is not a sustainable strategy in the long term, so groups aiming for longevity seek to build civilian consent (Mampilly, 2011:55). At the time of research, the KNU had been in conflict with the Burmese state for sixty years, thus, it is an exceptionally long-running armed opposition group.

As Mampilly (2007:31) argues, building internal legitimacy for an armed opposition group as a political authority serves to buttress its claims to represent a targeted population and builds its external legitimacy. This study found that youths are situated between the KNU and the local community when conducting political mobilising work and effectively manage the flow of political ideology and strategy between the KNU and its civilian support base. They also reproduce the political culture of the KNU and its representations of sovereignty through their use of performative symbols such as displaying the KNU flag during training and singing the KNU national anthem. Wickham-Crowley (1992) argued that the key benefit of people in this role is their ability to move through different social worlds communicating with different people, thereby reducing the 'social distance' between guerrillas and peasant supporters. They are usually rural born and bred people who have

received an unusually high level of education and can appeal more successfully to both mass peasant supporters and elites (Wickham-Crowley, 1992).

In the KYO, at the time of the fieldwork period all of the community organisers and political trainers were youths born in rural, contested areas of Karen State who, very unusually, as Wickham-Crowley (1992) argues, have managed to finish secondary schooling either through the KNU education system or in Burmese state-controlled schools. They are also, usually as a result of their education, urbanised. They come from the S'gaw and Pwo-Karen dialect communities and are either Christian or Buddhist. Predominantly, they are male, reportedly due to cultural proscriptions on female travel in dangerous areas, but some female KYO leaders also participate in the work at the district level.

### *The importance of youths in internal brokerage roles*

During lengthy discussions with KYO community organising leaders who were resting and recuperating in the headquarters office, four factors were identified which made the KNU's youth wing better suited to this work than the parent party. First is the scale and reach of KYO inside Burma. KYO is a large organisation with extensive networks throughout eastern Burma. In 2008 there were 40,911 KYO members throughout Karen State and Thailand, according to KYO's membership list, and up to 3,000 active staff from the central level down to the village level.<sup>171</sup> KYO staff travel around KNU-controlled areas, IDP areas, partially-securitized areas and government-controlled areas of Karen State, including Tenasserim division, assisted by the difficult terrain of the eastern borderlands and local support. Analysis of funding reports to donors and training attendance lists indicate that since 2000, KYO have conducted hundreds of political awareness and community organising workshops with INGO funding in school buildings, churches and temples, or in temporary training shelters in the jungle close to villages.

Related to the scale and reach of KYO is the labour capacity and energy of its young staff. Youths without dependents are especially valuable in this role as the trips entail long periods away from home. Moreover, the trips are physically demanding requiring long, arduous treks on foot through the jungle to reach remote areas, which older KNU leaders say they find difficult.

Thirdly, the delivery of politically sensitive programmes is facilitated by the pre-existing social role of youths in Karen State. As chapter six discussed, KYO's role as a village social work group is maintained in conjunction with its political role as the nascent political

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<sup>171</sup> Interview with KYO Vice-Chairperson and KYO Joint Secretary 2, Mae Sot, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009. A table showing KYO's staffing levels is available in APPENDIX A

leadership of the KNU. Thus, KYO youth leaders often continue to work on social issues with youths at the same time as their political education workshops. Photographic discussions with KYO community organising leaders revealed that after the training sessions are finished for the day they often provide peer support to unaccompanied youths in boarding houses, discuss education opportunities outside the village with youths or distribute public health information provided by other Karen organisations based in Thailand. The multiple roles of KYO in Burma aids underground political mobilisation of Karen communities in Burma. Youth leaders in KYO stated that as long as youth groups are perceived by the Burmese government to have no name, hierarchy or organisational structure, and as long as they do not discuss politics, they are tolerated. Yet, at times, the political links of village youth groups to the KYO (and by extension, the KNU) are activated and they take part in organised political trainings, workshops and other necessarily underground activities.

Fourthly, peer-to-peer political campaigning is deemed important by the KYO and the KNU because of the age disparity between youths and the KNU leadership. Most KNU leaders in the Central Executive Committee and Standing Committee are in their forties, fifties and sixties; thus, youths complain that KNU elders are out of touch and do not listen to them.<sup>172</sup> KYO is not the only organisation involved in political education and campaigning work among Karen communities. Karen University Students Group (KUSG), Karen Students Network Group (KSNG), KWO, Burma Issues and the Kwekalu news service are all involved in various aspects of political education, awareness-raising and campaigning (not always for the KNU) among the civilian Karen population inside Karen State, in Thailand and among the overseas diaspora. However, with the exception of KWO, these organisations are all led and staffed by youths.

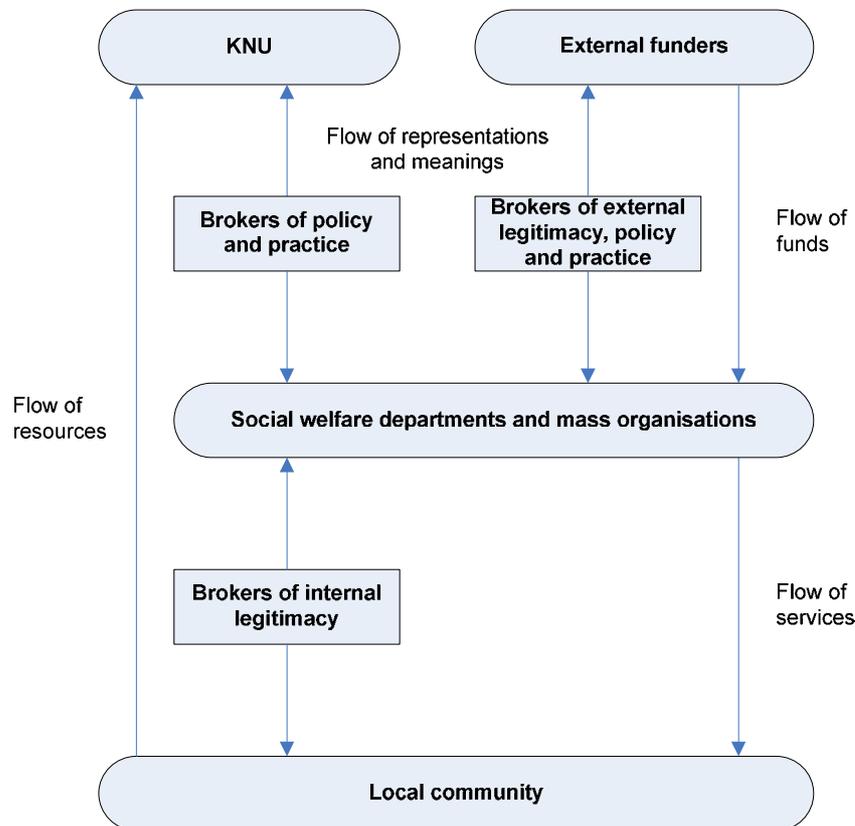
### ***Building the external legitimacy of the KNU's mass organisations and welfare wings***

In addition to negotiating the KNU's internal legitimacy with its support base and undermining certain Burmese state-making practices, youth staff and leaders of KNU-affiliated organisations such as KYO, KWO, KED and KDHW manage their organisation's relationships with their external funding agencies. As such, they have also to build the organisation's external legitimacy and manage flows of funds, reporting, accounting and representations of meanings. In essence, they are 'brokers'. This is a term used by Mosse and Lewis (2006:16) to refer to people in the context of development

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<sup>172</sup> Interview with a KYO leader, Mae Sot, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 2009

programmes, usually situated between the state and the community, who read the meaning in a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters. In this case, youths can be considered as brokers when they negotiate between their home organisation and external funders, as well as when they negotiate between the KNU and the local community, as the following diagram indicates.



*Figure 14 Strategic positions of brokers*

Key staff responsible for brokering their organisation’s relationship with external funders report that they tend to adopt a stance of humanitarianism towards international donors, while continuing to be positioned as civil servants in their relationship with the KNU. Thus, these ‘brokers’ wear multiple hats, negotiate different stakeholder policies and priorities and attempt to build coherent projects out of this complexity.

This study found that as the KNU’s mass organisations and welfare wings now rely on external funding for all of their operations, they have an increasing need for more staff able to work in brokerage roles with external donors. However, there are two factors which affect their ability to build their brokerage capacity: recruitment and retention of young participants with the right skills and travel restrictions on KNU-affiliated people in Thailand.

### ***Recruiting and retaining youth brokers in KNU-affiliated organisations***

Discussions with staff involved in ‘external brokerage’ in externally funded KNU-affiliated organisations revealed that they need particular competencies to be able to do their jobs. They must be familiar with Western culture, aware of donor politics (particularly issues of political neutrality), English-speaking and IT literate<sup>173</sup>. A young female KYO leader who liaises frequently with INGO donors on an adolescent reproductive health project explained that the most difficult aspects of her work were communicating with donors in English and writing funding proposals. Supporting this finding, the KNU’s General Secretary, Zipporah Sein, stated that after political education, English language is the most important skill for youths in the KNU to learn now.<sup>174</sup>

Refugee camp youths have the highest levels of education and English language skills among the Karen population in Burma and the Thai borderlands, but as chapter seven identified, they tend to be the least loyal participants and often leave for paid work elsewhere or resettlement to another country. Therefore, to build staff capacity, KYO and other KNU-affiliated organisations regularly run IT skills, financial management and INGO proposal and report writing training sessions for their staff in Thailand who have the most contact with external funders. This was an activity that I was often involved in as a trainer for KYO during my previous period of employment with the organisation. However, leaders in many of the KNU-affiliated organisations complained that staff who become adept at these skills are often in high demand and poached by other organisations, including INGOs themselves. A young leader from CIDKP explained that staff turnover is high among their offices on the Thai side of the border, while it is much more stable among staff based inside Karen State where very few INGOs operate:

Interviewer: *“Why do staff leave CIDKP?”*

Saw AG: *“On the Thai side, staff leaving [CIDKP] have gone to AMI, HRDU, INGOs, other Karen NGOs or CBOs with a better stipend. Some staff, after they get married, they go to work with another organisation. In this situation it’s not easy for those who have a family to work because the stipend is low, for example, just 1,500 baht per month on the Thai side. Inside Karen State, I haven’t seen anyone from 2006 until now moving to another organisation. They are more stable.”<sup>175</sup>*

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<sup>173</sup> Author observation of participants working in Karen organisations between 2003 and 2009.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Saw AG, (male) a young CIDKP leader, Mae Sot, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009

### ***Negotiating sanctuary for brokers in Thailand***

Recruiting and retaining staff with the skills necessary for negotiating and managing externally funded projects appeared to be a continuing concern for KNU-affiliated organisations at the time of fieldwork. However, negotiating their sanctuary and freedom of movement in Thailand is becoming increasingly problematic, as a KYO leader who manages the organisation's relationship with local Thai authorities explained:

Interviewer: *"What are the difficulties in your job?"*

Saw H: *"We need more skill. We have but we need more. Not everyone, but just me especially. We need to find money, manage, we plan but the situation changes and is always flexible, it makes us very tired. If we want to go to Ler Per Her [IDP camp] tomorrow, but Thais don't give permission, we cannot go. The time and situation don't belong to us."*<sup>176</sup>

A common feature of successful armed opposition groups is the availability of a sanctuary space for the group which offers a degree of protection from state force (Salehyan, 2007, 2010). While studies such as Salehyan's often focus on the military advantages of sanctuary spaces, which allow armed opposition group soldiers to re-group, house rear bases or move units along the border, there are also critical non-military advantages. Sanctuary in Thailand has been key to the longevity of the KNU because it offers organising space and facilities for the headquarters of the KNU's constituent organisations.

Operationally, Thailand has long provided a safe place for the KNU leadership to travel, conduct meetings, and bank its income, but Thailand's excellent communication facilities (mobile phone coverage, inexpensive IT hardware and cheap broadband networks) also make sanctuary in Thailand especially important for contact with international organisations, which is impossible for the KNU in Burma. Externally funded KNU organisations depend on their Thai base for communicating with funders, banking revenues and purchasing supplies, but increasing restrictions on the mobility and activities of the KNU on Thai soil by Thai authorities are causing increasing difficulties.

As chapter five examined, since Thailand re-engaged with the Burmese State economically after the communist threat in the region disappeared after the end of the Cold War, Thai policies towards Burmese opposition groups based in its territory have been based more on Thai business interests than geopolitical concerns, leading to increased pressure on the KNU by its Thai host (Irrawaddy, 2009b). Thus, as Salehyan's (2010) study of rebels and sanctuaries aptly describes, sanctuaries come with strings attached and can be a mixed blessing. KNU-affiliated organisations are not registered in Thailand as charities and

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<sup>176</sup> Interview with Saw H, (male aged 34) a KYO central leader, Mae Sot, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2009

around 95 per cent of staff based in KNU-affiliated offices on the Thai side of the border had no form of identification other than a KNU membership card at the time of research. Holding a KNU membership card used to prevent arrest while travelling around the local town, but since the Thai authorities have been placing more pressure on the KNU, the card has become almost worthless. As a result, participants in this study report that they are dependent upon the changing whims of local Thai officials for security and permission to travel and conduct meetings. Thus, as the following young leader explained, for young brokers there are significant difficulties as well as advantages to sanctuary in Thailand:

Interviewer: *“Why is your office in Thailand?”*

Naw H: *“Working in Thailand you can talk with visitors and journalists easier. You cannot bring foreigners inside Karen State. It’s easier to do networking and communicate with other CBOs and NGOs.”*

Interviewer: *“Do you have any office in Burma?”*

Naw H: *“We don’t work in the (Burmese) military-controlled area because we cannot do anything. Also along the border is territory that is not completely controlled by the KNU so you cannot keep a stable office and it’s difficult to move lots of equipment.”*

Interviewer: *“Are there any problems with your office in Thailand?”*

Naw H: *“Working in Thailand has a security problem, you cannot move. Most of our friends do not have a legal document so face some problems some times and it costs money [in bribes to Thai officials] for that.”<sup>177</sup>*

Being located in Thailand has also been identified as a source of generational tensions among KNU organisations, as chapter six discussed in more depth. Naw H went on to explain that the increasing importance of youths is changing the hierarchy of power within KNU organisations:

Interviewer: *“Are there ever any problems between the younger and older women in KWO?”*

Naw H: *“The old women say now this century is like the papaya – the small ones are at the top (of the tree) and the big ones at the bottom. Sometimes the conflict happens and they [KWO staff] have a meeting and discussion and negotiate.”<sup>178</sup>*

The KWO General Secretary attributed generational tensions among its staff in Thailand to the availability of information from the internet and the greater ability of young staff to access this:

Interviewer: *“Are there ever any problems between the younger and older women in KWO?”*

Nan Dah Eh Kler: *“Sometimes there are disagreements between older and younger women about political views, but not big problems. This is because people have not the same view. Younger people have more education and older people have learned from their experience. The*

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<sup>177</sup> Interview with Saw C, (male aged 29) a Burma Issues co-ordinator, Mae Sot, 28<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>178</sup> Interview with Naw H, (female aged 34) a KWO leader, Mae Sot, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009

*youngsters also get more fast-changing information in English from the internet and internationally but elders cannot read English so cannot get the information.*<sup>179</sup>

Meanwhile, on the Burmese side of the border, KNU-affiliated organisations continue to make use of the difficult terrain of the borderlands while conducting activities outside the control of the Burmese State. Young brokers in the KYO explained that the terrain enables them to traverse areas uncontrollable by the Burma Army, mobilising support for the KNU and undermining Burmese state-making practices. This case therefore demonstrates that difficult terrain has important non-military advantages to an armed opposition group because it enables the group to conduct underground political outreach activities.

### **c) Youths and the transformation of the KNU's governance services**

Chapter five argued that while the KNU controlled large areas of eastern Burma, it effectively operated as a *de facto* state and provided a variety of governance services to the civilian population in its areas. However, as the KNU has lost territory and revenues since the 1990s, its budget for governance services has greatly decreased. In this case, the KNU's welfare wings and mass organisations have managed to develop relations with INGOs in the refugee camps in Thailand and use these to generate funding for the provision of governance services to populations in Karen State. This does not appear to have been a purposely crafted strategy, rather it emerged as a result of a constellation of factors: the KNU's decline in territorial control, the increase in conflict in its former 'liberated zones', an escalating humanitarian crisis as a result of internal displacement and attacks on villagers' livelihoods, a lack of KNU resources to respond to the need for humanitarian aid, an increase in INGOs bearing witness to the humanitarian crisis and political lobbying by diaspora and Western pressure groups of Western governments.

#### ***Transformation to mobile delivery of governance services***

Since the end of the Cold War there has been a decline in territorially-based insurgencies (Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Mampilly (2011:253) argues that this is because the cost of holding territory outweighs the value it provides today. However, as Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) suggest, this may mean that the 'technology of rebellion' has changed, rather than an overall decline in rebellion itself. Kriger (1992:169, in Mampilly, 2011:54) argues that "controlling territory allows insurgents to offer utilitarian benefits to civilians in ways that groups without territory could never do" and Mampilly (2007) agrees that territorial control is a pre-condition to the delivery of governance services. However, this case shows that despite a great decline in KNU-controlled territory, with transformed revenue streams the

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<sup>179</sup> Interview with Nan Dah Eh Kler, KWO General Secretary, Mae Sot, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2009

KNU's welfare wings and mass organisations manage to provide extensive welfare services to the civilian population in Karen State, including in partially-securitized and government-controlled areas.

What is particularly interesting about this is the way they have adopted the key advantages of guerrilla warfare used by the KNU's military wing – mobility, favourable terrain, relationships with the local population, support from international allies and safe base areas, or sanctuary (Guevara, 2001:58; Loveman & Davies, 2001:4) – and applied them to the delivery of governance services. These strategies are also long familiar to villagers in hiding in Karen State where mobile livelihoods are adopted to evade state authority (Malseed, 2008:496). Mobility, familiarity with the terrain and local support are essential to the provision of a variety of governance services by the KNU and the NGOs from across the border in order to evade Burma Army troops who attack services and staff provided outside its own structures, (BPHWT, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2009; KHRG; 2006; KHRG, 2007; Lee *et al.*, 2007:38; Malseed, 2008:499). Like guerrilla soldiers, mobile health service providers avoid using roads and bridges that are patrolled by the Burma Army and move through jungle paths instead (Lee *et al.*, 2007:40). Meanwhile KYO district offices are occasionally mobile too with office stationery carried in a backpack while bulkier items, like typewriters, are stowed in a safe place (such as a cave or relative's house in a refugee camp).<sup>180</sup>

Given the absence of appropriate state services or international responses to the humanitarian crisis in eastern Burma, this assistance is very valuable and often the only viable way of reaching vulnerable people in the borderlands (South, 2011:40). However, it also enables the KNU to continue contesting Burmese state-making. The fungibility of external revenue sources enables the KNU's welfare departments to remit back to the KNU's central treasury the five per cent of the budget they are each officially granted, enabling a greater proportion of income to be spent on the army, who continue to contest Burmese state-making practices through guerrilla warfare.<sup>181</sup> As chapter five argued, the aim is not to defeat the Burma Army militarily, but to put pressure on it to negotiate with the KNU. Furthermore, the KNU's military wings frequently serve more as armed guards for migrating IDPs, the delivery of humanitarian assistance inside Karen State and roving bands of youth political training groups, journalists, researchers and religious groups.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Discussions with KYO district leaders from Dooplaya district in 2009

<sup>181</sup> Interviews with Education, Health and IDP Relief department leaders between October 2008 and August 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Discussions with KYO, KEWU and KNLA leaders during 2003 to 2009. HRW (2005, p.23) also notes that KNLA regularly organises village evacuations to protect villagers from Burma Army incursions.

### *Contesting state-making through non-military strategies*

This case illustrates how the KNU's technology of rebellion is changing in the post-Cold War geopolitical environment and in a context of increasing involvement by humanitarian actors. It also shows how an armed opposition group may contest central state-making through non-military means in peripheral areas. Messages transmitted through community education and outreach programmes undermine those transmitted by the Burmese state and allow the KNU to provide alternative information and ideas to the Karen population. The articulation of alternative cultures and histories also undermines the state's Burmanisation campaign. Furthermore, political outreach programmes allow the KNU to build support for its political ideology, recreate its political culture and signal sovereignty internally, which can then be used to build external legitimacy (Horstmann, 2002; Mampilly, 2011:56). As a result, the Burmese State's attempts to generate a degree of consent from the civilian population are undermined, which may then facilitate the civilian population's attempts to resist more coercive methods of Burmese state-making.

Giving material support (such as IDP relief) to populations attempting to remain outside state control also undermines the state-making practices of the Burma Army in areas it has yet to establish control, in particular its attempts to starve the villagers out of the hills and into relocation sites (KHRG, 2007b). The Burma Army's attacks on aid workers in this function serves to confirm that it perceives aid workers operating outside its control as a threat. The distribution of aid also serves to build the KNU's internal legitimacy even while it is provided by other organisations, because civilians view the KNU positively by comparison with the Burma Army for even allowing aid to be delivered in the area, rather than attacking it. As Naw Zipporah Sein stated:

*"The people see if the KNU does not allow them [NGOs] they cannot go inside [Karen State]."*<sup>183</sup>

More directly, material support provided by organisations affiliated to the KNU can build its internal legitimacy among the civilian population as part of the social compact, even if they have not funded or provided the aid themselves (South, 2011:35). A KYO leader involved in the delivery of humanitarian aid to IDPs inside Karen State who was interviewed as part of this study reported that donors insist he always explains where the aid is coming from and that it is not from the KNU, but despite this, the aid still legitimises the KNU in the recipients' eyes because the KNU have facilitated its delivery<sup>184</sup>.

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<sup>183</sup> Interview with Naw Zipporah Sein, KNU General Secretary, Mae Sot, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2010

<sup>184</sup> Interview with a KYO leader, Mae Sot, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

*“FBR (Free Burma Rangers) and other relief work is taken advantage of by the KNU to show they work for the Karen people.”<sup>185</sup>*

This last point has long been a politically sensitive issue for the KNU’s welfare wings and the international donors who fund them. It originated as an issue in the Karen refugee camps in the 1990s when the KNU was argued to be controlling the distribution of aid and using it to build its own legitimacy (Christopher, 1998 and Lee, 2001, in Thawngmung, 2008:22; Callahan, 2007:37). Some commentators also argued that the refugee camps in Thailand were KNU villages transplanted on to Thai soil, constituting a non-territorial basis of power for the organisation (Christopher, in Thawngmung, 2008:22). Likewise, the provision of cross-border aid from Thailand by organisations affiliated to the KNU has been argued to provide material support and legitimisation to the KNU, although there has been very little actual ‘aid leakage’ (South, 2011:41).

Whether external funding for governance services legitimises an armed opposition group or undermines it among the local population is dependent upon whether the group can continue to position itself between the local community and the provision of governance services (Mampilly, 2011:90). Although the KNU has been forced to partially sever its welfare wings in order to qualify for donor funding (they remain politically accountable to KNU leaders), the fact that the same staff continue to be present in the reformed organisations can also be seen as the effective insertion of KNU staff into NGO structures. Moreover, since Karen staff, not foreigners, continue to be responsible for the delivery and distribution of governance services inside Burma, to the local population there may be little difference in their perception of where aid comes from.

Although this is politically contentious, the provision of governance services may be very valuable to the civilian population in a conflict zone because, as Mampilly (2011:232-240) argues, stable rebel governance may decrease the humanitarian crisis and number of civilian deaths resulting from war-induced famine or health risks. It is also important to recognise that INGOs may have even less accountability to the local population than armed opposition groups and can leave a governance void when they withdraw from a country.

With Zipporah Sein as the current KNU General Secretary, the KNU has increasingly emphasised the role it plays not just as a defensive force for the protection of villagers in Karen State but as a conduit and provider of humanitarian aid to displaced populations. An open letter from Zipporah Sein to the US House of Representatives, Committee of Foreign Affairs demonstrates how the KNU attempts to build external legitimacy through its provision of governance services:

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<sup>185</sup> Interview with an NGO leader / KNU official / KYO leader. Mae Sot, 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2009

“The KNU controls and operates in significant territory in Karen State. We operate local services, including schools and clinics. We provide safety and security to people fleeing attacks by the Burmese Army. However, the United Nations and governments refuse to work with us in delivering humanitarian assistance, providing education and other assistance to the population, most of whom live in poverty. One reason given for this is that we are an armed group. However, the largest armed group in Burma is the dictatorship, and the United Nations and governments work with them, despite the fact that they are illegitimate and break international law. Our Army is to defend civilians, not attack them as the Burmese Army does. In addition, we respect human rights and support democracy, and are a democratic organisation. We have also offered to abide by monitoring rules and requirements set by the UN or other donors, and unlike the dictatorship, place no restrictions on the delivery of aid. It does not, therefore, seem logical to refuse to work with the KNU.” (KNU, 2009)

### **3 Factors affecting youths’ non-military work in the KNU**

#### ***Enabling factors***

By studying youth non-military activities in the KNU, this study indicates that there are at least five important factors enabling youths’ non-military work, which then help the KNU to achieve its political and strategic goals in Burma. First, the KNU’s externally funded organisations are reliant upon continued sanctuary in Thailand. As several scholars identify, where a neighbouring state is sympathetic, or unable to secure its borders, the presence of an international border can be crucial for an armed opposition group by providing a sanctuary space, enabling the group to develop and grow (Gates, 2002). It also alters the balance of power as armed opposition groups unconstrained by boundaries gain an advantage over government troops who must usually respect boundaries (Salehyan, 2007). However, this case shows that sanctuary is only advantageous to the non-military side of the KNU’s operations, as it is no longer allowed to bring weapons across the border or command its troops from Thai soil.

Second, mobile providers of governance services and mobile political outreach and community mobilising teams are dependent upon local support for hosting, feeding and managing the security of their staff, as well as facilitating the delivery of governance services through areas the KNU does not control. As a result, although the KNU is less reliant upon local taxation for its changed revenue streams, it remains reliant on non-material local support in the form of intelligence, recruits and legitimacy. This may explain why the KNU does not appear to be transforming into a more predatory group (judging by human rights reports from the region), despite its material reliance on external ‘rents’ from INGOs and the sale of natural resources for income.

Third, youth workers in the KNU are reliant upon the sanctuary granted by the difficult terrain of the borderlands for covert travel around Karen State. Fourth, they are reliant upon transnational funding and non-material organisational assistance (for example, IT training). Fifth, they appear to benefit from a relative lack of appropriate governance services provided by either the Burmese State or other groups claiming political authority in Karen State.

### ***Constraining factors***

This study found at least four factors constraining youths' non-military work, which then make it more difficult for the KNU to achieve its political and strategic goals in Burma. First, increasing pressure on the KNU by their Thai host is starting to affect youths' non-military activities as well as the KNU's military operations. The Thai government has an incentive to allow cross-border aid to continue from its territory in order to prevent more people migrating across its border, but it has also come under pressure from the Burmese regime to suppress the activities of the opposition groups on its soil, which may reduce cross-border activities in future (South, 2011:35; Fink, 2008:460). Second, declining territorial control and increasing poverty and displacement has resulted in a lack of educated youths joining the KNU, which makes the organisation and management of non-military work more difficult. At the time of research, many youths worked in several non-military roles concurrently with different organisations due to the lack of appropriately skilled recruits. Third, refugee resettlement has taken away a large chunk of the KNU's most skilled and experienced young staff and leaders. Fourth, negotiating funding for KNU youths' non-military work in Burma remains to some extent constrained by state bias among INGO donors.

## **4 Conclusion**

While chapters six and seven analysed internal organisational issues of social categories, inter-generational relations, recruitment, retention and exit among the youth cohort in the KNU, this chapter situated youths' non-military roles and activities in KNU-affiliated organisations within a context of changing strategies of conflict and state-making in eastern Burma. Analysis of the non-military roles that youths are involved in highlighted important political and social welfare roles of youths within an armed opposition group and demonstrated how the KNU's changing political and strategic goals have affected these. It also pointed to the factors that constrain or enable youths' non-military work and how these impact upon the achievement of the KNU's goals. Clearly there are important political and practical implications of these findings, which are discussed in the following, concluding chapter.

## **Chapter 9: Conclusions and implications: Youth participation patterns and non-military roles in the KNU**

This study focused on the non-military roles of youths within an armed opposition group. It aimed to show how micro level processes and broader structural conditions interact to shape youth roles and non-military participation within the KNU, which have in turn played a role in shaping the strategic orientation and activities of the organisation in its struggle against the Burmese state. It set out to understand these issues by exploring the central research question:

How and why do youths participate in non-military roles in the KNU, and what are the effects of their participation?

This question was divided into a set of three sub-questions:

1. How is 'youth' defined and understood in the KNU and why are they so defined?
2. Why do youths take on non-military roles in the KNU and what factors influence their career trajectory within the movement?
3. What is the purpose of youth non-military roles in the KNU and how are these roles shaped by the KNU's political and strategic goals?

The first part of the thesis focused on the broader literature on youth participation in armed opposition groups. Chapter two examined how the term 'youth' can be understood and how young people are involved in armed conflict. Although this study was concerned with youth involvement in a particular type of political armed opposition group, I drew on a broad body of literature concerned with young people's participation in a variety of forms of collective violence. It argued that youth participation in armed opposition groups is the product of a complex interplay of structural, organisational and individual factors which vary across time and space and are rooted in historical experiences of conflict in society. The chapter provided a tentative framework for analysing youth participation that aims to encompass the structural, organisational and individual dimensions of youth engagement, which also draws upon Hirschman's (1970) ideas of exit, voice and loyalty in institutions.

Chapter three focused in more detail on the nature of armed opposition groups, arguing that there is a need to appreciate the particular characteristic of opposition groups in the context of protracted peripheral conflicts. The starting point for this analysis was the nature of the central state and the dialectical relationship between centre and periphery, state and non state. An historical, political economy perspective on state formation and

state-making practices on the periphery yielded insights into how and why armed groups in the periphery violently contest the state and lay claim to public authority.

Chapter four outlined the research methodology and argued that a mix of anthropology-based research methods were most appropriate. The chapter then describes the fieldwork period, the challenges and limitations arising as a result of the methodology adopted and how they were met or mitigated.

The focus shifted in chapter five to an analysis of the KNU and its conflict with the Burmese state. It explained the outbreak of conflict as the result of ethnocratic state-making in the centre and a legacy of self-rule in the borderlands, resulting in marginalised Karen elites entering into an alliance with borderland peasants to repel Burmese state-making. The chapter then examined changing modes of state-making and contestation between the Burmese state and the KNU. It argued that incomplete and fractured state-making practices have resulted in a complex mosaic of sovereignty and control in the borderlands and examined the nature of conflict, control and youth political action in four different zones.

Chapter six proceeded to address the first research sub-question: How is 'youth' defined and understood in the KNU and why are they so defined? It argued that a constellation of factors combined to induce the KNU to focus on regenerating its ageing political leadership through the creation of a youth wing. The chapter then analysed the effects the creation of a youth category has had on inter-generational relations and youth voice in the KNU.

Chapter seven addressed the second research sub-question: Why do youths take on non-military roles in the KNU and what factors influence their career trajectory within the movement? It built on the four different zones of governance and control identified in chapter five and the framework of participation factors developed in chapter two to examine youth participation patterns from recruitment to exit.

Chapter eight addressed the third research sub-question: What is the purpose of youth non-military roles to the KNU and how are these roles shaped by the KNU's political and strategic goals? By examining the KNU through the lens of youth programmes and activities, the research highlights the interaction between internal organisational dynamics and shifting structural conditions at the international, national and local levels. It shows how the growing significance of youth within the KNU has paralleled the growth of the welfare and humanitarian arms of the organisation, which in turn is a reflection of strategic adaptation in the light of shifts in the Burmese state's own state-making practices. The

main findings are discussed in more detail after a brief summary of the background to the case. This is followed by the thesis's contribution to the wider literature and policy implications.

### ***Background to the case***

The approach adopted in this study was an analysis of youth participation situated within a historical context of state-making and peripheral conflict. The analysis of state formation in Burma in chapter five argued that since independence from colonial rule, ethnic politics and violent practices of state formation have displaced pre-colonial power-holders, traditional agrarian relations and peasant control of land, contributing to conflict. The KNU is an exceptionally long-running, ethno-nationalist armed group with a degree of public authority in eastern Burma. After independence, it quickly became a significant power-holder, controlling large swathes of territory, resources and black market trade in the eastern borderlands, almost creating a *de facto* state in the process. However, after the Cold War ended, policies and priorities directed towards the borderland armed groups from the Burmese state and its neighbours changed. The Burmese state controlled and limited access to rents and used these to co-opt locally and regionally powerful armed actors, including elements of the KNU and its military wing.

Since the early 1990s, the Burmese state has relied upon patrimonial politics to build its power base and militarisation and counter insurgency to strengthen its grip over the borderland areas. As a result, the KNU has declined in power and territorial control, splintered into competing armed militias and suffered from crises of leadership. Symptomatic of this decline is the division of areas where they operate into four different spaces of governance and control in eastern Burma and the Thai border area: government controlled 'white zones'; partially-securitised areas with multiple, overlapping claims to authority by different armed groups; KNU-controlled areas; and exile spaces in Thailand. Facing a changing context of conflict and state-making, the KNU has been forced to adapt its strategies of reproduction and legitimacy-building. Its political and governance activities are a key mode of contesting Burmese state-making practices with a number of important non-military roles for youths.

## **1 Key findings and contributions of this thesis to the research literature**

### **a) Creating 'youth' in the KNU: the influence of history, geography and conflict**

This research project sought to understand why there was a specific 'youth' category in a context of armed opposition to a state, how it was constructed and how it is affected by the changing dynamics of conflict. Chapter six found that 'youth' in the KNU is a particular

construction referring to males and females between the ages of 15 and 35 which also interacts with other social categories including gender, religion, locale and language group. For example, being a youth in an ethno-nationalist armed group like the KNU means being an ethnic *Karen* youth. In practice, in the youth wing, it often also means being a *male* youth since female youths gravitate towards the women's wing. Although the KNU uses a defined age range to refer to its youth category, as Durham (2000) argues, the term 'youth' is more an indicator of social relations than an absolute reference to a fixed age group. As explored in chapter six, youths are explicitly positioned by the KNU as nascent political leaders subordinate to elder political and military leaders until they transition into the parent party.

As previous studies of youth in conflict have argued (e.g. McIntyre, 2006; Fithen & Richards, 2005; Parsons, 2004; Marks, 2001), this study found that the term 'youth' in an armed group is very much a social construction, which serve particular institutional and ideological functions. However, it is also argued that the construction and positioning of a 'youth' category is influenced by the organisational history of the group. Although the KNU had an identifiable 'youth' category at the time of research, in its early days a politicised and powerful youth wing posed a threat to the leadership resulting in the KNU operating without a youth wing for the next forty years. A number of factors coalesced to compel the KNU to reform its youth wing in the 1980s as a result of a changing international context, shifts in the state-making and counter-insurgency strategies of the Burmese state and political repression in urban areas. The crises that ensued in the KNU resulted in a leadership re-shuffle which worked in favour of younger generations as key patrons of the 'youth' cohort gained ascendancy. However, when the KNU reformed its youth wing, fear of factionalism and the potential threat of a powerful 'youth' cohort influenced the way it positioned its 'youth' cadres, resulting in a particular construction of 'youth' which politicised but did not militarise young people's roles. This effect is less well known because previous studies of armed groups have tended to consider how the category of youth is used to rally younger generations for violence (For example, Fithen & Richards, 2005; Parsons, 2004).

Rather than simply being a defined age range, Durham (2000) argues that youth categories are socially constructed and relational constructs which serve to regulate social interaction by age. This is supported to some extent by the research but it presents a more nuanced picture which on the one hand shows how the KNU aims to regulate political actions of the 15-35 age cohort, and on the other, how a youth wing can negotiate some political and operational autonomy. Although the youth wing of the KNU is politically constrained by a

parent organisation that seeks to shape its behaviour, I have argued that there are a number of ways in which it operates with some political and operational autonomy. First, younger participants occupy positions of authority and influence in KNU structures in their own right. Second, the constitution of youths in the KNU as a nascent political leadership as well as representatives of their peers resulted in youth leaders being granted some voting power over KNU policies. Third, since the KNU has used the youth wing to mobilise the local Karen population in eastern Burma, they have empowered youths to represent the organisation. This empowerment is negotiated within KNU structures as youth and elder leaders try to agree on the 'proper' degree of political voice and influence, maintaining a fine balance between youth autonomy and constraint.

It is an area of particular concern for non-military KNU-affiliated organisations in Thailand because socialisation of youth participants in a different political and cultural context, increasing contact with Western INGOs and greater political and operational freedom has contributed to generational tension. Furthermore, youth organisations and activities have expanded outside those initially proscribed by the party leadership which has limited the KNU's coercive power over its youth cohort. Thus, while youths may initially have been constituted as politically active but subordinate to the elder leadership, the changing context of conflict over time as well as differences in the geographic space of the KNU's operations have changed inter-generational relations and the internal distribution of power such that those categorised as 'youths' also operate now as political agents in their own right. As a result, it is clear from this study that a 'youth' category constructed within an armed opposition group is dynamic and partly influenced by factors outside the group's control.

Where an armed opposition group operates in an area of INGO activity, INGOs themselves can be an influencing factor. This case demonstrated that the political and operational developments of youth organisations are not just shaped by the parent party but also by INGO donors and external interventions. Hence, although a youth wing may often appear to be subservient to party elders, this case supports Nolte's (2004) and Leao's (2004) argument that young participants may also have a fair amount of autonomy in their day to day operations. Non-military youth cadres within an armed opposition group should therefore be conceptualised as actors subject to hierarchical structures of control influenced by generational relations and the nature and organisational history of the group, but also as actors with some capacity for independent action. Or, as Jabri (1996:70) argues, while individuals may be purposive actors, they also act within institutions which constrain and legitimate decisions depending on the dynamics of the situation.

Besides organisational history, the changing dynamics of conflict and differences in the geographic space of the KNU's operations, a range of other key factors shaped patterns of youth recruitment for non-military roles within the group.

#### **b) Mobilising youths from recruitment to exit**

Chapter two argued that much is now known about how young people are recruited into and participate in military roles in armed opposition groups but less is known about those participating in non-military roles. However, this thesis argues that non-military youth cadres are important participants in an armed opposition group because of the roles they play in building the group's legitimacy and regenerating its political leadership. As such, an armed opposition group needs to mobilise and manage the career progression of non-military youth recruits. Since the KNU operates in multiple zones with differing patterns of governance and control, chapter seven examined patterns of youth recruitment and progression in each of the four zones previously identified.

#### ***Youth recruitment into the KNU: the interplay of individual motivations, group needs and local conditions***

Life histories of young participants and interviews with KNU recruiters revealed that many participants cite grievances with agents of the Burmese state (usually the army) as reasons for joining the KNU (see page 190). Recruiters stated that grievances often combined with local political desires to pressure the state to reform or drive its armed forces out of the borderlands in order to regain self-rule (see page 200). However, interviews with recruiters and an examination of the secondary literature (cf: KHRG, 2009:191) suggest that most young people in areas close to KNU organisations do not join up and outmigration is a more common response.

More compelling reasons for joining were local histories and links to the KNU, whether this was through close proximity to the group; family, friendship or community ties, or through outreach work by armed group recruiters. The context and history of the KNU's territorial control were important factors because in areas where the KNU still retained a presence, its discourses framing participation were well-instituted and youths appeared to view their participation as akin to civil service. In other areas, village, family or individual links to the KNU facilitated youth participation. As Humphries and Weinstein (2006:449 in Mampilly, 2011:218) argue, when individuals have community ties to an armed opposition group they are more likely to join.

Interestingly, close links to the group were found in this case to have little effect on young people in refugee camps resulting in very small numbers of recruits joining from the

camps. (pages 205-206). In this case, the lack of refugee recruitment into the KNU appeared to be due to differences in the governance regime of refugees' lives in Thailand and the presence of resettlement opportunities. Constraints on political campaigning by the KNU in Thailand further inhibited recruitment both from the refugee camps and among migrant workers in Thailand. This finding is surprising given the number of academic studies of 'refugee warriors' which highlight the role that refugee camps play in providing base camps and a pool of recruits to armed opposition group (Lischer, 2005; Loescher *et al.*, 2007). This research found that a very different local context of young people's lives in the refugee camps, as well as the presence of resettlement opportunities effectively limited their voluntary participation in the group.

This research also added a new insight into how armed group recruiters view refugees. Chapter seven argued that refugees are not necessarily the most desirable recruits for an armed group because, despite their higher levels of education, they may be the least loyal to the organisation, which results in high staff turnover and a loss of skilled workers. Thus, as Terry (2002) argues, the chief benefit of a refugee population to an armed group is not the pool of recruits they provide, but the legitimising function they serve.

By examining how young people came to participate in the KNU from very different areas of Burma, this research indicated that localised histories and differences in governance and control significantly affect the way in which young people are recruited into and retained by armed opposition groups, as Kalyvas and Kocher (2007) and Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) suggest. As a result, for an armed opposition group which operates in multiple zones there are multiple patterns of participation among the youth cohort. However, individual motivations and life decisions were also significant. Thus, as Long's (1992) actor-oriented approach suggests, youth participation in an armed opposition group is best understood as a complex interaction between individuals, groups and social structures.

### ***Matching recruits to non-military roles: the importance of education***

In seeking to understand which youths were directed into non-military roles, this study found that education is closely linked to patterns of youth participation. Youths are incentivised to access alternative education opportunities provided by KNU-affiliated organisations as a result of the lack of appropriate education services provided by the Burmese state (pages 190-194). Chapter seven found that a youth's education level was then instrumental in determining the eventual role they took on once recruited. More educated youths joined higher levels of KNU structures and were directed into management and leadership roles, political roles or work within the KNU's welfare wings. As a result, youths from more stable areas and/or more wealthy family backgrounds

dominate in non-military and management roles while youths from conflict zones/IDP areas appear to be more prevalent in lower skilled and military roles, despite forming the majority of recruits. However, this was not the sole influencing factor; once again, Long's (1992) positioning of actors as individuals whose behaviour is mediated by external conditions was demonstrated in this case as a young person's education level also combined with their own interests, the institutional needs of the KNU and broader cultural norms concerning gender roles (pages 206-209).

### ***Who is selected for political leadership training? The influence of loyalty, ethnicity and education***

Education patterns are also significant in understanding the progression of recruits from military to non-military roles. Life histories with young, former soldiers and interviews with KNU recruiters indicated that since the organisation has a great shortage of highly educated recruits in non-military leadership and managerial positions, highly educated youths in the military were permitted and even encouraged to transition into non-military roles (see pages 174 and 208).

Education was specifically used as a tool to recruit and train the KNU's next generation of political leaders. This study revealed patterns of leadership regeneration and youth career progression in the KNU by examining youth leadership training process in chapter eight (pages 225-230). Key factors influencing which youths were directed into leadership training programmes were found to be loyalty, ethnicity and education. Youths resident in refugee camps were less likely to be admitted to leadership training through KNU structures because they were far more likely to exit on resettlement programmes, while youths living in areas which are not loyal to the KNU were less likely to be trusted by recruiters. Since ethnicity is believed to be one indicator of political allegiance, only ethnic-Karen youths were accepted into leadership training programmes. Entry to political leadership training was also dependent on having a relatively high level of education, which perpetuates a pattern of middle class, Christian leadership due to the linkages of religion with schooling provision in eastern Burma.

### ***The interplay of exit, voice and loyalty among the youth cohort***

Chapter two found that few studies have considered how young participants exit an armed opposition group. This study aimed to address this gap in knowledge by examining non-militarised youth exit from the KNU (pages 213-216). It found that differing political, economic and governance contexts in the multiple spaces of KNU operations resulted in different exit patterns. Poverty and a lack of energy and interest (due to long working hours

in occupations outside the KNU and the protracted nature of conflict) appeared to be significant in explaining youth exit in Burma, while exit for work in INGOs or to a third country through the refugee resettlement programme were more significant among youths in Thailand. These findings indicate that young recruits are not permanently tied to armed groups and that exit is fundamentally linked to territorial control. Without stringent territorial control an armed opposition group cannot control exit.

The relationship between voice, loyalty and exit among younger generations of an armed opposition group is also under-theorised. By using Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice and loyalty in organisations, this thesis argued that the presence of easy exit options can give youth cadres more voice in an armed opposition group. However, this is likely only to be the case if the armed group tries to prevent exit by nurturing loyalty and allowing more voice so that members feel they have a stake in the group's goals and direction. An armed group is likely to focus on nurturing loyalty if other, more coercive methods or material incentives to maximise retention are not possible. This was the case for the KNU because its coercive power and financial resources were in decline. As Hirschman (1970:92-93) argues, instituting mechanisms for members to voice their opinions is in a group's long-term interest because it enables it to respond and adapt to changing concerns, however, as yet there is no evidence to suggest that this will prevent factionalism in the KNU.

### **c) Non-military youth roles in the KNU: leadership regeneration and legitimacy building**

A non-militarised 'youth' category may be more important to an armed opposition group which dedicates greater resources to its non-military operations and internal bureaucracy. The internal organisation of armed opposition groups, including the skill and style of its leadership have previously been found to be important factors in determining when armed groups can mount and maintain an effective challenge to the state (Guevara, 2001; Weinstein, 2007; Clapham, 1998). However, chapter three found that relatively few studies focus on the internal management and organisational structure in such groups (Gates, 2002).

Chapter eight examined the purpose of youths' non-military roles in the KNU and how they are shaped by the organisation's political and strategic goals. It found that although the KNU's youth wing was re-convened to regenerate its political leadership, the changing dynamics of conflict resulted in three key non-military roles for the KNU's youth cohort: regenerating political leadership for the KNU; brokering the KNU's internal and external legitimacy; and providing social welfare services linked to the KNU's governance strategies.

### ***Regenerating political leaders in practice: The influence of organisational leadership and history, gender norms and INGOs***

Some studies (for example, Twum-Danso, 2004; Leao, 2004; Nolte, 2004, Parsons, 2004) have found that armed groups regenerate themselves long term through their youth wings. This research added a new insight into the regeneration process by examining the factors that combine to induce an armed opposition group to focus on political leadership regeneration. It also added a detailed insight into how youth leadership training is conducted by an armed opposition group's youth wing and women's wing in practice. An examination of the KNU's leadership training programmes in this study found that while leadership regeneration is important to an armed opposition group seeking longevity, the skill and style of the group's political leadership and outside sources of funding affect its youth training processes (see pages 225-230).

Chapter eight argued that youth leadership training is affected by the presence of INGO funding streams. Competing training needs for young participants in KNU organisations funded by INGOs can result in youths developing the skills necessary for liaison with external donors but inadequate for political leadership. It also argued that leadership regeneration is likely to be affected by patterns of recruitment for youth leadership training programmes. In this case, these favoured educated, middle class youths from particular regions, religions and ethnicities.

Despite these challenges, this study argued that incorporating young political leaders into an armed opposition group can result in increased political representation of younger generations. But it also pointed to how these advances are affected by institutionalised gender biases and organisational histories of military and elder domination in the group's political leadership.

Youths in political leadership training processes are important to the internal regeneration of an armed opposition group, but this study found that youths are also important in roles related to building the armed group's legitimacy.

#### ***Youth brokers of an armed opposition group's legitimacy***

A specific 'youth' category may have initially been created to regenerate the political leadership of the KNU, but this study found that the changing dynamics of conflict over time have resulted in its youth wing taking on roles as brokers of the organisation's internal and external legitimacy.

#### **Youth as internal brokers of legitimacy**

Chapter three argued that groups aiming for longevity who are reliant on a form of local taxation and support (whether cash or in kind) must build both their legitimacy and a public fear of penalties should people refuse to pay their taxes (Naylor, 2004). They have to distinguish their legitimacy from that of the state, with whom they compete for territory, populations and resources (Naylor, 2004). As Mao and Guevara argued, an important way to build legitimacy is to communicate the goals of the group to the civilian population and mobilise support for the group's political agenda (Boudreau, 2002; Winthrop and Graff, 2010; Mampilly, 2011:13).

The role of youth cadres in shoring up grassroots support for armed opposition groups is well known (for example, Leao, 2004; Nolte, 2004). Wickham-Crowley's (1992) study of revolutions finds that the way in which armed groups often do this is by using the skills of unusually well educated participants from rural areas who can move through many social worlds communicating with different people, thereby reducing the 'social distance' between guerrillas and peasant supporters.

Chapter eight argued that as the KNU's armed wings and organising department have declined in size and reach, its youth wing has taken on many of their community mobilising functions, especially among younger generations (see page 230-236). Youth community organisers traverse large areas of eastern Burma conducting political training workshops for youths and managing the flow of political ideology and strategy between the KNU and its civilian support base. They also reproduce the political culture of the KNU and its representations of sovereignty, for example, by singing the KNU's 'national anthem' and displaying the KNU's 'national' flag at training events. Effectively they are 'brokers' of the KNU's internal legitimacy.

This study found four factors which made the KNU's youth cohort more suited to mobilising youth cadres within the grassroots community than their elder counterparts: the scale and reach of youth networks; the greater strength and energy of youths, as well as their lack of dependants; the existence of social roles for village youth groups, which can act as a cover for political training; and their ability to liaise with civilian youth as peers.

#### Youths as external brokers of legitimacy

Chapter three argued that in Terry's (2002) analysis of humanitarian aid, the primary benefit of a refugee population to an armed opposition group is the external legitimacy function they serve, raising the profile of a 'victimised' population and attracting both sympathy and aid. Chapter five found that the KNU's welfare wings have not only attracted external aid for services to refugee populations but have also managed to extend this to deliver

governance services to populations inside eastern Burma. Critical to this process is the role of ‘external brokers’ who mediate between INGO donors, the KNU and the recipient population.

This is critical to the KNU because INGO funding is important for the continued provision of governance services by armed opposition groups with limited resources of their own. However, organisations affiliated to armed opposition groups struggle to build their legitimacy among external funders as a result of their political ties. This study showed how the KNU’s youth and welfare wings have largely been reformulated as local NGOs or CBOs in order to qualify for INGO funding (see page 246). External brokers then manage funding relationships with external donors and welfare service provision relationships with the local population, but also remain politically accountable to the KNU. This situation requires brokers to represent their organisation in different ways to different stakeholders.

This study builds on Mosse and Lewis’s (2006:16) concept of ‘brokers’ in development projects, discussed in chapter three by showing how youth brokers manage relationships with external donors and the legitimacy of organisations affiliated to armed opposition groups. External brokers manage flows of funds and services and negotiate representations of meanings, policies and priorities in order to build coherent projects.

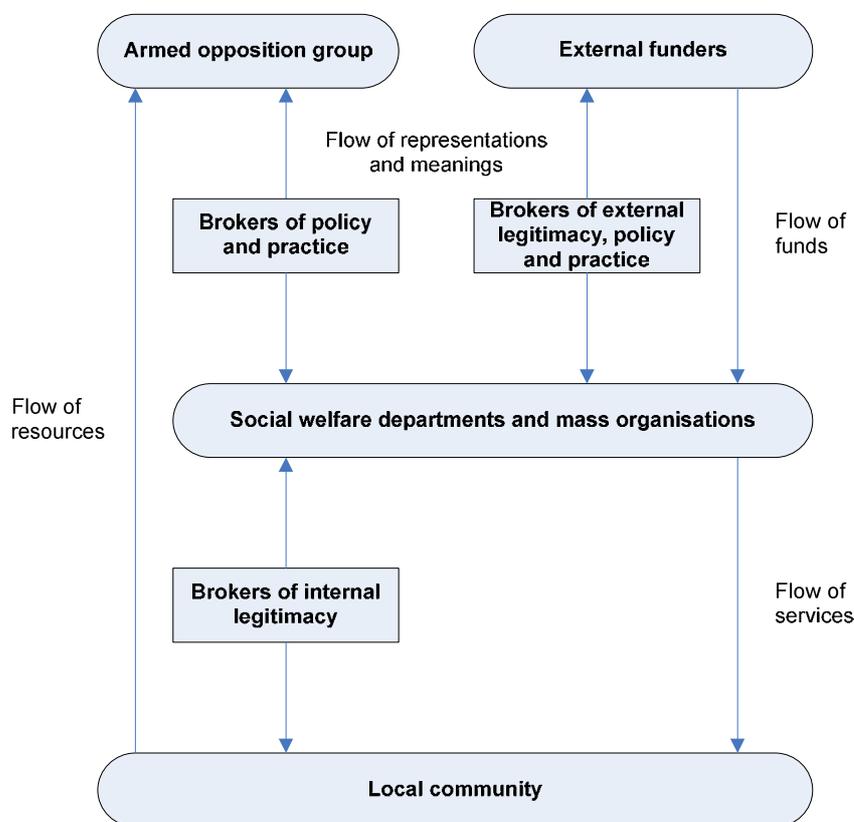


Figure 155 Strategic positions of brokers linked to an armed opposition group

Chapter eight found that depending on whether they are brokering internal or external legitimacy, different skills are required of these young brokers, but both are reliant upon the participation of highly educated recruits. Internal brokers need to convey political ideas and be able to relate both to the armed group's leadership and the local population, thus, participants drawn from the local population but who have received a high level of education are ideal. External brokers need to be able to communicate with external funders in English, using the language of INGOs and through the medium of IT. As a result, an armed opposition group may devote significant resources to recruiting and training non-military youths in these skills.

The significance of this role may be demonstrated by examining an armed opposition group's funding streams. Chapter five found that the KNU's education, health and IDP departments received combined INGO funding more than four times the revenue of the KNU's central treasury (page 148). Furthermore, the headcount of non-military KNU-affiliated staff is many times that of its military wings (page 207). The youth wing itself has approximately the same number of active youth workers as the KNU's army (KNLA). This indicates that many more youths are needed to participate in non-military than military roles.

### ***Governance and Legitimacy: Youth providers of an armed group's governance services***

External brokers of an armed opposition group's legitimacy are particularly important in situations where the group is reliant upon external funding for part of its operations. In this case, the KNU is reliant upon INGO funding for its governance services. Chapter three argued that secessionist and ethno-nationalist armed groups intent on securing regional autonomy were found to be particularly likely to establish governance systems. This is because they have to rely on and convince a specific ethnic or national group that they offer a better alternative than the state (Mampilly, 2007:31; Weinstein, 2007). Entire administrative systems may be established in addition to the military as power-holders seek to prove their capacity for governance and provide collective benefits to their supporters in order to build legitimacy (Weinstein, 2007).

Even when an armed group no longer funds these services itself and partially severs its welfare wings to allow them to qualify for INGO funding, this study found some indications that it can continue to accrue legitimacy among the civilian population just by facilitating the provision of services. This can buttress an armed opposition group's claims to represent the population, thereby building its external legitimacy (Mampilly, 2011:31).

This study examined how youths are involved in the provision of education and humanitarian relief services. While it did not find any particular advantage to having youths in this role, it gave a detailed picture of how the provision of governance services builds an armed opposition group's legitimacy. Chapter eight argued that young people involved in the provision of governance services effectively challenge central state-making practices by transmitting alternative information, narratives, symbols and ideas and providing assistance that helps local populations to live outside the reach of the state (see pages 251-253).

This study added a new insight into how an armed opposition group can change its modes of governance provision as it loses territorial control. Naylor's (2004) study showed how armed opposition groups bureaucratise and expand their non-military activities as they progress from roving bandits to fully established governance regimes, but it did not explain what happens as an armed group loses territory. This study found that although the KNU has declining territorial control its governance services have not contracted. Instead, it showed how an armed opposition group's governance services may continue despite the loss of territory and resources by adapting to the international aid agenda and partnering with INGOs. As Zahar, (2001, in Mampilly, 2011:89) argues, armed opposition groups with a more limited resource base have a strong incentive to develop relations with transnational actors in order to generate revenues. As a result, chapter three argued that many armed opposition groups rely to an extent on external aid for the funding of their governance services (Bob, 2006, in Mampilly, 2007:37).

While armed opposition groups and INGOs may work together to deliver governance services in conflict-affected areas they have different intentions. INGOs seek to provide welfare and humanitarian services to a civilian population and may inadvertently undermine the state in the process, while armed opposition groups intentionally seek to undermine certain aspects of state-making by providing alternative welfare and humanitarian services (and the messages they contain) to the civilian population. As Mampilly (2007) argues, the provision of governance is a strategic decision to garner civilian consent for rebel rule. Youths (and INGOs) involved in the provision of these services are, therefore, involved in processes which monopolise the social, political and economic inter-relations of a defined community (Mampilly, 2011:237).

Mampilly (2011) argues that armed opposition groups have sought to claim legitimacy by mimicking state sovereignty, but this study found that changing theoretical approaches to state sovereignty as state capacity to meet the human needs of its population, rather than political independence are also mimicked by armed groups adapting to new 'technologies of rebellion' (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010). Armed opposition groups may claim legitimacy,

even sovereignty, on the basis that their governance services meet the obligations of a state to its civilian population in the state's absence or neglect. This case therefore demonstrates the argument made in chapter three that a reified and absolutist understanding of the state and sovereignty is unhelpful in understanding conflict and power in the peripheries of developing states since armed opposition groups may be intimately involved in the provision of alternative forms of rule and regulation.

Although it has previously been assumed that territorial control is essential to the provision of governance services by armed groups (Mampilly, 2007:245), this case demonstrates that territorial control is not essential. The KNU's governance services were delivered as mobile services when territorial control made fixed services impossible by adapting methods of guerrilla warfare already familiar to the KNU and local populations (pages 250-251). This reduced the need for fixed positions in Burma, however, it is dependent upon a relatively stable sanctuary and delivery routes from Thailand. This finding adds an important new dimension to understanding the 'geography of conflict' (Herbst, 2000). The military benefits of difficult terrain and sanctuary in neighbouring countries are already well known (Herbst, 2000; Salehyan, 2010; Gates, 2002), but this case demonstrates that they have important non-military advantages to an armed opposition group too. It showed how they are critical to internal processes of leadership regeneration, management and organisation of the group's bureaucracy (especially INGO revenue raising and reporting processes) and the delivery of governance services.

## **2 Policy implications**

The numbers and significance of youths working in non-military roles in this case suggests that militarised youth should not be the only focus in theory and policies concerned with armed opposition groups. Sustaining and regenerating the organisation through long-term external and internal changes are just as important as the armed war, as is building the legitimacy of the group in order to signal its strength to the state and win non-military concessions. Youths working to achieve these goals are, therefore, at the nexus of processes of contestation over state-making. Where this work is funded by INGOs there are important policy implications.

### ***INGOs, governance services and armed opposition groups***

By becoming involved in the provision of governance services with armed opposition groups, INGOs are directly involved in processes of political contestation. This is a politically contentious point because of state bias in external approaches to armed opposition groups (Mampilly, 2011:243). The political nature of providing external funding

to organisations linked to armed opposition groups has been discussed at length in the humanitarian aid literature and has previously arisen as a source of concern among organisations providing aid to Karen refugees in Thailand (Thawngmung, 2008:22; Callahan, 2007:37). However it is also important to recognise that the political ramifications of subverting armed opposition groups' political authority or providing aid through a predatory form of state are examined in much less detail. As Mampilly (2011) argues, one way to deal with this issue is to prioritise the welfare and viewpoints of civilians and recognise the politics of all humanitarian interventions, rather than approaching the subject with a bias towards the state.

It may be more problematic to ignore the political origins of humanitarian interventions and social problems that organisations affiliated to armed opposition groups work to address because, as this case found, it can lead organisations to mask the political side of their operations to donors. Such organisations may themselves prefer to work with INGOs to address the political causes of social problems, not just its effects.

INGOs may be in a unique position to influence political processes in armed opposition groups. This study found that INGOs working with such groups have opportunities to support the political empowerment of youths and effect positive social and political change, for example by advocating gender equality. In the Burmese context, the same approach could be taken to address ethnic divisions. Publically challenging ethnic divisions remains difficult for youth leaders in the KNU, even while they privately express recognition of the problem. In this respect, they effectively reproduce the ethno-nationalist political culture of the group, however, this should not be taken to mean they blindly follow the parent party. As Jeffrey (2012:250) points out, "young people's involvement in reproducing and deepening established structures of power is never a consequence of their being simply brainwashed...political action always involves compromise". In working with youths affiliated to armed opposition groups, however, it is important for INGOs to recognise that there are unavoidable political hierarchies and relationships to the parent party which youth leaders must negotiate as part of their operations. In a highly militarised and politicised context of conflict it is very difficult for any organisation to operate independently of political and military power holders. This may be of concern to INGOs but the operational and political limitations of work in conflict zones need not necessarily preclude outside support.

### ***Youth in war to peace transitions in Burma***

Currently in Burma there is an unprecedented level of political change. The political capacity of a youth wing like the KYO can have both positive and negative implications for

any imminent war to peace transitions. First, political cadres need different types of programmes from the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes directed towards military cadres. Second, they can affect fragile political processes because of their high levels of political awareness and experience in political campaigning and community mobilising. They have the capacity to be a force for positive change, but as McEvoy-Levy (2006) points out, they are often neglected in political agreements at the elite level. They are also often expected to return to pre-war inter-generational relations, but as this case demonstrates, young participants working for the KNU in exile in Thailand have experienced a substantial increase in political freedom and may be unwilling to give these gains up. These issues could usefully be addressed in multi-party discussions around how peace processes both affect and are affected by young participants in armed opposition groups.

In the post-conflict period the skills and experience of participants in armed opposition groups like the KNU could usefully be transformed for peace-building and state-building purposes. The KNU may transform into a recognised political party and retain a youth wing in a purely political role. Alternatively its youth and women's wings, as well as its social welfare wings, could transfer into sub-state governance structures or become fully independent NGOs.

In the meantime, this case shows how improving bilateral relations between host and home countries can put increasing pressure on an exiled armed opposition group. While host pressure may force it to the negotiating table, the Burmese case indicates that without a political settlement it is unlikely to stem the flow of refugees and migrant workers. Host policies preventing political campaigning and recruitment appear, in this case, to be quite effective at preventing the recruitment and retention of youths into armed opposition groups. The provision of education in refugee camps may also divert youths away from armed groups. This case found that young people access education provided by the KNU to fill the gap in state provision in Burma. This indicates that if the state or another provider were to provide more appropriate and accessible education services, there may be less of an incentive for youths to seek education through armed opposition groups.

### **3 Conclusion**

This thesis has provided a corrective to mainstream accounts of youth participation in armed opposition groups which have focused primarily on their violent actions to the detriment of understanding their participation patterns in non-violent roles and the effects these have. It used a case study of youths working in the youth and welfare wings of an armed opposition group to analyse the complex interactions shaping individual decision

making. These include the changing nature of conflict, processes of state formation, violent non-state resistance, and evolving organisational adaptation by the KNU and its leadership. It also took in to account local histories of conflict and state-making, as well as the nature of the central state in ethno-nationalist peripheral conflicts. By studying the non-military activities of an armed opposition group, this research highlighted how micro level processes and broader structural conditions interact to shape youth roles and non-military participation within the KNU, which have in turn played a role in shaping the strategic orientation and activities of the organisation in its struggle against the Burmese state.

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## **APPENDIX A. Guideline Life History Questions for participants**

Name, age, occupation, parents occupations, region of origin, village/town, highest level of education, number of siblings, religion (and parents religion), ethnicity (and parents ethnicity)

Who is a 'Karen'? *Explore*

Who is a 'youth'? *Explore*

Why did you join this organisation?

What did you do prior to joining the organisation (e.g. other organisational job, work, school etc.) – *Explore individual characteristics and situation*

(What was the structural context they were living in? – *Explore number of times village had been attacked or displaced, frequency of attacks, village and family wealth, location of village and proximity to armed groups*)

Did your parents or anyone in your village work for the Karen movement? - *Explore cultural framing of participation*

Did your friends join the movement? (If so, what did they join? If not, why not?) – *Explore peer influence*

What job do you do in this organisation?

What tasks does the job entail?

What else do you do/are you responsible for?

How did you come to do this job in particular?

Why is this job done by 'youths' (compared to adults)?

What difficulties do you encounter when carrying out your work?

What do you enjoy about your work?

What jobs have you done in the past?

What do you think you will do in the future? (Next year, after 4 years, after 10 years)

What is your ambition?

Which aspects of your work are conducted in Thailand and which in Burma and why?

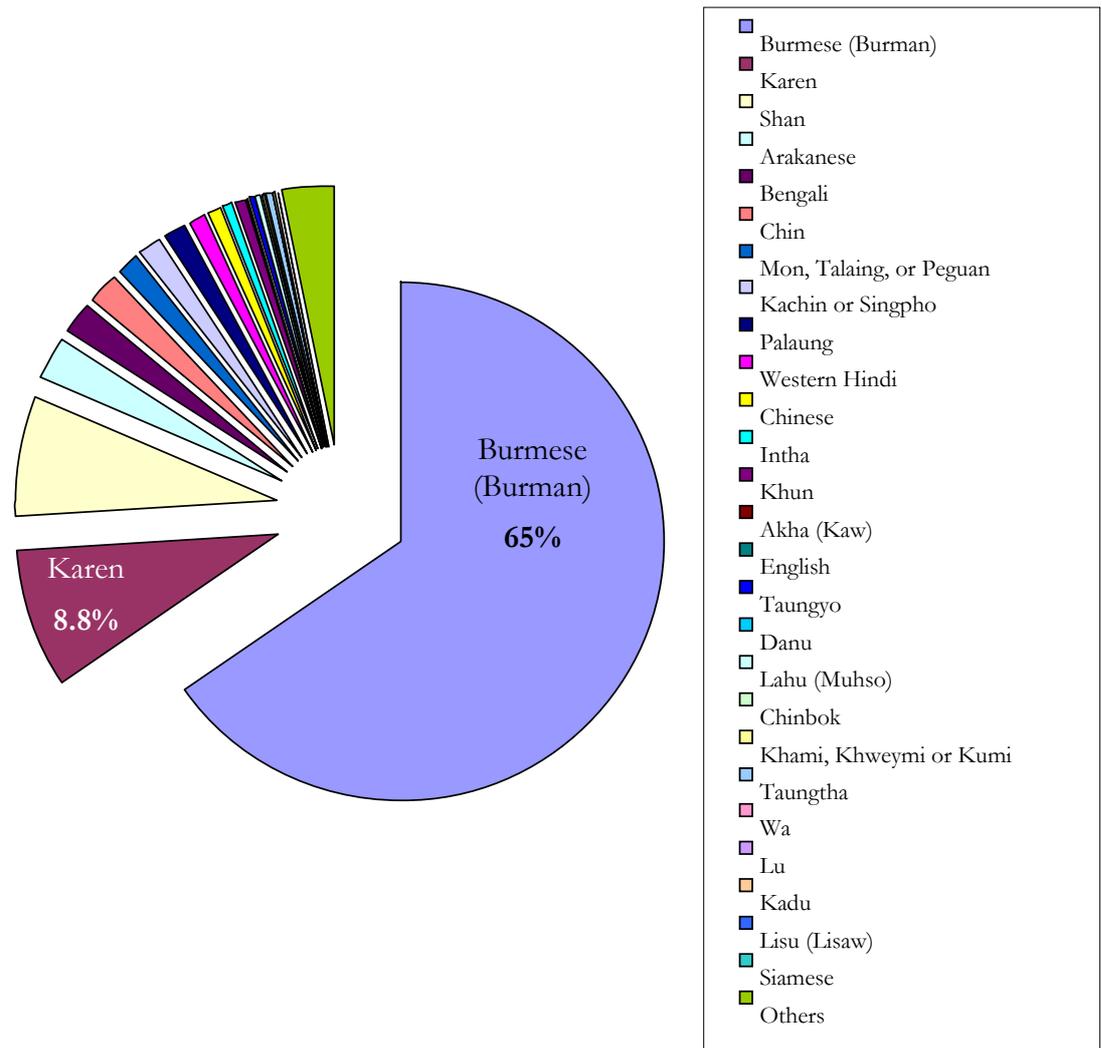
What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing your work in Thailand/Burma?

**APPENDIX B. Biographical data of life history or in-depth interviews with youths**

Number of youths who participated in life history interviews or in-depth interviews	35	
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Number of interviewees who identified as S'gaw Karen	28	80%
Number of interviewees who identified as Pwo Karen	3	9%
Number of interviewees who identified as mixed S'gaw and Pwo Karen	4	11%
<b>Gender</b>		
Number of male youths interviewed	26	74%
Number of female youths interviewed	9	26%
<b>Age</b>		
Average age of all youths interviewed	29	
Average age of all youths interviewed at the time they were first recruited in to a KNU-affiliated organisation	21	
<b>Education level</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who had finished Grade Ten schooling	32	91%
Number of youths interviewed who had finished a post-ten further education programme	19	54%
Number of youths interviewed who had a post Grade-Ten Diploma	1	3%
Number of youths interviewed who had a Bachelors degree	3	9%
Number of youths interviewed who had a Masters degree	1	3%
Number of youths interviewed who had received further education at KYO school (KYLMTIC/KYDC)	7	20%
<b>Religion</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who identified as Christian - Baptist	22	63%
Number of youths interviewed who identified as Christian - Seventh Day Adventist	1	3%
Number of youths interviewed who identified as Christian - Catholic	5	14%
Number of youths interviewed who identified as Buddhist	4	11%
Number of youths interviewed who identified as Animist	1	3%
<b>Personal connections to the KNU prior to recruitment</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who had a family member also working	22	63%

in the KNU at the time of recruitment		
Number of youths interviewed who had friends working in the KNU at the time of recruitment	28	80%
<b>Experience of serious political abuse</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who had experienced their home being attacked	18	51%
Number of youths interviewed who had a family member who had been killed/tortured by an armed group	9	26%
Number of youths interviewed who had been internally displaced	15	43%
<b>Military experience</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who had ever been a soldier	3	9%
Number of youths interviewed who had done military training with the KNLA	7	20%
<b>Occupation</b>		
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for KYO	23	66%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for KUSG	2	6%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for KWO	1	3%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for FTUK	1	3%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for KNU (departments)	13	37%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for CIDKP	2	6%
Number of youths interviewed who were currently working for Burma Issues	3	9%

## APPENDIX C. Ethnic composition of Burma in 1911



*Ethnic composition of Burma in 1911 (Data from the 1911 British India census, His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1922)*

## APPENDIX D. KYO Staffing Levels in 2008

Number of KYO Committee members		District						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Level	Total	Doothahtu (Thaton)	Tawoo (Toungoo)	Klerlwehtoo (Nyaunglebin)	Mergui-Tavoy (Tenasserim)	Mutraw (Papun)	Dooplaya (Dooplaya)	Pa-an (Hpa-an)
Central	11							
District	63	9	9	9	9	9	9	9
Refugee camp	49				14 <sup>186</sup>	14 <sup>187</sup>	14 <sup>188</sup>	7
IDP camp	14					7		7
Camp section	225				25 <sup>189</sup>	115 <sup>190</sup>	70 <sup>191</sup>	15 <sup>192</sup>
Townships	84	10	10	10	4	15	20	15
Villages <sup>193</sup>	2500	250	250	375	250	500	500	375
<b>Total</b>	<b>2946</b>							

<sup>186</sup> Two refugee camps with 7 KYO committee members each

<sup>187</sup> Two refugee camps with 7 KYO committee members each

<sup>188</sup> Two refugee camps with 7 KYO committee members each

<sup>189</sup> Five camp sections between two refugee camps in the district with 5 KYO committee members each

<sup>190</sup> 23 camp sections between two refugee camps with 5 KYO committee members each

<sup>191</sup> 14 camp sections between two refugee camps with 5 KYO committee members each

<sup>192</sup> 3 camp zones in one refugee camp with 5 KYO committee members each

<sup>193</sup> Estimated approximately 500 villages with 5 staff each

Refugee camps:	Tham Hin	Mae Ramoe	Umpiem Mai	Mae La
	Don Yang	Mae La Oo	Noh Poe	
IDP Camps:		Ei Thu Hta		Ler Per Her

KYO Membership in 2008: 40,911

Numbers in blue iare estimated numbers by KYO central level staff at the time of research in 2008. Numbers in black font are exact numbers at the time, according to KYO and KNU staff.