

Burma's new 2008 Constitution offers many problems for political parties, ethnic cease-fire groups and exiled dissident factions seeking some common ground to the disagreements between ethnic groups and the military dictatorship.

If any solution is to be found for ethnic group problems, the regime must review the mistakes of past leaders of the union and the political aspirations of the ethnic communities. The root cause of the nation's ethnic political crisis is the regime's opposition to a federal union. The late dictator Ne Win, who seized power in a military coup in 1962, opposed sharing equal power in a series of heated debates in the then parliament.

Ne Win supported a unitary state over a genuine federal union. The Military Council headed by Ne Win declared that the military coup had taken place because of the "federation problem," which he said could lead to the disintegration of the nation. Equality of ethnic minorities with the Burmese majority was to him out of the question. When Ne Win seized power, he shattered the 1948 Constitution. At the same time, the Pang Long Agreement, which promised ethnic groups autonomy, was broken and abrogated.

Actually, it is a reasonable demand for self reliance among the respective ethnic minorities. The military regime should not use guns to govern ethnic minorities. If we look back to 1960-61, many leaders from ethnic states criticized the weakness of the constitution as well as the government's failure to realize the political autonomy of the ethnic minorities.

They accused the central government of not allowing the representatives of ethnic states to manage their own affairs in areas of the economy, judiciary, education, customs and so on. The central government ruled the ethnic areas as vassal states.

Sen-Gen Than Shwe has followed the tradition of his predecessor Ne Win and Saw Maung, who both defended the single unitary state. "All the armed forces in the union shall be under the command of the Defense Services," says section 337 of the 2008 constitution." It means ethnic armed troops are under state control.

The junta-sponsored Nov. 7 elections will be for 330 civilian seats in the 440-member House of Representatives. Under the 2008 Constitution, military personnel will be appointed to the remaining 110 seats. In the 224-seat House of Nationalities, 168 will be elected and 56 will be appointed by the chief of the armed forces. Retired generals who get elected are not counted as part of this group's quota. In total, there will be 1,187 seats in the national and regional parliaments elected by the people.

In such a parliament, dominated by the military and former military, ethnic representatives will have little or no chance to press the self-sufficiency and equal status issues in parliament. Authentic ethnic representatives, who are willing to push ethnic issues forward, may not occupy enough seats in the new parliament to form an effective coalition.

Without addressing and honoring the ethnic people's political aspirations, the new parliament-based government will be unable to stop political and civil strife throughout ethnic areas. National reconciliation and ethnic self-determination are two sides of the same coin, and they must be addressed in the new parliament and in regional and state parliaments.

*Zin Linn is vice-president of exiled Burma Media Association which is affiliated with the Paris-based Reporters San Frontiers.*