Chapter 1
Kachin history, perceptions, and beliefs: contextual elements
The population of Kachin State people is estimated to comprise approximately 3 percent of Myanmar’s total population, according to preliminary results of the 2014 census, although not all areas could be surveyed due to the conflict, and final results have not yet been made public. Kachin State, which borders both India and China, is the country’s northernmost region and the furthest point from Yangon. Most members of the Kachin ethnic groups are located in Kachin State although their presence can also be found in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, India, and in Yunnan, China. Nonetheless, the ethnonym “Kachin” is only used for those populations based in northern Myanmar, i.e., Kachin State, the north-western part of Shan State, and Sagaing Division. In Kachin State, Kachin populations live alongside Shan, Bamar, and some Rakhine (especially in the mining areas like Hpakant) peoples. Descendants of Nepalese, Indians, and Chinese can also be encountered there. In spite of their political weight, the Kachin are currently a minority in Kachin State, accounting for about only 38 percent of the population; Bamar and Shan are the other main ethnic groups in the region (Holliday 2010: 119).

Aspects of the local culture – such as the language, religion and cultural habits – have been reified for political purposes, to forge a common feeling of belonging. As with other minority groups in Myanmar, these elements contribute to shaping the identity. For political leaders, they offer, since the creation of an independent Myanmar, a means for developing narratives that are fundamentally distinct from those of the Bamar people. Ethnic identity has been

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1 Along with Mon State, Kachin State is one of the ethnic States where the main ethnic group is actually a numerical minority.
The Jinghpaw

As anthropologist Francois Robinne, director of the IRASEC, has noted, when asked about one’s ethnic group, a “Jinghpaw” is more likely to say that he or she is “Kachin,” than a “non-Jinghpaw,” who would mention their own sub-group and, overall, be more reluctant to be called “Kachin” – not only because it reifies the dominance of the Jinghpaw group but also because the term is perceived as emanating from British and later Burmese authorities (Robinne, 2007: 62–63). Countrywide, the catch-all term “Kachin” has been increasingly used and Jinghpaw dominance in representation of the Kachin is apparent. The use of their language as a common medium of expression, and the prestige and wealth of some Jinghpaw clans, tends to put them in a position of greater power in relation to other Kachin sub-ethnic groups.

The notion of “clan” is still strongly correlated to the notion of “belonging.” The actual number of clans and Kachin ethnic groups (often referred to by the Kachin as “tribes”) is still subject to academic debate due to the porous nature of the categories and the confusion over clan names, ethnonyms and ethnic groups. It is commonly stated that there are five main Jinghpaw clans: the Marip, Maran, Nhkum, Lahpai, and Lahtaw. In addition, there are several sub-ethnic groups that tend to recognize themselves, or are recognized in some cases by external observers, as Jinghpaw, including the Lisu, Zaiwa, Lawngwaw Lachid, and Nung Lungmi (Robinne 2007: 64-65).

Since Myanmar gained independence, Kachin identity has been structured around various elements, especially its religion and language, that differentiate it from the Bamar ethnic majority. A “self-conscious” Kachin identity started to emerge with the arrival of Christian missionaries and British colonization in the late nineteenth century, as in other areas of the country and in other countries of Southeast Asia. The process gained momentum over the years, and by the time of Independence, the self-identification of peoples in Myanmar’s border areas had become structured around the notion of ethnicity, with strong religious components. The complexity of Kachin identity and intra-ethnic group dynamics are based on selective historical facts and perceptions. These are instrumental in supporting the current conflict rationale for the Kachin, and their attitudes to conflict and peace.

The term “Kachin” itself appears to be recent in origin. Used since the late eighteenth century and only coming into widespread use since the nineteenth century, the term represents a complex, multi-ethnic reality. It commonly refers to a group of tribes recognizing themselves as, or having close relations with, the
Jinghpaw group of the Tibeto-Burmese ethnic family. This recognition involves the belief in shared forefathers of the various ethnic sub-groups (Hanson 1913: 13). Hence, the term “Kachin” usually includes the dominant Jinghpaw ethnic sub-group, but also the Lanwngwaw, Rawang, Lachid, Zaiwa, and, sometimes, Lisu groups (Robinne 2007: 59). Yet, these groups do not share the same native tongue, nor the same alphabet.

1 - The Panglong Agreement: unfulfilled promises of the post-Independence era

“The Tatmadaw soldiers want to cover all our Kachinland […]. In the 1940’s there was no Bamar in Kachin lands, no Burmese troops either, they came after Panglong.” (Religious leaders’ complaint to the United Nations Special Representative on Human Rights in Myanmar, Myitkyina, February 15, 2013).

During World War II (1939 - 1945), Burma became a major battlefield and in March 1942, the Japanese fascist troops took Rangoon and the British administration collapsed. The Burma Independence Army (BIA) led by a number of Bamar leaders, including General Aung San, the father of the current opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize awardee Aung San Suu Kyi, initially fought alongside the Japanese, as they considered this would free them from the British. Some ethnic groups (like the Kachin), trusting in promises of autonomy, remained loyal to the British. The BIA switched alliances and the Allies, with BIA support, won the war in July 1945. Once peace was restored, a particularly delicate task of the central administration was to bring the ethnic levies – including Kachin soldiers – back under its central control into a centralized army resembling the pre-war one.

Negotiations took place with the British to gain the country’s independence. The political parties and ethnic groups each had their own vision and expectations on achieving Independence. Many armed groups had been formed throughout the country during and after World War II. The early post-war context presented some interesting similarities with the current one, including a diversity of views among the leaders from different ethnic groups that could be exposed in absence of authoritarian rule; the peace makers’ challenges to capture and respond to numerous ethnic political demands; and finally the issue of demobilization of the combatants and their tentative reintegration.
When the British departed in 1948, traditional relationships between the center and the periphery, as well as between the ethnic minorities, dramatically evolved. Kachin region was placed under the direct administration of Rangoon for the first time in the country’s history. The foundations of modern Burma, as a nation based on recently constructed ethnic identities, had already started. For the Kachin elites supportive of the KIO, political administration in pre-colonial history set the context, and provides material for a historical justification of the current conflict.

Kachin state was created on January 10, 1947, but administrative recognition from Rangoon was not followed by promised autonomy. In February 1947, a number of Bamar and ethnic leaders (including some Kachin) participated in the Panglong Agreement, an initiative led by Aung San that aimed to pressure the British to grant early independence to the country by demonstrating that Aung San could unite ethnic groups (Walton 2008). This Agreement was intended to pave the way for a constitution granting the Kachin, Chin, and Shan ethnic groups greater autonomy. But this project seems to have disappeared following Aung San’s assassination later that year. Soon after, the government dismissed Kachin calls for autonomy, creating a view among Kachin that “Aung San’s promises disappeared with him” (Manam 2011). Kachin leaders today see the Agreement as an unfulfilled obligation that lies at the core of their current grievances (Manam 2011).

The former vice chairman of the KIO, Dr. Manam Tu Ja, observed the following of the role played by Aung San, as captured now in the common Kachin memory:

“To understand the current grievances of the KIO, one needs to go back to the Kachin pre-colonial history. Before the time of British colonization, all ethnic nationals were living separately from the Bamar in their own territories. But the British occupied the whole country, and since then, the ethnic groups became mixed. The government started to rule with one policy for the Bamar and another policy for the ethnic groups, with a dominion status for the Kachin. After the Second World War, General Aung San planned the Independence. The ethnic leaders accepted him because they wanted a federal union. He promised to give them self-determination and autonomous rights. They trusted Aung San. He showed he was standing for their cause with the promises of Panglong and the
visits he made to Shan and Kachin States. He could not write it up in the constitution as he was assassinated on the way.”

Nonetheless, other sources show that Aung San’s priority was to maintain the unity of Myanmar as a nation, and some of his public statements reveal that his approach to ethnic politics may not have exactly converged with the Kachin political grievances. In a speech in Rangoon, in 1947, about the characteristics of a nationality, he expressed the opinion that the Kachin (referred to in the below extract as Jinghpaw) could not create a nation, because of inherent characteristics:

“Whereas common language is an essential factor in a National Community, it is not so in a Political Community. Now, how many nationalities are we going to have in Burma? Strictly speaking there can be only one. Of course, there can be distinct races and tribes within the nation. They are called national minorities. Perhaps by stretching a point we may regard the Shan States as a National Community. But there are no other communities within Burma. For instance, the Jinghpaws. They do not possess all the requisite features of a nation. Particularly for economic reasons they cannot stand as a separate nation.”

Yet, it has become an accepted narrative for the Kachin that Aung San was supportive to their independence demands. This agreement was maintained as an almost mythical status and has driven nationalist messages. For example, in a public meeting organized on June 27, 2014, the representative of a group of local non-government organizations (NGOs) operating in Kachin and Northern Shan States gave their perspective of the current peace process, based on the reminder that the nation could only possibly be built according to the “spirit of the Panglong Convention.”

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2 Interview by the author in May 2013 in Myitkyina.
3 Bogyoke Aung San’s address at the convention held at the Jubilee Hall, Rangoon, on May 23, 1947, in Silverstein (1993: 156).
4 Strategic Management Team (consortium of local NGOs) meeting in Yangon, June 2014.
The Kachin and Shan States are resource-rich territories with abundant supplies of precious metals, gems, minerals, and timber. For this reason, the Kachin economy has drawn outside interest for centuries, creating opportunities to establish alliances, and triggering conflicts among the various ethnic groups.

After Independence in 1948, the political awareness of the Kachin leaders underwent a political transition, correlated to emerging territorial issues, particularly along their shared border with China. The Communist revolution in the newly proclaimed People’s Republic of China followed Mao Zedong’s defeat of Kuomintang troops in 1949. The Kachin found themselves under pressure due largely to movements of Kuomintang troops – covertly supported by the United States – across Myanmar’s border into Northern Shan State, to seek refuge and to launch attacks into China. Throughout the 1950s, concerns over the activities of Kuomintang troops and border demarcation claims from China instilled long-lasting feelings of bitterness expressed by Kachin leaders (Kozicki 1957). Later, in 1960, when Myanmar’s President Ne Win and Chinese leader Zhou Enlai signed a Boundary Agreement, some lands adjacent to the Chinese border passed to Chinese control, without prior Kachin consent. This, according to the British journalist Martin Smith (1993: 158), “was a major factor behind the sudden outbreak of the Kachin uprising.”

Furthermore, Burma’s then-prime minister U Nu decided to promulgate Buddhism as a “State Religion” in 1961, putting the majority-Christian Kachin leadership at odds with much of the country. General Ne Win, who seized power after a military coup, placed Buddhism at the center of nation-building and mixed in leftist ideology to create the country’s political doctrine – the Burmese way to socialism. The rationale behind this choice can still be debated, as mentioned by professor of politics, Robert Taylor (2009: 290): “How much the state’s leaders in the 1950s consciously used Buddhism as a religious weapon against state’s rivals and how far they genuinely believed that the faith should be upheld to the state, cannot be known.” Given their tenuous affiliation with a newly independent Burma, the Kachin felt that respect for their identity was at risk.
Meanwhile, tensions between the central government and Kachin leaders intensified as their political views diverged. On October 25, 1960, what was to become the most influential Kachin political institution, the KIO, was created by seven Kachin students studying at Rangoon University, with the declared goal “to retain the rights of the Kachin.”

Some months later, the Kachin Independence Council met for the first time in Lashio in Shan State on February 5, 1961, which was subsequently named “Revolution Day” as the group decided to demand an independent state and “drive out external elements.” An armed wing, the KIA, was created by members of the Kachin Rifles who had experienced discrimination in the then Burma Independence Army (BIA) from leading Bamar officers (who had fought for independence alongside the Japanese in World War II). The KIA was initially led by a handful of veteran soldiers and former officers who fought alongside the allied forces, including the US Army (Robinne 2007: 259-261). At that time, the Burmese Army was struggling to unify and professionalize its forces (Callahan 2003). During its first years of existence, the KIA made quick progresses. According to Smith (1993: 191): “The KIO […] within a decade developed into one of the most successful and best organized of all armed opposition movements in Burma.” Amid a rapid increase in its mobile battalions, the KIA took control of large and strategic areas along the Chinese border including the Hukawng Valley, Kamaing town, and areas of Northern Shan State (Smith 1993: 220, 251, 257).

According to the interviews, a considerable number of influential Kachin people gave their support to the KIO/KIA more often than not, depending on the fluidity of the context. They provided physical protection, basic services to the community, and, for some, economic opportunities. At times, they gained or lost legitimacy depending on the changes they brought in other people’s lives, accumulation of wealth, and levels of violence experienced by the population. Following internal criticism over the KIO’s lack of inclusiveness in the early 2000s, the KIO attempted to rectify this by launching public consultations on political decisions. This more participative model managed to secure a degree of legitimacy for the organization, without totally annihilating internal opposition to the leadership.

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5 Interview with the Technical Advisory Team Leader in Myitkyina, September 2013.
6 Ibid.
The role of the Church in Kachin areas

Christianity progressively emerged as the main religion among the Kachin. The Baptist religion was first brought to the animist Kachin by proselytizing foreign missionaries in the late eighteenth century, and became, during the second half of the twentieth century, the cornerstone of the modern Kachin identity. According to Mandy Sadan, the prolonged conflict in Kachin territories induced a modern nationalist ideological model of the Kachin people as mainly Christian. “This social ideology, often expressed by ethno-nationalists through the question that to be a Kachin nationalist one had to be a Christian started to become entrenched. This social ideology […] connected notions of threat to the security of the self to the narrative of Christian conversion. Opposition by the State to this belief became a symbol of the State assumed deep-seated antagonism to the Kachin peoples as a distinct community within the nation” (Sadan 2013: 346).

Today, it is estimated that more than 90 percent of the Kachin population are Christian and about two thirds of them are Baptists. The Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC) is the most influential church and its influence goes well beyond merely religious activities. In most remote areas where the state hardly reaches, KBC became an essential service provider for the local populations, shaping an intricate church-society relationship, that is best described as a “patron-client” relationship (Médard 1976). Nowadays, the KBC plays the pivotal role of a patron, and has developed strong relations with influential “clients” among local political and business leaders, but also ordinary members of the community who benefit from the church’s influence and protection (Jaquet, forthcoming in 2015).

After the Independence of the country, Bamar leaders tended to view Christianity as a result of British colonial influence. Indeed, the bulk of the Christian population is composed of minority ethnic groups that were converted during the colonial era, including the Karen, Karenni, Chin, and Kachin. Many of these minorities supported the British administration and army. After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, such signs of foreign influence were seen negatively and often attracted discrimination. Even today, religious minorities reportedly encounter a “glass ceiling” in civil services, Buddhist values are taught in public schools, and so on. Alongside demands for autonomy, these elements, seen as unwelcome foreign influence and colonial legacy, have most

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7 This not systematically the case of the Kachin populations found in Yunnan Province of China, many of whom are Buddhists.
8 According to the definition proposed by the French political scientist Médard, the patron-client relationship is “a personal dependency relation unrelated to parenthood based on reciprocal exchange of favors between two persons, the patron and the client, who control uneven resources.”
9 For example, according to an interviewee who was living in Kachin areas during this period, the Tatmadaw, in the early 1960s, under General Ne Win, released and disseminated a propaganda leaflet titled “The burning question.” This anti-Christian document was largely in reaction to the formation of the KIO/KIA. It asserted differences between Buddhists and Christians and justified the use of violence against the Christians.
likely exacerbated negative perceptions of Kachin aspirations among the Burmese leadership. Compounding grievances over such matters, under Ne Win's socialist nationalization policies, churches lost their assets and their authority to run schools. Such policies eroded much remaining trust among Kachin leaders in the government. A crackdown on religious freedom was a key initial cause of the conflict in the 1960s according to an informant who witnessed the steady deterioration of relations between Kachin leaders and central government in the 1950s. Kachin religious leaders developed significant political power as they were often consulted by Kachin political leaders, during formal and informal meetings held before key decisions were made.

The KBC supported attempts by government and Kachin representatives to hold a dialogue in the 1980s (Lintner, 1997: 157), and in 1993-4, with religious leaders acting as mediators. As in some other ethnic areas, the predominance of Christianity among the Kachin was recognized by the central state in the form of specific measures applied during the initial ceasefire agreement. For example, in the mid-2000s the Myanmar Army North-Western Regional Commander, Major General Ohn Myint, reportedly exempted Christians from forced labor on Sundays out of respect for Kachin Christian beliefs (Callahan, 2007: 43).

Since the resumption of the conflict in 2011, Churches have taken the lead in providing humanitarian assistance to the civilian victims of the war. While international aid organizations encountered the greatest difficulties in reaching out the majority of the displaced populations located in the KIO controlled areas, Churches were able to access the areas and organize continuous support. This was possible because they had the trust of both government and KIO. Practically, it meant that they managed to cross military check points of both the Tatmadaw and KIA, and – in some cases, battle lines. The most influential churches – i.e. the Baptist and the Catholic ones – have been by far the main aid providers for Kachin civilians. Starting with the first civilian displacements, they provided food as well as basic items but also physical protection to the Internally Displaced Persons, a practice that has been continued until today.

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10 Interview of the descendant of a foreign missionary in Yangon, April 2013. Also see Smith (1993: 180 -183).
11 Interviews conducted by the author in Myitkyina showed that a Catholic priest, Father Thomas, played a crucial role in creating negotiation space between the warring parties. Due to health issues, he was not able to finalize the process and handed over responsibility to the then chairman of the KBC, Reverend Saboi Jum, in the early 1990s.
3 - From post-Independence disillusionment to the first armed conflict (1961 – 1994)

In the post-Independence environment, Kachin claims for greater political autonomy soon emerged. The early years, under a fledgling national legislature in the early 1950s, were characterized by an overall feeling of insecurity as militia groups spread dramatically throughout the country, while elements within the army were attempting to reform its structure to secure the new country (Callahan 2003).

By the early 1960s, the Tatmadaw had managed to contain a number of anti-government insurgent movements but its officers assumed the role of sole “state-builders,” leaving a legacy of mistrust among the population, both ethnic and Bamar (Callahan 2003). There was then a distinct hardening of positions on the question of autonomy among non-Bamar ethnic groups that was threatening the unionist project of the armed forces. Later, the central government attempted to implement cultural and religious “harmonization” programs in order to impose Bamar values on ethnic populations (Berlie 2005). In Kachin State, this generated a deep and lasting resentment against the central government. As mentioned above, the nationalization of schools was a key factor in fuelling conflict as it antagonized many Kachin, who blamed the central Bamar administration for seizing Church assets and objected when the language of teaching in the country’s schools and universities was changed from English to Burmese all over the country in the early 1960s. According to an interview of the descendant of a foreign missionary in September 2013 in Yangon, these schools, initially created by missionaries, were highly valued by the Kachin people. When the land, buildings, and funds were taken back without prior consultation, this angered the local communities engendering ill-will towards the central state. They felt their culture was threatened, and some leaders promoted the armed conflict as a way to defend it.
A personal account of the first Kachin war,
Interview with an elder, by the author in Myitkyina, September 2013

According to an interviewee from Northern Shan State: “The current situation can last for a hundred years because it has already been like this for more than fifty years. It started in 1961 with the previous fighting. The KIA was quite weak at that time. It did not own modern weaponry but they were powerful because the members were very united. At that time, the KIA soldiers did not forcibly recruit young people to become combatants. Everybody joined the fights willingly and soldiers had a real commitment to their cause.

At that time, I was a high school student in Kutkai [Northern Shan State]. One day, after singing quarrels at the church, I was with my friends, walking back to our boarding house. We were all together about fifteen students. We meet a KIA officer on the road and had a discussion with him. He asked us whether we would be interested to join the KIA troops. He said we could fight to free Kachin State from the Burmese oppression. That was in 1961. […] It was the first time I had really encountered a KIA soldier. Soon after, during the conflict, the police captured all the Kachin students in our town and put them in jail in order to stop them from joining the KIA. I managed to escape then, and fled to another town, in order to continue my studies.

At that time, the Bamar police officers looked down on the Kachin people. They treated us as if we were just idiots. Then, progressively, the Tatmadaw soldiers came in greater number to Kachin areas; they had more ammunition to fight the KIA troops. They hoped to overrun KIA easily, but they have failed to defeat it. It took them time. Up until now, fifty years later, they [KIA and Tatmadaw] are still fighting.”

The first phase of conflict between the Tatmadaw and KIA broke out in 1961 and lasted 33 years. According to an interview conducted in the late 1980s with Brang Seng, KIO chairman from 1976 to 1994, the only possible resolution of the armed conflict had to be a political negotiation. Once again, his account resonates with the current views of Kachin partisans:

“All have seen that during the last 26 years Ne Win has spent half the nation's budget in this — in wars against the ethnic revolutionary fighters. But he cannot do that — he cannot win the war. Although we cannot capture Rangoon and Mandalay, he cannot defeat us. So the problem of ending the war is not on the battlefield, it should be on the table (Jagan and Smith 1994).”

During this conflict, short-lived truces were agreed in 1963, 1972, and 1981. Later, in the 1990s, various Kachin armed groups signed ceasefire agreements with the then-military government, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The government gave to these territories a new temporary status, as
“Special Regions” to which were initially promised specific support for development. Although this aid hardly materialized, the ethnic armed groups were given business opportunities with the Bamar leadership (Transnational Institute 2009). Peace agreements were signed with: the New Democratic Army – Kachin\textsuperscript{12} in Special Region 1 on December 15, 1989; the Kachin Defense Army in Special Region 5\textsuperscript{13}, Shan State, on January 13, 1991; and the 4th Brigade in Special Region Number 2, Kachin State, on February 24, 1991. Finally, the largest faction, the KIO, signed a ceasefire on February 24, 1994, after several months of negotiations in which the government offered more concessions than in previous, failed, rounds (Taylor 2009). The final ceasefire document was kept secret for decades at the request of the government, presumably to avoid other armed groups demanding similar privileges, as other ceasefire agreements were never put in writing. Point 11 of the KIO Cease Fire Agreement created hopes for greater autonomy in the future and political involvement of KIO leaders as it says, “Following the successful implementation of this first phase, the second phase will be marked by continued negotiations on the question of the KIO’s legal involvement in the new constitution of the Union of Myanmar and of the resettlement and rehabilitation of the KIO members.” Both parties agreed on the principle of launching a political dialogue phase. After the junta was renamed the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), in 1997, and its seven-step “Roadmap to Democracy” was unveiled, in 2003, it asked the KIO to wait for political dialogue until the last step of the “Roadmap” was achieved (the drafting of a new Constitution, holding elections, and setting up a parliament and a civilian government).

The peace agreement, though vaguely worded, mainly focused on military matters such as troop positions. There was no provision for an independent monitoring mechanism, and no agreed demarcation or separation of the troops from each side. Yet, it produced high expectations among the KIO who regarded it as an official recognition by the state that political power-sharing would follow. It can be inferred that, because of these expected concessions, the KIO was keen to collaborate while waiting for the future democratic government to grant it more autonomy. In the meantime, the KIO operated like a local government in some areas, described by some as a “State within the State”

\textsuperscript{12} The New Democratic Army – Kachin (NDA-K) was a faction of the former Communist Party of Burma established in 1989 after the collapse of the CPB. It is considered to have close relations with the Myanmar military and Chinese governments.

\textsuperscript{13} The Kachin Democratic Army (KDA) was a break-away faction from the KIA’s 4th Brigade formed in 1990.
(Callahan 2007: 42). For example, the KIO managed its own education (including primary and secondary schools) and healthcare systems.

The KIO intermittently participated in the decade-long National Convention to draw up a new constitution, hoping to influence its content. In 2001, the KIO presented a 19-point proposal requesting self-determination, a state-based constitution, and resolution of issues around regional governance and authority. But the junta did not respond and its silence contributed to the antagonism of the KIO leadership. Yet, despite increasing frustration, the KIO continued to engage in the National Convention that resumed in 2007 chaired by the then Lt. General Thein Sein himself, currently president of Myanmar. During these years although other political ethnic groups walked out of the Convention (such as the Shan delegates of main opposition party, the National League for Democracy, in February 2005, after the arrest of key party leaders), the Kachin continued their participation, lending legitimacy to the process. But the 2008 Constitution did not end up reflecting the KIO’s inputs. And they isolated themselves from other ethnic armed groups that had opted for armed opposition over peace parleys.

Nonetheless, prior to the 2010 general election, the KIO continued to push its demands and maintained hopes that its claims for autonomy would be incorporated into future governance arrangements. Relations with the government deteriorated in the lead-up to the 2010 poll, when the KIO-backed Kachin State Progressive Party’s (KSPP) attempt to register as a political party was rejected by the Union Election Commission. The official reason for this rejection was that the party was headed by KIO senior member Dr. Manam Tu Ja, although he in fact resigned from his position as vice chairman of the KIO, along with five KIO central committee members, in order to enable their participation to the elections. This move was allegedly intended to punish the KIO for its refusal to support the government’s proposal to turn its armed wing, the KIA, into a Border Guard Force (BGF), under a plan revealed in April 2009 to bring all ethnic armed groups under the control of the Tatmadaw (Euro-Burma Office 2010). The elections were held without the KSPP or, indeed, any Kachin political party representing the KIO ideas contesting, and both sides started to prepare for renewed conflict. The Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) ran Kachin candidates with military and business backgrounds with close relations with the regime.

14 Euro-Burma Office (2010).
Figure 1: Armed Groups in Kachin and Northern Shan areas (indicative map)

This map shows the complexity of the armed groups’ situation in 2009 in Kachin and Northern Shan States, where a multitude of armed groups control of territories and trade along the Chinese border (Source: TNI 2009)
This increasing radicalization of a number of Kachin individuals was rooted in disillusionment after a succession of political disappointments. It was also encouraged by generational changes within the KIO leadership in the KIO/KIA since the early 2000s. Following the chairmanship of Chairman Zaw Mai (between 1994 and 2001), critics within younger cadres emerged. New leaders realized that their organization’s image had been severely damaged due to the behavior of some leaders who had accumulated significant wealth through “cronyism,” including close ties with Bamar military commanders and businessmen, under the post-1994 ceasefire (Woods 2011). A new leadership style was adopted in the KIO/KIA, with the emergence of a “Young Turks” leadership under Chairman Gun Maw. Consultations with community representatives were launched on a number of matters, including participation in the 2010 elections. Today, such broad-based consultations are still held – a factor, according to some Bamar sources, that makes peace negotiations more difficult as the Kachin leadership wants to show more inclusiveness. In order to get the majority of constituents on board for key political decisions, it must take into account public opinion.

A number of sticking points have recurred in political negotiations with the successive governments since the inception of the KIO/KIA. The history of politics in Kachin territories shows a tradition of self-administration that was, until Independence, unchallenged by Burmese central authorities, even though the Kachin clans had links with regional powers and did not live in total isolation. Kachin political representations are still anchored in these past models, forged through clan-based alliances and local-level agreements. The emergence half a century ago of the Kachin nationalist independence movement is based on this version of the history and explains the more recent hardening of the Kachin position including efforts to bolster identity, entwining such notions with cultural, religious, and political projects. Understanding this position of the Kachin leadership is pivotal to building a long-term reconciliation process that would provide an alternative to more separatist projects.
An illustration of Kachin nationalist movements’ frustrations

The frustrations among the Kachin leadership increased during the year that led up to the outbreak of the conflict as demonstrated by the transcript, presented below, of the KIO, Kachin National Organization, and Kachin National Council Statement issued on 48th Anniversary of Kachin Revolution Day, February 2, 2009. This statement illustrates that the frustrations are both generated by the SPDC, but also by some internal disagreements among the leadership.

“1. Today, after 48 years we are still confronted with a high-handed Military rule in the land of our forebears that denies the inherent rights of the people and freedom that was already achieved under Independence.

2. In the pursuit of peace and prosperity in the last 48 years, much has been sacrificed in human lives and treasure, in the honor and glory of our land.

3. Today, on the 48th year of revolution, we have not achieved the stated goal of regaining freedom, but have lost ground in the occupied regions.

4. A few leaders, who have become interested in their own welfare, decline to discuss or initiate talk about the purpose or mission, but instead placate the enemy for personal gain. Now a time has come for the people to realize that there is no consensus of unity of purpose in the leadership.

5. The ceasefire agreement with the SPDC had not produced peace and progress, but a regression that allowed the rampant spread of HIV/AIDS and other treatable diseases in the indigenous population which had lost the battle of social justice and to suffer the depletion of their natural resources.

6. We can no longer ignore or overlook what is happening all around us. The injustice inflicted upon our people calls for action and this is to be accomplished by uniting all the people in uprooting the enemy from our land.”