



Policy Factors in Ethnic Conflicts in Myanmar—An Example of Ethnic Issues in Rakhine State

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Abstract: *Ethnic conflicts have long constrained Myanmar's domestic political, economic and social development, and the ethnic issues in Rakhine State are particularly complex. As the main ethnic group in Myanmar, the Burmese maintain their dominant position in the trilateral game of "Burmese-Rakhine-Rohingya" in Rakhine State by means of the central government's ethnic differentiation policies, religious and cultural policies, and party election policies. However, this has resulted in an increase in ethnic violence, the rise of Buddhist nationalism, and the growth of the Arakan National Party. And national policies play a catalytic or inducing role in the transmission process of social foundations and ethnic conflicts, by changing the environment of interethnic relations to facilitate ethnic mobilization. As the central government's policies have failed to effectively resolve the differences in interests among local ethnic groups and maintain harmonious ethnic relations, the existing identity differences such as ethnicity, religion, and parties have become tools for a small number of ethnic elites to achieve political goals, exacerbating ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State.*

Keywords: Policy; Ethnic conflict; Myanmar; Rakhine state.

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1. Introduction

Since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, half of the 21 major ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement with the Myanmar government. Sporadic ethnic issues have long constrained Myanmar's political, economic and social development. Ethnic conflict usually refers to disputes between two or more ethnic groups on political, economic, cultural and other issues. [1] The ethnic conflict in Rakhine State mainly occurs between the Buddhist Rakhine people and the Muslim Rohingya people. There are also ethnic conflicts between the Rakhine people and the Burmese, the main ethnic group in Myanmar, but those are more manifested as political or military struggles without religious colors.

At present, the academic community has made fruitful research results on the causes of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. In terms of religious and cultural factors, Myanmar scholar Lian H. Sakhong (2012) proposed that the concept of "One religion, One language, One nation" prevailed in Myanmar during the process of "Nation-building," and the "Nationalization" policy of Buddhism led to inter-ethnic conflicts. The role of religion in Myanmar's ethnic conflicts is to shape identity and use it as a tool to mobilize ethnic groups. [2] In terms of colonial historical factors, R. H. Taylor (2007) made a detailed study of the "Divide and Rule" policy during the British colonial period and believed that the large-scale migration of Muslims from British India to Myanmar led to the current ethnic problems in Myanmar. [3] Scholars such as Xu Liping (2017) also attributed the ethnic conflict between the Burmese and the Rohingya to the political legacy of colonialism. [4] In terms of institutional structural factors, M. Gravers and F. Ytzen (2014) believed that after Myanmar's independence, it failed to abide by the Panglong Agreement and deviated from the construction of a federal state, which led to ethnic conflicts. [5] Marte Nilsen (2013), based on Western human rights concepts, emphasized that Myanmar's political system and unstable democratic procedures triggered the conflict between Buddhists and Rohingyas in Rakhine State. [6] In terms of cognitive and conceptual factors, Martin Smith (2007) believes that there is a lack of trust and understanding between the Burmese and other ethnic minorities, and that ethnic conflicts stem from the Burmese's discrimination against ethnic minorities in various fields. [7] Li Chenyang (2013) and other scholars also believe that the



prevalence of “Greater Burmese Nationalism” within the ruling group and the prevalence of local nationalism and even feudalism among some ethnic minority elites are the reasons for the long-term existence of ethnic issues in Myanmar. [8]

Most scholars are discussing the issue of explanatory variables, that is, what factors are more likely to lead to ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, and few scholars have specifically analyzed the causal logic of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. In addition, domestic and foreign scholars have paid more attention to the root factors in their research on the causes of ethnic conflicts in Myanmar, and the research on accompanying factors such as national policies still needs to be deepened. Accompanying factors may aggravate the intensity of ethnic conflicts, induce secondary problems or hinder conflict resolution. Their importance is self-evident. This paper will mainly adopt qualitative research methods, comprehensively screen multi-channel source literature, and sort out the historical context of ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State through the policies of the Myanmar government, explore the path of policy factors acting on ethnic conflicts, and provide a new perspective for the study of the causes of ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State, Myanmar.

2. Ethnic Polarization Policy and the Intensification of the Rohingya Issue

The reigns of U Nu and Ne Win, Myanmar was committed to the integration and construction of a modern nation-state. The rulers implemented a policy of differentiation against ethnic minorities, not only using cultural means to erase the characteristics of ethnic minorities, but also taking “hard measures” such as military strikes and economic sanctions to accelerate the process of ethnic integration. The Rohingya people are very different from the main ethnic groups in Myanmar in terms of appearance, language and religious beliefs, and are naturally regarded as “aliens” by the mainstream society of Myanmar. In fact, the Rohingya people have not always been treated unequally by the Myanmar government. Legal texts such as the 1947 Myanmar Union Naturalization Law and the Myanmar Union Choice of Nationality Ordinance classify the Rohingya people as indigenous people of Myanmar, and they have legal rights such as citizenship, including the right to vote and the right to be elected. For example, in the 1951 general election, 4 Rohingya people won seats and held senior positions in the U Nu government. [9] However, in order to exclude outsiders and promote national identity, the central government’s policy towards the Rohingya people has evolved from “acceptance” to “exclusion and expulsion.”

In his Union Day speech in February 1964, Ne Win first proposed the concept of *taiyingtha* (native ethnic groups), dividing the residents in Myanmar into eight “native ethnic groups” and subdividing them into 135 smaller ethnic groups. The Rohingya were not included in the list because they were considered “Bengalis.” In 1974, the Ne Win government began to implement the Emergency Immigration Act, requiring all Myanmar citizens to obtain citizenship cards, while the Rohingya could only obtain foreign identity cards. The Rohingya’s citizenship was officially deprived, which restricted their rights to education, medical care and employment. The economic development level of the Rohingya concentrated areas seriously lagged behind other parts of Myanmar. In 1977, in order to prevent the Rohingya and Rakhine people from jointly instigating a separatist movement in Rakhine State, the Myanmar government launched “Operation Nagamin” to crack down on illegal immigrants and alienate the two ethnic groups. It called on citizens to register and encouraged them to report illegal immigrants. The Rakhine people began to exclude the Rohingya people, resulting in the persecution of a large number of Rohingya people. [10] In 1982, the Ne Win government further promulgated the Citizenship Act of the Union of Myanmar, which divided domestic citizenship into three types: “real citizens,” “guest citizens” and “naturalized citizens.” The Rohingya people were still not included in it. It clearly stipulated that all Myanmar citizens must show proof that their family had settled in Myanmar before the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, and must be fluent in one of the official languages of Myanmar. Most Rohingya people migrated to Rakhine State from South Asia after the 1930s. The Rohingya language is not officially recognized, so they cannot apply for Myanmar citizenship. [11]

In the 1990 general election, two political parties representing the Rohingya registered to run for election. However, by the 2010 general election, the military government realized that the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) could not compete with the Rakhine political parties in Rakhine State, so it promulgated a new Political Party Registration Law, which retained the right to vote for Rohingyas holding temporary “white cards” but deprived them of the right to be elected, allowing the USDP win seats in townships dominated by Rohingyas such as Buthidaung and Maungdaw. Before the 2015 general election, the federal parliament promulgated the 2015 Referendum Law, which once again allowed Rohingyas to vote with “white cards,” but was strongly protested by the Arakan National Party and a large number of monks in Rakhine State. President U Thein Sein was forced to

issue an executive order announcing the further cancellation of the voting rights of the “white card” group. As the Buddhist radical group “Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Protection of Races and Religions)” publicly condemned the National League for Democracy (NLD) for favoring Muslims, the two major parties ultimately did not recommend Muslim candidates to participate in the general election. The interethnic conflicts in Rakhine State have been further deepened under the guidance of the ethnic differentiation policy, and the unequal relationship between the Burmese and ethnic minorities has been continuously solidified in the form of legal provisions.

3. Religious Policy and the Rise of Buddhist Nationalism

In order to strengthen the central power and build a nation-state, the U Nu government proposed the policy of “One religion, One language, One nation,” stipulating that since 1952, Burmese has become the official language of all government units, and no other language teaching courses except Burmese can be offered in primary school classrooms. Before the 1958 general election, U Nu promised to establish Buddhism as the state religion in order to win the support of Buddhists, who make up the vast majority of the population in Myanmar. After his victory, he proposed a constitutional amendment to “make Buddhism a state religion” to the parliament. Some ethnic minority elites believed that this move was unconstitutional and filed a complaint, but the Supreme Court rejected the complaint on the grounds that “As long as it complies with constitutional procedures, members of parliament have the right to propose constitutional amendments.” The parliament also quickly issued laws and regulations such as the “Regulations on the Promotion of the State Religion.” [12] Because of the policy support of the rulers, Buddhism has consolidated its dominant position in Myanmar’s belief system, and Buddhist thought has been able to penetrate into all aspects of national social life. Rakhine State is close to Bangladesh, so Islamic beliefs have a profound influence in the local area. U Nu’s policy of “Buddhism as a state religion” made the relationship between local Muslims and Buddhists increasingly tense, and also laid the seeds for the future rise of extreme Buddhist nationalism in Rakhine State.

After Ne Win came to power, he proposed the development model of “Burmese socialism” and began to strengthen control over society in all aspects. He placed Buddhist colleges and institutions under the strict control of the government’s Ministry of Religious Affairs, restricted monks from participating in political activities, and temples could not become the center of political activities. Buddha statues and pagodas were prohibited from appearing on books, calendars and other commodities. [13] These policies have suppressed extreme ideologies such as radical nationalism and fundamentalism to a certain extent. However, in order to meet the needs of political transformation, the elected government that came to power in 2011 began to gradually relax control over social trends, reduce supervision of private media and increase freedom of speech. Publications that may involve sensitive content, including politics, religion and ethnicity, do not need to be reviewed and approved, and can be published as long as they are registered with the competent authorities. The disordered political environment quickly stimulated ethnic conflicts, and the long-suppressed Buddhist nationalist forces continued to grow. Among them, the “969 Movement” led by Mandalay monk Wirathu was the most representative. Wirathu was previously sentenced to 25 years in prison for spreading anti-Muslim speech and inciting ethnic violence. He was released early in January 2012 due to the Myanmar government’s amnesty for political prisoners. After being released from prison, Wirathu spread a large number of radical videos and speeches on the Internet, attracting a large number of fanatics to follow him. He promoted the “Muslim threat theory” and called for unity among Buddhists across the country. The ethnic conflict in Rakhine State intensified and its situation soon expanded to the whole country. In order to limit the growth rate of the Muslim population and ensure the “purity” and dominant position of Myanmar Buddhism, members of the “969 Movement” proposed four bills to “protect national Buddhism,” namely the Religious Conversion Bill, Marriage Bill, Monogamy Bill and Population Control Bill. They were supported by U Thein Sein and Thura Shwe Mann, the chairman of the Union Parliament. The Union Parliament passed and implemented these bills before the 2015 general election. [14]

Since most of the officials in the Myanmar government are Buddhists, and the Thein Sein government is in urgent need of diverting the contradictions arising from democratic reforms, the “969 Movement” has become a point of pressure release. In order to win over the majority of Buddhist voters to support the USDP, the Thein Sein government indirectly gave the green light to Buddhist nationalism. [15] Aung San Suu Kyi also responded, “Please don’t forget that violence is carried out by both sides at the same time. This is why I don’t take sides and why I am pushing for mediation.” Because the Burmese political leaders are worried that the “pluralistic and inclusive” religious policy will be detrimental to their political future, they have adopted a silent and evasive attitude towards Buddhist nationalism, which to some extent condones the violent acts of extreme Buddhists against the Rohingya.

4. Political Party Election Policies and the Growth of the Arakan National Party

In 1988, the Saw Maung government established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and began to take certain ethnic appeasement measures to protect the political participation rights of ethnic minorities. It ended the policy of restricting party activities since the Ne Win government, allowed ethnic minorities to establish their own political parties, and announced the holding of multi-party democratic elections in May 1990. According to statistics, among the 93 political parties that eventually participated in the election, there were 9 ethnic minority parties representing the Rakhine people, among which the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) won a total of 11 parliamentary seats, ranking second among ethnic minority parties. However, after the 1990 election, the military government refused to transfer power to the winning NLD and dissolved ethnic minority political parties on a large scale, making it impossible for the Rakhine elites to play a political role through legal channels. After the 2010 election, U Thein Sein, chairman of the USDP, was elected president. The Thein Sein government established a local ethnic affairs department in accordance with the 2008 Constitution, with ethnic minority representatives serving as officials to be responsible for local and ethnic affairs. The chief ministers of all ethnic minority states were all ethnic minority representatives, but due to the constant fighting between the defense forces and the ethnic armed groups, many displaced ethnic minority people were unable to vote. In terms of ethnic composition of this parliamentary representative, the Burmese accounted for 63.5% and ethnic minorities accounted for 36.5%. In terms of religious beliefs, Buddhists accounted for 89.5% and Muslims accounted for only 0.6%. [16] Therefore, this election was criticized by the public as a “carefully planned game.”

The simple majority election system adopted by Myanmar determines that the two major parties, the NLD and the USDP, must take a middle line to attract more voters and increase their competitive advantage. Therefore, the two major parties dominated by the Burmese have implemented a policy of nominating ethnic minority candidates in Rakhine State, which has resulted in the Rakhine political parties being unable to compete with the two major parties. Such policies of excluding small ethnic minority parties have greatly dissatisfied the Rakhine people. For example, U Nyi Pu, the chairman of the NLD in Rakhine State, caused considerable controversy when he ran for the chief minister of Rakhine State. A large number of Rakhine political elites can only join national political parties in exchange for the support of national leaders for the interests of ethnic minorities. Since small parties have fewer opportunities to win elections or influence policies, voters tend to vote for strong political parties in order to maximize their political goals. The representativeness, enthusiasm and influence of Rakhine political parties have been greatly reduced. In addition, the participation of multiple political parties of the same ethnic group in the election has invisibly weakened the power of the Rakhine people in political participation, making it impossible to concentrate votes of the ethnic group, and local small parties can only take the path of alliance or integration. In order to boost the morale of the voters of the same ethnic group and achieve greater unity, the Arakan Democratic League and the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) merged into the Arakan National Party (ANP). After experiencing violent clashes between Buddhists and Muslims in 2012, the Rakhine people highly identified with the radical nationalist political program of the Rakhine National Party, which quickly made the party the third largest party in the federal parliament and the largest party in the state parliament. The strong ethnic loyalty in Rakhine State offset the effect of the simple majority system. Most Rakhine people voted for the Arakan National Party instead of the NLD or the USDP, which made the Arakan National Party gain a higher support rate in the local area.

However, the Arakan National Party has played an important negative role in the ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State. The Arakan National Party’s voter base is Rakhine Buddhists. Its purpose is to fight for greater rights for the Rakhine people and maintain the dominant position of Buddhism. In preparation for the 2015 general election, it did its best to cater to voters, using nationalism to escalate the situation and stir up ethnic conflicts to win more votes. As the party’s election policy has been continuously relaxed, free political competition and extensive mass mobilization have been carried out during the general election, and the influence of extreme nationalism has also increased. The Arakan political parties have gradually strengthened their voice in the federal and local parliaments, and used this to win more resources from the Burmese in parliament. The interest differences and distrust between the defense forces representing the interests of the Burmese and the ethnic armed groups in Rakhine State have intensified. The improvement of ethnic loyalty has also intensified the ethnic conflicts between the Rakhine and Rohingya people, causing the situation in Rakhine State to deteriorate sharply. [17]

5. Analysis of the Interaction Between National Policies and Ethnic Conflicts in Rakhine State

The Burmese elites generally have the same views on ethnic issues. Even though there are differences and competition between the military and the NLD, there are similarities in specific policies and regulations between the two sides, and there is a “compromising consensus” on issues such as maintaining the existing national power structure, which ensures the overall continuity of the ethnic minority policies of successive governments in Myanmar. The Rohingya people have a very low degree of Burmanization, their economic level is far lower than that of the Burmese, they have no citizenship in political status, and they are severely discriminated against by the Burmese in religion. The economic development level, political status and Burmanization level of the Rakhine people are at a medium level compared to other ethnic minorities. They believe in Buddhism like the Burmese and are relatively less discriminated against. This difference in social foundation has led to the Burmese adopting completely different policies towards the Rakhine people and Rohingya people who also live in Rakhine State. As the Burmese are in an advantageous position in all aspects, they naturally become the center of the power game. They flexibly adjust policies through their control over the state power organs, make concessions and use strategies to win over the Rakhine people, who are also Buddhists, in matters such as national elections in order to win their political support. When suppressing the separatist movement in Rakhine State, they need to rely on the Rohingya to alienate separatist forces in order to achieve unity of the majority of people within the country and maintain central control.

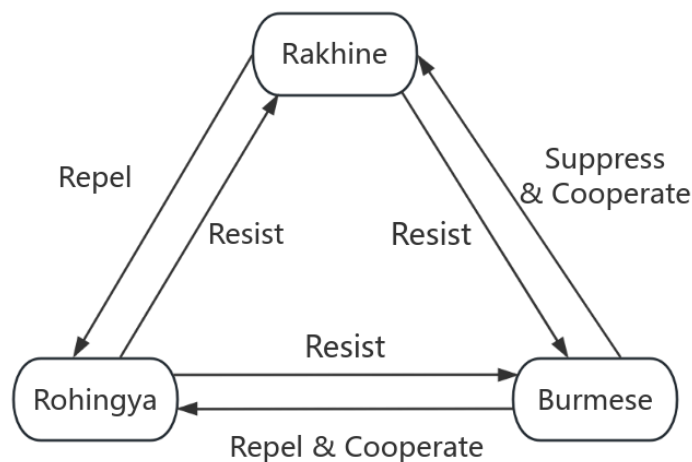


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of ethnic relations in Rakhine State

Michael Hechter pointed out that the degree of economic inequality between ethnic groups, the degree of frequent interaction and communication among members of disadvantaged ethnic groups, and the recognizability of cultural differences between ethnic groups will affect ethnic conflicts. [18] As disadvantaged ethnic groups, the Rakhine and Rohingya people have great social separation or cultural differences from the Burmese people, which is the dominant ethnic group, which creates social conditions for their effective ethnic mobilization. The Rakhine people’s struggle within the political system can no longer meet the growing ethnic needs, and thus choose to defend their rights by force. Because the Rohingya people are in a comprehensive disadvantaged position, their position in the “trilateral game” is very passive. The so-called “cooperation” proposed by the Burmese is more of a unilateral, asymmetric “utilization relationship” rather than a consideration of unity and care for disadvantaged ethnic groups. It is worth noting that after 2021, the political crisis has become the primary issue in Myanmar, and the conflict between non-Burmese ethnic groups has shown a trend of fading. Due to the consistency in political positions such as realizing a federal democratic state and striving for greater autonomy for their own ethnic groups, ethnic minorities in Myanmar have shown a new trend of reconciliation and even alliance to fight back against the military. From the above analysis, we can see that the driving force behind the evolution of ethnic conflicts in Rakhine State comes from the three-way game between the Burmese, Rakhine and Rohingya. Factors such as religion, political parties and blood ties are secondary. The fundamental purpose of the trilateral game is to maximize one’s own interests and minimize the interests of others (as shown in Figure 1).

Interethnic coordination, interethnic mobilization and interethnic conflict can all be seen as tools to achieve a deeper political goal. Demet Yalcin Mousseau believes that “Political elites use ethnic politics to carry out political mobilization, which is the main political mechanism leading to ‘from voting to violence,’ and the key to resolving ethnic conflicts is to eliminate the mechanism that makes ethnic mobilization a political tool.” [19] In the political transformation process of Myanmar, a multi-ethnic country, ethnic identity is easily regarded by political elites as the social basis for political mobilization. Identity differences such as religion, political parties and ethnic attributes among groups and complex conflicts of interest are the objective social basis. At the same time, ethnic conflicts are by no means caused by a specific factor, but are constantly evolving under the combined effect of multiple factors. Differences in objective conditions such as identity or interests may spontaneously lead to psychological or small-scale substantive conflicts, but they will not necessarily lead to overall political or military confrontation between ethnic groups. This high-intensity, highly organized ethnic mobilization process requires the state or political parties to formulate targeted policies to regulate and guide it. For example, during a long period of British colonial rule, Buddhists and Muslims in Rakhine State had only dissatisfaction and resentment, and rarely escalated to armed confrontation. However, it was not until after Myanmar’s independence that the government formulated policies to deprive the Rohingya of their citizenship, which triggered large-scale ethnic violence.

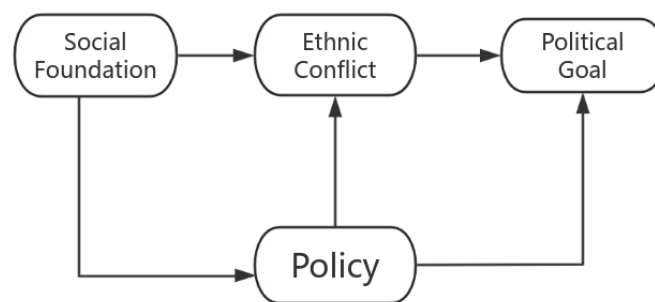


Figure 2: Schematic diagram of the role of policy in the formation of ethnic conflict

Policy means the mission objectives, principles, methods of implementation and specific measures of a certain historical period that a country or political party standardizes and stipulates in an authoritarian form in order to realize the interests and will of the group it represents. The country’s policy plays a catalytic or inductive role in the transmission process between social foundation and ethnic conflict (as shown in Figure 2), changing the environment of inter-ethnic relations to facilitate ethnic mobilization. Of course, the formulation of these policies is also based on objective social foundations. Countries that are undergoing a democratic transition are relatively more likely to be instigated by political elites and go to war. In Myanmar, the phenomenon of religion, a common culture shared by ethnic group members, being used as a means of ethnic mobilization is particularly obvious. When certain policies cause an ethnic group to be excluded or forced to demarcate, members of the ethnic group will distinguish between “us” and “others” more strictly than usual, and ethnic attributes will also gain new developments and new characteristics in complex and ever-changing conflicts. Under the encouragement and call of political parties, ethnic armed groups and religious groups, ethnic attributes are constantly politicized, militarized and religiousized. Multiple identities lead to multi-dimensional identification, stimulating the Burmese to launch military actions to expand their sphere of influence and enhance their dominant position, and also encouraging ethnic minorities to fight against the Burmese to gain greater autonomy in political management, economic trade, religion and culture. In the ethnic conflict in Rakhine State, the process of policy formulation and implementation is the process of ethnic conflict becoming a tool for ethnic elites to achieve their own political goals and safeguard their own interests.

6. Conclusion

National policies should be a powerful tool for the integration of a multi-ethnic country. The early leaders of Myanmar hoped to integrate many ethnic groups into one group to achieve unified management within the scope of national sovereignty. However, the policy of ignoring the differences in ethnic beliefs and cultures has led to a long-term lack of mutual trust among the various forces in Rakhine State. The historically accumulated hatred has led to the fact that local ethnic conflicts will not end in the short term. Fortunately, since the political democratic transition, the Myanmar government, whether it is the military or the NLD, has made promoting national reconciliation its “first priority,” started to compromise with ethnic armed groups and formulate long-term coexistence policies, strengthened investment and governance in economic development in ethnic minority areas,

increased the enthusiasm of ethnic armed groups for peace talks, and conducted dialogues, consultations and concessions on whether to continue to maintain a high degree of autonomy and local armed rights, and made enhancing national identity a priority. Solving the ethnic issues in Rakhine State will effectively promote Myanmar to make real progress. After the social stability and economic development of the region are guaranteed, the degree of humanitarian crisis can be reduced. Internationally, ethnic reconciliation in Rakhine State will help ease the pressure on ASEAN, a regional cooperation and security consultation platform, and promote the easing of relations between Myanmar and other Muslim countries, especially its neighbor Bangladesh. At the same time, it will reduce the investment and operation risks of Chinese projects in Rakhine State. As an important stakeholder in the Myanmar issue, China will further promote talks and peace, constructively participate in Myanmar's peace process, share the dividends of development through the "China-Myanmar Economic Corridor," promote mutual benefit and trust among all ethnic groups in Myanmar, support Myanmar to get rid of its development difficulties as soon as possible, and create a peaceful and stable surrounding environment for China.

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