

## Chapter V

### Between Compassion and Realpolitik

During the period of the 1970s and the 1990s even though Thailand has never officially countenanced the presence of the New Mon State Party and its armed forces on Thai soil in the form of a refugee-warrior community; it does not mean that the Thai Government failed to attempt some kinds of measures to suppress or drive the New Mon State Party and its armed force out of Thai territory and back into the Mon State. The Thai Government opted to graciously extend the period of Mon presence on Thai soil on the basis of humanitarian compassion. Apart from these humanitarian considerations, part of the rationale behind this scenario is understood to be based upon the historical fact and a widely held perception amongst Thais that the Mons are, albeit historical stereotyping, either good friends or loyal political spies.

The late 1980s were marked by a shift in Myanmar's political economic map, a wider opening her doors to the world economy, her efforts to promote trade with capital-rich countries, a softer stance on human rights such as Singapore and Indonesia, her

desire to become part of ASEAN, and, rather contrarily, her military cooperation with mainland China in stockpiling modern arms to suppress her ethnic minorities. Before this time, Thailand's attitude towards Myanmar's refugees, displaced persons and exiles was understood to espouse elements of non-confrontation with Rangoon. The term "non-confrontation" is used to emphasize Thailand's avoidance of unnecessary border conflict with Rangoon and her effort to create a state of balance of power through forming, fostering and deepening countervailing coalitions with ethnic minority groups, the Mon group included. The predominance of a military focus over an economic one, in deference to national security, is reflected in the relatively low volume of bilateral trade and the narrow scope of technical cooperation with Rangoon throughout the 70s.

Fearing the spread of Communism from Indochinese countries as well as from Myanmar into Thailand between the 70s and 80s, Thailand attempted to promote the safeguards of national territorial integrity and national interest as a central theme of national security. This was achieved by seeking military support from Western nations, mostly from the US to strengthen all State mechanisms concerned with security matters. In this long period of Cold War, Sangklaburi in Thailand's rural district was increasingly recognized as a particularly

sensitive area which was further destabilized when the New Mon State Party established its military base as the largest Mon community within and unclear border area between Thailand and Myanmar. This Mon diaspora outside Myanmar came to represent one of Thailand's most politically sensitive border points and its presence on Thai soil has provoked several border conflicts over the past decades.

At this stage , Thailand's willingness to scale down the magnitude of the Mon Nationalist Movement's activities on Thai soil by reducing , through repatriation, the number of Mon immigrants, some of whom work underground for the New Mon State Party has always been questioned among Rangoon's officers. Just containing the extent of the Mon Nationalist's activities was widely considered among Thai policy makers as a reasonable approach to the matter. In other words, Myanmar's Mons on Thai soil have been manipulated as political pawns.

To some , it is Thailand's traditional generosity towards the needy and its trans-border humanitarian compassion towards refugees that have strongly influenced Thailand's ruling elites to provide enormous humanitarian aid and asylum to those Mons who usually identify themselves as bona-fide refugees fleeing ongoing violence in their

homeland. Others feel that Thailand's efforts in providing asylum to the Mons have so far been insufficient. Thailand's inaction on this issue is argued to have been influenced by the general traditional of Realist analysis among high-ranking Thai officers which suggests the more is to be gained than lost from allowing influxes of Mon refugees or in extending the period of stay for those Mons, who have lived on Thai soil for a long period.

That attitude exists because the presence of the New Mon State Party before the beginning of the 90s was calculated to be beneficial, rather than detrimental, to Thailand in certain respects. For example, Thailand could use them as political spies or, in terms of border security, use the Diaspora as a buffer area against any sudden military strikes from Rangoon. This view is to some extent justifiable on several grounds. As observed, Rangoon's Government showed no signs of willingness to cooperate closely with the Thai Governments on the basis of mutual respect and sincere friendship. On a wider scale, the prospect of Myanmar's initiation of a universally acceptable democratic governance by phasing in a democratization process which respects the result of unbiased parliamentary elections still remains remote. Some Thai

officers are strongly convinced that Myanmar's political future essentially unpredictable as long as it is still in the hands of the military junta.

These conditions merged to induce Thai policy-makers to favour the so-called Dual Tracks policy during the 70s and 80s. For Thailand, keeping dual tracks ; trading with Rangoon whilst surreptitiously aiding Myanmar's ethnic minority groups was widely calculated as the most appropriate approach to managing any unpredictable political changes in Myanmar's future. However, the ethnic Mon Nationalist Movement which thrived in the 70s was not free of constraints from Thai authority. It is said that even visit to Mon refugee camps in border areas by Thai citizens of Mon blood was rarely allowed. The living conditions at the refugee camps along the border were not as atrocious as they are today.

The situation reached its most serious juncture in the year 1988 when the outbreak of bloodshed in Rangoon triggered a massive exodus of Mon refugees into Thailand. Local leaders from several Thailand's historical Mon communities , especially those in Ratchaburi and Pathumtani Provinces which still maintained sentimental ties with the Mon glorious past, started raising funds to aid Mon refugees. Many

Mon villagers in Ratchaburi Province , where a state of strong euphoric ethnic nationalism had pervasively prevailed , rushed to the border. Some who gravitated towards ethnic revival even tried to mount a political campaign in support of the New Mon State Party's call for international protection and other necessary political moves. This rising tide of ethnic political awareness , which might have contributed to a worsening of the relationship that existed between Thailand and Rangoon at the time, was finally brought under the tighter control of all the Thai State mechanisms concerned.

The incident of clash over the disputed Hill 451 between Thai armed force and Burmese counterpart in December 1992 has prompted the Thai army to deploy its armed forces and heavy artillery to defend the strategic terrain.

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