The process of democratization in Myanmar formally started when power was transferred to the Thein Sein-led Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government in 2011.

Despite many deficiencies, the country saw a gradual change toward a “disciplined” democracy, in accordance with the 2008 Constitution.

But ever since Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) came to power by end of March 2016, Myanmar has witnessed another form of power struggle between three important blocs — elected civilian government, unelected military leaders and the country’s ethnic armed groups.

In fact, the disagreement or differences among these three powerful blocs are directly or indirectly responsible for the stalemate or at least stymieing the country’s democratization process.

**National League for Democracy**

When the NLD came to power, some of its policy priorities were peace and reconciliation with the country’s ethnic armed groups, amending the Constitution and raising the living standards of citizens through economic development.

In their efforts toward peace and reconciliation, the NLD government has organized multiple rounds of what it calls the Union Peace Conference, also known as the 21st
Century Panglong Conference, attended by representatives of elected civilian government, the military and ethnic armed groups, among others.

Despite reaching several agreements, the peace process has been stalemated on issues such as federalism, role of military in politics and power sharing between the central government and the states.

More importantly, the peace process has been undermined by the ongoing military conflict between the Tatmadaw (security forces) and members of the Northern Alliance military coalition, particularly the Arakan Army (AA), in which the Tatmadaw has gone to the extent of deploying drones and jet fighters against the AA.

Since it came to power, the NLD government has made several attempts to amend the 2008 Constitution, particularly the role of military in politics.

But, on March 10, the Union Parliament rejected proposals to amend 14 provisions of the Constitution, including an end to the defense services’ national political leadership role, which would gradually reduce the military’s share of seats and end both the commander in chief’s role as the supreme commander of the armed forces and his right to take power during an emergency.

And, as per a World Bank report, Myanmar’s economy grew at 6.3 percent in 2018 to 2019, marginally higher than the 6.2 percent in 2017 to 2018. And the growth is expected to reach 6.4 percent in 2019 to 2020. In spite of this steady growth, the economy has not done well as expected or anticipated by many, coupled with the high level of inequality of wealth distribution among the population.
Unelected military leaders

The Constitution amendment proposal on March 10, if passed, would have gradually reduce the military’s share of seats from 25 percent to 15 percent after the 2020 election, 10 percent after 2025 and 5 percent after 2030. The proposal only received 404 votes, less than 62 percent of lawmakers. The amendment proposal would have passed had it received the approval of more than 75 percent of votes.

On the same day, the parliament had also rejected the proposal to remove the word “disciplined” in the Constitution, which states a “flourishing of a genuine, disciplined multiparty democratic system” as one of the union’s primary objectives and that “the union practices a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system.”

All military lawmakers in the parliament, supported by members of the USDP, formed by former military generals, voted in unison to oppose any attempt to reduce the role of military in politics.

This means the military will continue to retain its dominance in the country’s politics, particularly in security matters. The military will continue to appoint one of the two vice presidents, ministers for home, defense and border affairs, as well as maintain control over the powerful National Defense and Security Council.

The council is made up of 11 members, including the president, two vice-presidents, both parliamentary speakers, commander in chief, deputy commander in chief, Foreign Affairs minister, and the military-appointed ministers of Home Affairs, Border Affairs and Defense.

The military holds the view that the country is not yet ready for absolute power transfer to
the civilian authority, and that the military is the true guardian and the only entity that can guarantee the country’s territorial integrity.

**Ethnic armed groups**

Under the present arrangement in the national parliament, the NLD holds 59 percent of seats; ethnic parties, 11 percent; the USDP, 5 percent; while the military holds a constitutionally mandated 25 percent.

In a major setback to ethnic minorities’ demand, the parliament on March 17 rejected an opposition party-sponsored bill to amend the Constitution, which would allow chief ministers in ethnic minority regions to be elected, rather than appointed by the country’s president. The NLD lawmakers voted against the proposal.

Constituting roughly 40 percent of the country’s population and occupying 60 percent of the land, Myanmar’s ethnic minorities remain vital to peace and stability of the country. Many within ethnic minorities are still largely distrustful of not only the military, but also the majority Bama or Burman population.

Their perennial mistrust is compounded by the fact that there is no agreement on the country’s political future, including the paramount question of federal democracy. The military’s insistence on a ceasefire agreement on the one hand and offensive attacks on the other has taken the peace process to uncertainty level.

The differing priorities and objectives of these three major blocs of power make it difficult for the country to move toward peace, stability and development, including democratization. The sooner these three blocs find a common ground is the need of the hour for Myanmar and its people.
Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen is associate professor, assistant dean and executive director at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Jindal School of International Affairs, OP, Jindal Global University. He is the author of three books on Myanmar, including Democratization of Myanmar. Akash Sahu is a research assistant and graduate student at Cseas.