



COVENANT POLICY BRIEF | MAY 2023

Making external assistance work in the politically fragmented context of South-east Myanmar

Two years after the military coup of February 2021, the Southeast's political and conflict landscape remains characterized by a large and diverse opposition to the regime, geographically widespread armed resistance, and significant humanitarian needs.

Established Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in the Southeast have been joined by new forms of resistance, including the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG) and dozens of local defence groups, some aligned, some not.¹

This paper looks at these relationships in the Southeast of the country in the context of external assistance and existing networks for the delivery of basic services and local governance.

There is significant hope that cooperation between these pro-democratic entities will reduce the cycles of political violence faced over many decades in Myanmar.²

KEY POINTS

- › The significant political fragmentation in the Southeast makes having a deeper, better understanding of the context and relationships between different actors all the more critical.
- › New funds supporting new initiatives may be seen (or perceived) to cut across or undermine pre-existing local governance efforts and in doing contribute to cleavages between pro-democratic allies.
- › Local, ethnic basic service departments are open to partnership but there are increasing perceptions of offers of support to local actors being weighted toward being supply-led rather than demand driven by their plans, needs and political vision.

The aftermath of the *coup* has not however – to date - produced a wholly unified resistance front in the Southeast against the State Administrative Council (SAC) and its military forces. As of early 2023, there are dozens of PDFs in the Southeast, some aligned to the NUG, some with Karen forces, while others operate more independently.

While the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) are among the most staunch opponents of the regime in the Southeast (there are other ‘staunch opponents’ in other parts of the country), other Southeast EAOs such as the New Mon State Party (NMSP) or the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) and smaller Karen armed groups have met with the SAC and are not participating in the armed struggle. Respective positioning of EAOs has a bearing on operating contexts, in NMSP-controlled areas for example, there is far less violence and civilian displacement.

Border Guard Forces (BGF) and People’s Militias directed by the Myanmar military continue to support the regime on the battlefield. The most prominent of which is the much scrutinised Karen BGF which continues – with Myanmar military support - to build its illicit businesses through its partnership with criminal networks along the Thai-Myanmar border.

The ongoing armed conflict between the Myanmar military and resistance forces has seen repeated indiscriminate shelling of - and air attacks on - civilian communities repeatedly under-taken by the Myanmar military regime, which in turn has led to significant civilian displacement in the Southeast. As of May 2023, UNHCR estimates the number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in the Southeast to be over 436.000, with local responders estimating the number to be significantly higher.

Notwithstanding the limitations on cross-Thai border flows, the needs of displaced and conflict-affected communities in the Southeast are being met, but only to a limited extent; UNOCHA reports that some 4.4 million people across the country (largely in conflict affected areas) were supported in 2022 ...‘however, the support was not as deep or multisectoral as planned due to access constraints and severe under-funding.’³

Much of the funding continues to be committed to international humanitarian organisations who are constrained in their ability to access affected populations while direct support to established local providers of basic services remains uneven and uncoordinated across sectors (humanitarian ‘clusters’). Local providers note the need to scale-up their humanitarian operations to ensure greater coverage, and that they can do so safely within existing networks for the delivery of support.

Providing support to local communities and civil society entails navigating an increasingly complex political economy; one informed by relations between a multitude of armed actors and authorities, a diversified civil society landscape, a variety of international aid organizations and a growing number of illicit and illegal economic actors.

Leaders in the KNU, KNPP and Chin National Front have written warning of the country sliding into disintegration, specifically noting the risks of *Balkanization*.⁴ Commentators like former UN Resident Coordinator for Myanmar Charles Petrie have described the political context as ‘*tragic fragmentation*’. Such a context demands a meaningful pivot in the way the international community provides support if they are to make good on intentions to get behind and strengthen ethnic administrations and local community structures that have been providing humanitarian assistance and protection for decades.

Understanding context(s) and relationships

More than ever a conflict sensitive approach in this context demands a sound understanding and appreciation of the dynamics between activities of support, the actors and context. It is essential for any external partner to be sufficiently informed of these dynamics in order to minimize negative impacts and maximize the value of any intervention of support.

From the period of bilateral ceasefires starting 2011 until the *coup* in February 2021, and including the period of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) of 2015, the Southeast did not experience what is termed *positive* peace but continued to see ceasefire violations, human rights violations and sporadic fighting throughout the region with contestation over territory, resources and between ethnic and central government administration and service delivery systems. The expansion of the central state into previously contested ethnic borderland areas was often carried-out with and through private sector initiatives *and* some international development programs, and in case of Karen areas, military-led infrastructure development.⁵

In the same period, the phenomenon of ‘*interim arrangements*’, an express under-taking of the now defunct NCA whereby an EAO would oversee service delivery and administration in their areas for the ‘interim’ period until a political settlement was reached, was disregarded by the NLD-led government and actively side-lined the Myanmar military. A number of international development partners also preferred not to engage with EAO governance and administration systems either out of what was presumed to be fear of alienating or affecting their relations with the then government

and military or of strengthening parallel, ‘competing’ governance systems. Some international development partners actively sought to work around extant ethnic systems, in the process triggering tensions on the ground. Even some international peace support advisers demonstrated little regard for the meaningful application of ‘*interim arrangements*’. Only in a few cases, most notably in education and health, were positive examples of bringing together the different actors observable.

With hindsight, it is clear that an opportunity was lost on what might have aided the strengthening of accountable, bottom-up governance for local populations in ethnic areas. Instead, top-down, often high-level, demanding peace talks produced conflicting conceptual visions of federalism doing little for the policy focus or capacity of EAO administrations to provide for the basic needs and services for populations affected by decades of conflict.

Civil society leaders and commentators who pointed to the need to address the on-going conflict fault lines that were exacerbating pre-existing inequities were too often characterized as pessimists and backward looking. An understanding of this could prove instructive in appreciating the dynamics in the current coordination and cooperation efforts between the NUG, pro-democracy EAOs and aligned civil society.

Commentary has focused on the resistance being fundamentally aligned politically to topple the regime, which has led to unprecedented cooperation, coordination, and dialogue among groups, seen in the founding and operation of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC).⁶ This alignment has given significant cause for hope for consensus-based, inclusive decision-making in the wider pro-democratic opposition. Unfortunately challenges remain – both at the political level and at the level of interactions on the ground – the roots of which include the historical experiences and grievances of the ethnic groups, manifested by a lack of trust between Bama dominated institutions and EAOs. A hesitancy on the part of the elites to hearing and learning from minorities’ experiences (and indeed those of ‘minorities within minorities’), has been suggested and, critically, that this is inhibiting deeper trust building and consensus-based decisions. This is also visible on the ground, where some newly established PDFs and locally-led

attempts to re-establish order and offer services are directly or indirectly testing or challenging the authority of EAOs.

While popular media has portrayed the NUG and (an unknown number of) PDFs who have aligned with it as leading the popular resistance movement against the junta, both rely heavily on the support, protection, shelter and military competence of respective EAOs in the Southeast. In such a context, constructive coordination between the NUG and different EAOs, their departments delivering basic services and aligned civil society actors is essential. Supporters of the NUG should also acknowledge the political leadership and governance and basic services competence of EAOs in their respective areas of influence.

Approaches for external assistance need to avoid contributing to any further political fragmentation of the Southeast and placing additional burdens on local populations. For PDFs operating in ethnic areas, acknowledging and accepting the oversight of EAOs in ethnic areas would also prevent them from becoming what might be termed ‘*problematic allies*’, seen for example in efforts to secure income leading to the taxation of local populations and in their challenging of EAOs – like, for example, the NMSP - which have not become part of the armed resistance.

Co-ordinated efforts to strengthen existing ethnic basic service and governance systems can aid on-going efforts for trust-building among the different stakeholders of the pro-democratic resistance during political negotiations but, critically, also signal a commitment to building federalism from the bottom-up. Efforts that are perceived as supporting new - *parallel* – or competing governance systems and asserting their competence over pre-existing ethnic systems should be avoided. Failure to do so will only risk aggravating fault lines between allies and further fragmentation.

Getting external assistance right

It is only logical that in this challenging and fragmented landscape, that the longstanding local capacities and capabilities providing basic services and life-saving interventions of protection should be prioritized. Any new funding will land in a mix of long-established

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The strengthening of ethnic systems needs to be viewed as an essential component of a federal system. ”

networks, systems and ways of delivering basic services and protection - it is then incumbent on any new funding to ensure its priorities (and management and reporting systems) align behind those they are seeking to support.

A number of interlocutors on-the-ground in the Southeast have commented that the increased availability of (some sector specific) project funds has resulted in a scramble by fund-holders to sign-up partners, too often without adequate conflict sensitivity or political assessment being performed. This raises the question of whether some offers of external support are not more supply-led than demand-driven.⁷

In a context where overall resources remain limited, the allocation of project funds can bestow power and privilege. Allocating project resources without sufficient consideration risks unsettling political relations within and between the principals in the wider pro-democratic opposition and may seriously affect extant ethnic systems for basic service delivery. As ever, this context is one where perceptions matter. Funding and resource allocations can be perceived as external supporters 'betting' on a preferred pro-democratic opposition actor.

Partners on-the-ground are aware that funding opportunities cannot be turned down lightly, and so will expend time and energy (often at the expense of routine service delivery) on discussions on funding opportunities and proposals. There can be opportunity costs in the protracted discussion of new funding, these include side-lining or slowing-up the implementation of standing policy. These costs are not new, but they do need to be kept in view and, to the extent possible, mitigated.

New project funds – and those managing them – need to be looped into existing working groups or coordination platforms and to actively seek out sensible, constructive ways of coordinating with wider partners. Working to and planning against the same datasets of village-level demographics and needs across health, education and humanitarian sectors can enable improved, better coordinated and ultimately more efficient and effective delivery – as of 2023, there appear to be stark differences between the data sets of international and local organisations.

Another facet of project partnerships - long highlighted as unwieldy and inappropriate in the context of striving to deliver key services in the midst of conflict - is the overall administrative burden placed on ethnic partners and allied CSOs. Too often a small cadre of highly competent officials get charged with leading roles

in meeting the external partners' administrative demands and requirements – they do so because they are highly competent, but there is little doubt that their skills and time might be better deployed in the service of their communities.

Building and strengthening ethnic systems

The cautiousness seen in the decade preceding the *coup* with donors concerned of (over) investing in what some viewed as *parallel* ethnic systems and a marked reluctance to respond to '*interim arrangements*' needs to be definitively put aside.

Short-term projects with sharply defined deliverables are unlikely to deliver sustainable systems. The case continues to be made by stakeholders on-the-ground for further – and better coordinated - external support for processes that aim, over realistic time horizons, to enhance the capacity, capability, accountability and responsiveness of basic service functions.

A greater vision for systems strengthening is needed. One that contributes to the *political processes* through which EAOs may deepen their relationship of accountability with their communities and demonstrate democratic norms in their governance. Doing so whilst seeking to avoid greater aid dependency (or at least seeing it reduced) will constitute a significant building block for a future, federal democratic state; building federalism from the ground-up.

Ultimately, partnerships are based on trust. Myanmar's EAOs and CSOs are unlikely to be interested in developing longer-term relations with donors or external partners who they feel do not understand or respect their social and political roles and their significance in the future of a federal democratic Myanmar.

Notes:

- ¹ Among other events, the use of air strikes in Karen areas on 27 March and heavy weapons in the 9 April massacre in Bago all been identified by as turning point events driving the emergence and organisation of local defence groups and People's Defence Forces (PDFs) out of peaceful protest and the civil disobedience movement.
- ² See - Aye Chan and Ford, B., As Myanmar Coup Spurs National Resistance, a Unified Nation Could Emerge, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 19 April 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/04/myanmar-coup-spurs-national-resistance-unified-nation-could-emerge>
- ³ See OCHA Myanmar 4 March 2023 Humanitarian Update.
- ⁴ See - <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/ASEAN-must-help-reverse-Balkanization-of-Myanmar>
- ⁵ A phenomenon that Kevin Woods previously termed 'Ceasefire Capitalism' in the context of the Kachin ceasefire.
- ⁶ See- Ford, B. and Ye Myo Hein, *For Myanmar, the Only Path to Stability Runs Through its Web of Resistance Forces*, United States Institute of Peace (USIP), 01 December 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/12/myanmar-only-path-stability-runs-through-its-web-resistance-forces>
- ⁷ In respect of supply-driven projects and accompanying risks, there is the likelihood too that project evaluation reflects the need of donor for successful implementation of the *donor's program* rather than assessing the net benefit to recipients and implementing organization.



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