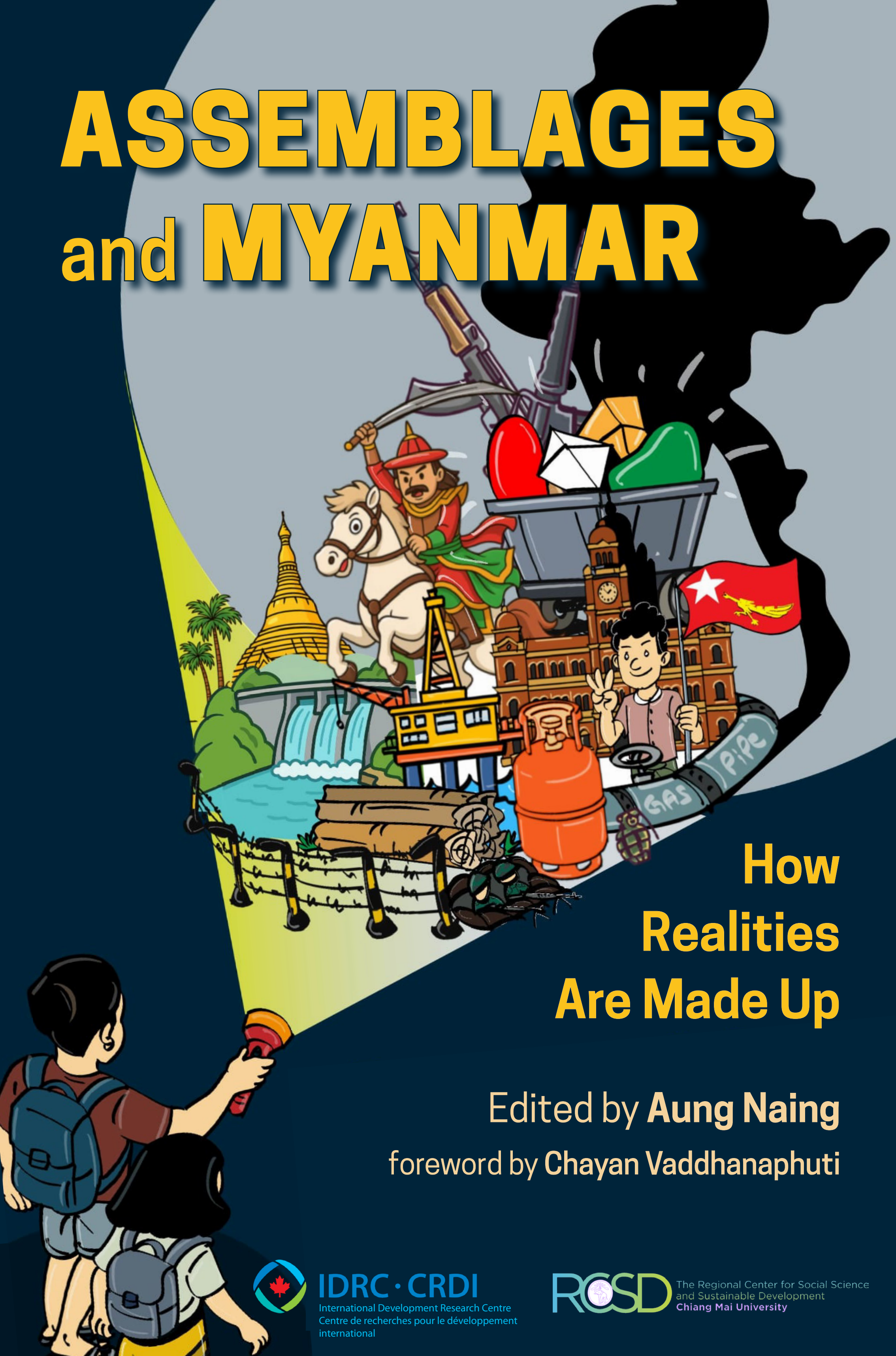
ASSEMBLAGES and MYANMAR



How Realities Are Made Up

Edited by **Aung Naing**

foreword by **Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**

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International Development Research Centre
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RCSD
The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development
Chiang Mai University

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DEDICATION

This volume is dedicated to all who have contributed their voice to the research featured in this volume, whether as editors, authors, or interviewees.

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ACRONYMS

AA	Arakan Army
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BGF	Border Guard Forces
BSPP	Burmese Socialist Programme Party
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
CSO	civil society organization
DBA	*Dobama Asiayone* (Our Burma Association)
EAO	ethnic armed organization
FDC	Federal Democracy Charter
ICBMS	International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies
IDP(s)	internally displaced person(s)
INGO	international non-governmental organization
IO	international organization
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
LNGO	local non-governmental organization
MAF	Myanmar Armed Forces
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MOU	memorandum of understanding
NGO	non-governmental organization
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
NUG	National Unity Government of Myanmar
PDF	People's Defense Force
RCSD	Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development
SAC	State Administration Council
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SSA	Shan State Army
SSPP	Shan State Progress Party
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army
VDF	Village Defense Force
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association

GLOSSARY

Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)	Ongoing civil resistance movement against the 2021 military coup. Initially a mass strike of public sector workers who refused to work under the junta, the objective of the CDM is to deny the junta legitimacy and ability to govern, and to send a strong signal that the people of Myanmar will not accept a military dictatorship.
National League for Democracy (NLD)	Liberal, democratic political party founded in 1988 and led by Aung San Suu Kyi. The military regime detained party leaders in February 2021 and dissolved the party in 2023, although it remains a powerful political force.
National Unity Government (NUG)	Myanmar government-in-exile formed after the 2021 coup with lawmakers elected in 2020 who were barred from office by the military junta.
Panglong Agreement	1947 accord between ethnic Shan, Kachin, and Chin leaders and Burmese nationalist political leader Aung San agreeing to the formation of a united, independent nation with guarantees of autonomy for ethnic areas. Its promises for ethnic rights and federalism were largely unfulfilled.
People's Defense Force (PDF)	Armed resistance wing of the NUG against the Myanmar military. The military junta designated the PDF as a terrorist organization in May 2021. Four months later, the PDF announced armed operations against the junta.
Spring Revolution	Decentralized resistance movement initiated following the 2021 coup that seeks to unite citizens in rejection of military rule and calls for return to democratic governance.
State Administration Council (SAC)	Military junta governing Myanmar following the 2021 coup. The legitimacy of the SAC is contested by the NUG. The SAC was officially renamed in July 2025 ahead of elections scheduled for December 2025.

GLOSSARY of BURMESE TERMS

attahita	self-concern; selfishness
ayeidawbon	campaign chronicles; documentation of a struggle
dalan	(military) informant; spy
Dhamma	the teachings of the Buddha
Ka Kwe Ye	militia program started in 1963 to transform the armed forces of local warlords into home guard units under the command of the *Tatmadaw*
kyat(s) (MMK)	Myanmar currency; 1USD=2,100 *kyats* as of November 2025
kyei nya gyet	sovereign command
Ma Ba Tha	ultra-nationalist Buddhist organization
parahita	social welfare; concern for others; charity
Pyusawhti	military junta-aligned militia
sadan	intellectual or moral witness
sagyoke	binding agreement or contract
Sangha	Buddhist monastic community
saopha	(Shan) title used by hereditary rulers of Shan states
taingyintha	national "races"; indigenous ethnic groups
Tatmadaw	Myanmar's military, administered by the Ministry of Defence and composed of the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Navy and the Myanmar Air Force.
tawhlanyei	revolution
Thakin	Master (lit.); honorific title for British colonial officials appropriated by DBA leaders
Thway Thauk	extreme version of a pro-junta militia
wunthanu	lineage; kind

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Burma, Myanmar, or Burma/Myanmar?: What's in a name?

Prior to 1989, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia was officially and exclusively known internationally as "Burma," the name that colonial British rulers used after consolidating the central plains and previously autonomous mountainous regions in the mid-1800s in reference to the country's largest ethnic and linguistic group, the Burman or Bamar. The international use of "Myanmar" to refer to the country dates only to 1989, when the country's unelected military rulers of the time declared the change of the nation's name to *Myanmar naing-ngan*. In addition, the official names of many ethnic groups, regions, cities, and villages were also changed, including that of the former capital city from "Rangoon" to "Yangon."

The name changes were purportedly an effort on the part of the military regime to remake Burma into a more inclusive, multiethnic country and to fully cast off the vestiges of the colonial era. However, many critics have pointed out that these changes failed to address the root causes of problematic Burman/ethnic minority relations, and historians have demonstrated that both "Burma" and "Myanmar" were used among the Burmese themselves prior to British administration. In addition, the use of "Myanmar" in English presents a grammatical challenge, as there are no standard adjectival or demonymic forms.

While international organizations, including the United Nations, have adopted the use of "Myanmar," academic, journalistic, political, and activist convention in much of the world continues to favor the use of "Burma," although usage patterns continue to evolve. For this reason, and at the editor's discretion, "Burma/Myanmar" is used frequently throughout this publication and "Burmese" is used as the adjectival and demonymic form. The decision of whether to use pre- or post-1989 "official" names in individual narratives has been left entirely to the contributors, and in many instances the names are used interchangeably with no intended political implications.

NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

Names in Myanmar: Personal and family names, honorifics

There is no official standardized system of romanization for Burmese names or vocabulary, and spellings can vary widely. Additionally, Burmese culture does not use family names or surnames for individuals. First names, which can consist of one or more words, are decided largely based on the day and astrological sign of birth. In informal situations, many people use shortened nicknames. Thus, family kinship is impossible to determine based on names, and unrelated individuals may share the same or very similar names.

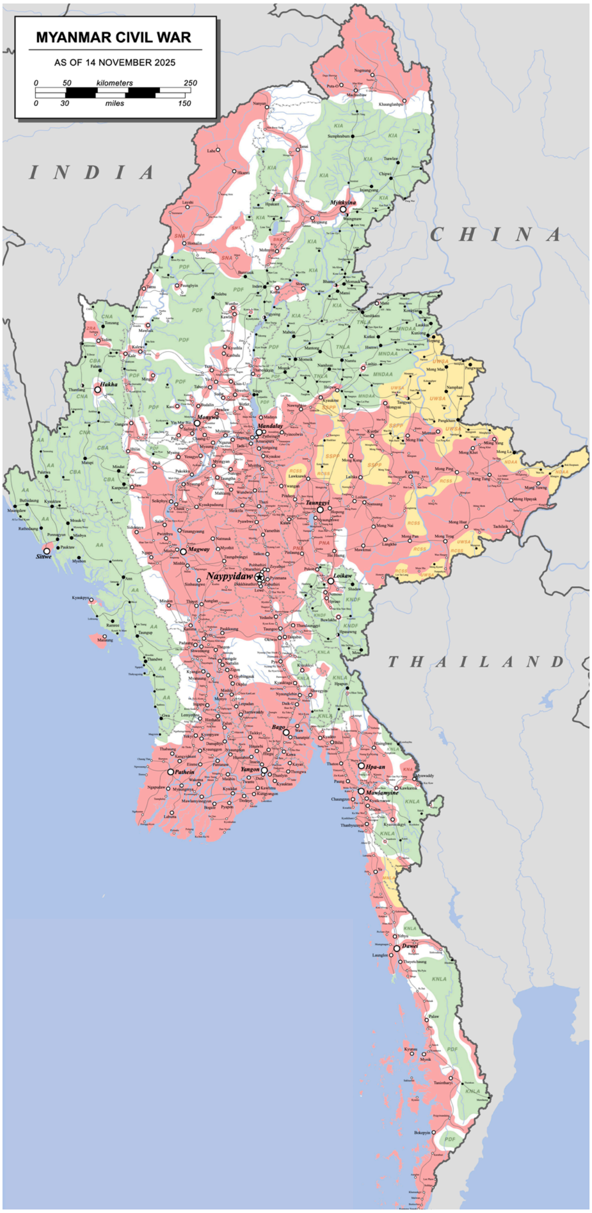
Honorifics based on age, gender, and social status or relationship are significant in Burmese culture and are frequently used before an individual's name. For Burman females, "Daw" refers to a respected elder, while "Ma" is used for young women and women of a similar age to the speaker. For Burman males, honorifics include "U" for respected elders, "Ko" for men of similar age and status to the speaker, and "Maung" for younger males. Ethnic groups of Myanmar, such as the Shan, Karen, and Mon, use their own unique honorifics.

Since the 2021 coup, the military has retaliated against protesters, activists, and revolutionaries with extreme forms of violence and oppression. Many individuals have made the decision to change their names or to use pseudonyms for safety reasons. To protect the identity of informants for this publication, all individuals were given the option to choose pseudonyms and to alter potentially identifying details.

CONFLICT MAP OF MYANMAR

Military situation in Myanmar as of November 14, 2025

red: military (Tatmadaw) control; other colors: resistance forces and contested areas


MYANMAR CIVIL WAR
AS OF 14 NOVEMBER 2025
0
50
kilometers
250
0
30
miles
150
INDIA
CHINA
THAILAND
Myitkyina
Hakha
Monywa
Mandalay
Sittwe
Magway
Taunggyi
Naypyidaw
Loikaw
Bago
Pathein
Yangon
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SNA
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CBA
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TNLA
MNDAA
UWSA
SSPP
RCSS
PNA
KNDF
KNLA
NDAA

Source: Wikipedia Commons, Myanmar conflict (accessed November 27, 2025) *https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Myanmar_civil_war_simplified.svg*

Foreword

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

This book arises from a dark but remarkable moment in Myanmar's history. After the coup of February 2021, the lives of millions were disrupted—families torn apart, communities displaced, and hopes for democracy violently suppressed. Yet in these same years I have witnessed, through the courage of friends and colleagues, the determination to keep imagining a different future. Many of the authors here are themselves part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Their words carry not only analysis but also the pain, resilience, and creativity of people who refuse to submit.

At the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies in August 2024, scholars introduced the concept of *assemblage* as a way of making sense of Myanmar's present. At first, I was intrigued. The concept seemed to capture what we were seeing: diverse groups—teachers, students, workers, ethnic communities, monks, feminists, diaspora activists—coming together in unexpected and fragile ways. Assemblage highlighted the creativity of these connections across long-standing divides.

But over time, I also felt impatient. Assemblage is powerful for describing fluidity and contingency, yet it remains abstract and often detached from the practical questions that matter most in the struggle: How can these fragile networks endure? How can temporary solidarities become the foundation of a new society? What really matters for Myanmar is whether today's assemblages of resistance can evolve into something more durable—a shared project that unites diverse forces around common commitments.

The conditions for such a transformation are already visible. They lie in the shared values that many in the movement articulate: democracy, federalism, inclusivity, equality, and peace. If these can become the cement that binds together CDM teachers, students, ethnic minorities, displaced communities, and activists across borders, then the fragile assemblages of today may grow into the durable alliances of tomorrow.

But finally, I was inspired. The chapters in this volume speak to that challenge. Dr. Aung Naing, who has long been at the forefront of supporting Myanmar scholars and activists, has written an introduction that reflects on assemblage theory and its relevance to Myanmar's current situation. The chapters following the introduction illustrate how assemblage theory can be applied to a wide range of complex settings and contexts. They examine assemblages across diverse geographic settings, from Northern Shan State to Sagaing Region and earthquake-affected cities, and explore the interactions of a wide range of actors, including armed groups, the Myanmar military, conflict-affected communities, local and faith-based organizations, and humanitarian agencies.

The different contributions to this volume show how assemblage theory can be applied to a wide range of thematic areas, offering a flexible lens to analyze relationships that constitute Myanmar's current landscape. For example, this theory is used to shed light on complex territorial and political realities, highlighting shifting alliances where authority is fluid and negotiated. Other authors in this book make use of assemblage thinking to examine how reactionary identities form counterrevolutionary assemblages, obstructing inclusive and democratic transformation, and how the military's systematic violence destroys material livelihoods as well as moral and spiritual bonds within communities. Moreover, assemblages of care are examined, supporting life in borderlands and displacement zones through local, faith-based, and cross-border networks, while humanitarian ethics are questioned through an assemblages approach, showing how neutrality is shaped by power under repression. Assemblage theory is even applied to illuminate dynamics in the context of the 2025 earthquake in Myanmar, pointing out the convergence of political opportunism, diplomacy, and grassroots resilience. At the other end of the book, Dr. Gustaaf Houtman offers a concluding chapter arguing for the critical role of declarations that articulate the shared principles emerging from Myanmar's struggle. This reflection grew out of his conversations with several participants and myself, helping us to see more clearly both the intrigue and the limits of the assemblage concept and the need to ground it in a set of shared values that can cement the movement and guide Myanmar's future.

This book demonstrates across these different approaches how assemblage theory offers new ways of looking at human, social, and material arrangements in Myanmar—their constituents and fluid relationships, negotiations, and cooperations—in complex and changing circumstances.

As director of the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University, I am proud that our center has stood with colleagues, friends, and students from Myanmar before and especially after the 2021 coup. This book reflects those ties of solidarity and commitment.

I want to thank all the contributors, whose courage and scholarship give life to these pages. Finally, I am especially grateful to Charlotte Trenk-Hinterberger, publication manager, and Garrett Kostin, copy editor, who patiently oversaw the materialization of this edited volume.

It is in this spirit of friendship, solidarity, and shared struggle that I commend this book to readers. May it contribute not only to understanding, but also to the long and unfinished journey toward a more just and democratic Myanmar.

Introduction

Assemblages and Myanmar: How Realities Are Made Up

Aung Naing

Unpredictability, volatility, and uncertainty are hallmarks of our current global politics, where the rise of populism, the weakening of democratic institutions, the rise of artificial intelligence, and the increasing volatility of climate, markets, and international relations undermine prior assumptions, strategies, and agreements (Dishon & Gilead, 2021; Katzenstein, 2022). The process of shifting towards a more multipolar world order is both relentless and uncertain. Across different levels of international relations, policy, and commerce, dealing with uncertainty represents the single greatest challenge—itself a crisis superimposed on all the other crises taking place in the world. Previously tried and tested risk management approaches, calibrations, mitigations, and negotiations are losing their effectiveness. In his latest book, *Navigating Uncertainty*, Ian Scoones (2024) seeks to provide an alternative approach to dealing with uncertainty. This is based on two key steps: firstly, an alternative conceptualization of crises; and secondly, an embrace of multiple forms of knowledge and networks to navigate pathways through uncertainty, rather than seeking to control, manage, or eliminate it.

The defining of a crisis requires us to recognize its "in-between" nature: a transition from old to new arrangements, where the new is as yet undefined. This means that the crisis is not seen as a temporary setback or an aberration from the norm, but instead as a symptom of a cataclysmic rupture between the past and the future in which the present is a toxic mix of old and new. Gramsci (1971, in Scoones, 2024) describes this as an interval, or interregnum: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in the interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear" (p. 256).The uncertainty and volatility arise not from the lack of any order or structures, but rather from ongoing competition between them:

> An interregnum does not imply lack of order, but rather a semi-ordered system. There is no total confusion out of which emerges a new fully formed system of hegemony but, instead, a period of competition between different strategies backed by different alliances, potential or realized, of social forces. (Stahl, 2019, p. 6)

However, rather than mourning the loss of the "abiding myth of linear progress towards a singular modernity" (Scoones, 2024, p. 3), a navigational approach seeks to embrace what is emerging from that loss: "multiple visions of progress," which may entail "more effective, often collective, collaborative responses." Facing the rise of populism and its erosion of democratic norms and institutions, a risk-management response focuses on how best to preserve or restore those institutions—rather than seeking to identify alternative framings for civic life and governance—in order to sustain human flourishing with inclusion, equity, and justice.

In terms of the post-2021 coup "Myanmar problem," the observations of Scoones and others are indeed apt. Despite ongoing narratives from both the military junta and the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) either presuming or seeking to reestablish a unitary state, the ground reality in Myanmar is best described as post-state. As territorial control is assumed by diverse anti-junta forces, effective governance is increasingly localized and plural. Even in areas still under junta control, the effective delivery of state services such as security, energy, administration, and education is patchy at best. In areas under the control of anti-junta forces, new administrative structures, public services, and security apparatus are being established. These may be linked to either ethnic-affiliated armed groups or newly established

People's Defense Forces (PDFs), but in both cases these non-state entities are seeking to cement local autonomy and affirm the right to self-determination.

This to some extent mitigates the notion of Myanmar as a failed state: whilst by most accepted standards the previous unitary state of Myanmar can be considered "failed," the emergence of alternative state-like structures points to multiple possibilities arising from fragmentation. This enables policymakers to move beyond the binary choices of either (a) reluctant support for the junta administration as the only force likely to be able to maintain the unitary state, or (b) an assumption that the only future for Myanmar's people is the restoration of the unitary state, albeit under a different form of governance. Such binary assumptions ignore three factors: firstly, the ground reality that fragmentation has occurred to the extent that maintaining or restoring any single unitary territory is unlikely, and any attempt would be costly in military and political capital. Secondly, that a single unitary state is not necessarily the best model to ensure the peaceful flourishing of all of Myanmar's varied communities; and thirdly, that a unitary state is not necessarily the common goal of Myanmar's people anyway.

However, the picture is both fluid and complex. Emergent administrative and public services systems are diverse, often poorly resourced, and in some cases simply replicating the norms and practices of the previous regime. The current state of Myanmar is indeed an interregnum, with multiple competing systems, institutions, and ideologies, as well as an as-yet-undefined future. Certainly, there are sufficient of Gramsci's "morbid symptoms." What is required then is an acceptance, as Scoones urges, that there will be no return to normalcy; that what is happening in Myanmar is not simply a temporary aberration, but a deep, cataclysmic, and irreversible rupture. Oddly enough, acceptance of this "end of linearity" is itself deeply liberating: it draws attention to what is actually happening in the interregnum itself. What is emerging? What are the competing elements and ideologies? Where are the new collaborations, networks, and possibilities? This type of consideration does not abandon the notion of a future unitary state at some point in the future. On the contrary, it rejects the idea of a return to a previous state or a restoration of a previous state. If there is to be a state, it is one which must be built anew.

This perspective informs an international relations policy which is characterized and motivated not by a desire to control, manage, or predict, but one which is curious, plural, and agile. Instead of relying only on formal negotiations and treaty-based arrangements, a "navigational" international relations policy cultivates relationships with multiple actors, draws on multiple forms and sources of knowledge, and seeks to foster collaboration and cooperation across broader networks.

At the heart of this is the need to "see" differently; not only to have alternative perspectives on the nature of Myanmar's current crisis, but also the ability to see new possibilities and potentialities and to work with different forms of knowledge in navigating complex realities. To this end, the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies (ICBMS4), held at Chiang Mai University in August 2024, drew together scholars from more than 10 countries, the majority from Myanmar. The 800-plus participants engaged in lively discussions and debates on how academia could contribute to a better future for Myanmar's people. The broader theme of the conference was "Assemblages of the Future: Re-imagining Communities After the State," and it sought to engage new analytical approaches informed by assemblage theory to generate alternative pathways for governance, international relations, migration, education, ethnic rights, land and natural resource governance, and humanitarian aid in the current post-coup crisis. A follow-up event was hosted by RCSD for a smaller group of regional scholars, further exploring the theme of assemblage, particularly with reference to civic space and the growing challenges posed by technocratic authoritarianism to citizens' rights.

What this volume seeks to present is a distillation of reflections from those two events, offering a theoretical framework for seeing differently: not as the only way of seeing, but as a set of lenses which can support a more "navigational" and less "managerial" approach to uncertainty. The framework is derived from assemblage theory, which seeks to conceptualize things based on their constituent parts and internal relationships rather than their visible external structures. Assemblage theory is notoriously dense, and this book does not seek to provide a comprehensive account of its entirety. Rather, we attempt to give a general introduction to the theory and demonstrate how it can be applied in the analysis of different policy areas related to contemporary Myanmar.

This volume also seeks to give Myanmar scholars the primary role in narrating, interpreting, analyzing, and advocating the key issues in relation to their own contexts and futures. Throughout the process, assemblage theory has, on the one hand, proved to be a tricky and unpredictable companion, never allowing a sense of settled conclusions. However, the overriding sense has been one of liberation. By foregrounding the contingent nature of many systems and structures and rejecting their "givenness" in favor of a rigorous analysis of their constituent parts and tentative ontology, the hegemony of concepts like the "state" can be challenged. Aside from room for alternative future possibilities, a fresh perspective may reveal that the emperor is perhaps not so well dressed after all. To consider "Myanmar" as an assemblage in ontological terms provides the space to perceive how the peoples, materialities, dreams, and fears—which are connected by geography, blood, or virtue to what has been called Myanmar/Burma—may well exist as very different realities, particularly in light of the current crisis.

In Chapter 1 ("Unpacking Assemblage: Navigating Complexity"), Aung Naing offers an overview of assemblage theory and how it can be applied in post-state analysis and policy. In Chapter 2 ("Unsettled Spaces: Territorial Assemblages in Northern Shan State"), Sai Tun Aung Lwin looks at the history of the Kachin sub-states and how complex arrangements of armed actors, ethnic identities, and territorial claims result in a fluid patchwork of governance. The complex assemblage illustrates the location of territorial claims in overlapping and sometimes contested historical narratives, precluding any simplistic judgments on border settlements. In Chapter 3 ("Reactionaries in Myanmar's Democratic Revolution: Assemblage and Identities"), Naing Aung explores how particular counter-revolutionary identities are constructed. This is crucial in understanding the "third space" between the two main opposing combatants and highlights how particular "affects" shape relations between elements in society. In a similar vein, Chapter 4 ("The Fifth Cut: Undermining Moral and Spiritual Capital in the Myanmar Military's Drive for Hegemony"), by Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, and Thida, highlights a particular strategic tactic used by Myanmar Armed Forces to destabilize, demoralize, and deterritorialize communities of resistance. By focusing on undermining moral and spiritual agency, junta forces add a further weapon to the already-notorious “four cuts” counter-insurgency strategy.

Chapters 5 to 8 turn attention to humanitarian assistance. In Chapter 5 (“Tectonics: Assemblage of a Disaster”), Aung Naing uses assemblage theory to probe deeper into the nature of the catastrophic earthquake of March 28, 2025. Far from being a “natural” disaster, skillful manipulation of naïve international actors enabled the Myanmar military to simultaneously exacerbate the human cost and exploit the crisis for political and economic gain. Writing about the Myanmar-China border, in Chapter 6 (“Care Assemblages and Citizenship Vulnerabilities in Myanmar/Burma”), Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho proposes the framework of “care assemblages” to bridge assemblage and care theories and capture the everyday humanitarian practices that are often overlooked in state-focused analyses of geopolitics. Chapter 7 (“Ethical Assemblages in Complex Emergencies”) by Phone, Israel, Thinzar, Ei Ei Thaw, Wai Aung, and Aung Naing continues the focus on humanitarian work, exploring how concepts of humanitarian neutrality and ethics are constructed by different actors, with hugely divergent results in the field. In Chapter 8 (“Assemblage in Action: Funding Hopefulness in Conflict Zones”), Lwin Lwin and Aung Naing seek to elicit both a practical and aspirational note. By analyzing the assemblage of hope in rural, conflict-affected communities, process-oriented development assistance programs have enabled a resurgence in future-oriented collective actions of solidarity. Highlighting the inherent political nature of all humanitarian and development assistance, this chapter issues a plea for assistance which genuinely empowers agency and solidarity amongst communities under continual threat of violence. The final section (“‘Our Cause’ (*do ayei*) Cries Out for a Declaration: Assemblage, Intellectual Witness, Charting New Inclusive Futures”) offers a compelling reflection from Gustaaf Houtman on the ICBMS4 conference, arguing for a formal declaration by Myanmar’s intellectual community to reshape international relations and humanitarian policy.

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PART I:

Introducing Assemblage: Territories, Identities, and Affective Flows

Chapter 1

Unpacking Assemblage: Managing Complexity

Aung Naing

Chapter summary

Policymaking, particularly in situations of protracted conflict where state structures have collapsed, is often hampered by analytical models which presume a prior structure (such as the state) obscuring more complex ground realities. In civil conflicts, much analysis focuses on antagonistic relationships between the state and opposing actors. In such analysis, the focus is often state-centric, whereby those opposing the "state" are termed "rebels" and the objective of peacebuilding tends toward the restoration of prior configurations of the state. Such approaches typically produce analyses based on what *was* or what *should be*, rather than what *is* or what *could be*. In contrast, assemblage theory rejects an independent ontology of prior structures, positing instead that such structures emerge from complex interrelationships between multiple human, material, and non-material elements. The relationships between elements determine how the resultant "assemblage" is shaped. The focus is thus on the elements which make up the assemblage and how they relate to each other. This is presumed to be constantly changing and subject to influences from new elements which may change the form of the assemblage. Assemblage theory pays close attention to grassroots dynamics and can identify new "sites of possibility" within apparently chaotic scenarios, leading to policymaking that can contribute to the development of an as-yet undefined future.

Keywords: assemblage, territorialization/deterritorialization, reterritorialization, affective flows, polycentricity, fragile/failed states, policy intervention, sites of possibility, grassroots perspectives, multi-sited agency

Complexity on the doorstep

The international response to failed or failing states is largely characterized by confusion and disappointment. Beyond the divergence of political ideologies lies a surprising lack of theoretical capacity to cope with what are typically complex, multi-layered crises. This may sound surprising, given the plethora of analysis produced on countries like Somalia, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Myanmar; however, a common criticism has been an overreliance on Eurocentric paradigms (Kang, 2003) and a privileging of liberal theories of the state (Sabaratnam, 2013). Whether in the case of Somalia, often held up as the exemplar of the failure of the “failed state” concept (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009), or Myanmar, where the resurgence of decades-old tensions has plunged the country into a new era of chaos (Croissant, 2022), foreign policy interventions have largely failed. Foreign policy actors, particularly in the case of Myanmar, have typically blamed three factors for their lack of success: the recalcitrance of the warring factions themselves, a lack of unity amongst other international actors, and the “complexity” of the relevant problem. Furthermore, simply labeling a problem as complex has itself often been used simply as an excuse for failure. According to Ford (2024), “Complexity, however, is not the problem. The fatalism stems from too many policymakers and analysts conflating complexity with intractability. Pairing the two leads to myopic decision-making and ineffective interventions” (para. 3).

This illustrates the fact that, whilst not denying that the contexts of Myanmar and other crisis-affected places are indeed complex, what is needed are tools to navigate complexity, rather than simply allowing it to remain a convenient excuse for failure. If the analytical approach is unable to capture the inherent complexity of a crisis, the proposed solutions it intends to produce are also likely to represent an oversimplification. Relying on state-centric paradigms and privileging Eurocentric, liberal theories of statehood in analyzing the current Myanmar context leads to the kind of conclusions articulated in a recent article by David Steinberg (2024) in *The Irrawaddy*:

> Now, Myanmar is disassembled. Putting it back together requires deft handling and nuanced thinking. The instructions for assembly—

> the constitutions of 1947, 1974, 2008—are no longer adequate, if once they may have been so considered by some groups. Blame is easily assigned: the British for their governing patterns, the military, the civilian leadership, and the ethnic minorities, some of whom at various times sought to prevent assembly. But blame is neither a guide to reassembly nor a policy alternative. And reassembling the puzzle cannot be accomplished with a hammer, as the military has viciously tried to do for over half a century. Myanmar is moving in a chaotic self-induced and destructive path. There are no instructions for reassembly. This is uncharted territory. (para. 2)

Steinberg's analysis is insightful in a number of ways: the complex historical legacy of Myanmar, the futility of authoritarian approaches to "assembling" Myanmar; and that "blame" is not a policy alternative. However, whilst there are no "instructions for reassembly," Steinberg's underlying premise of the need for reassembly is misguided. What if "reassembly" into some form of coherent unity roughly equivalent to the previous "shape" of the state of Myanmar is not the objective? Why presume that the prior state structure is necessarily the template for the future? Moreover, the presumption that the task at hand is one of "reassembling" obscures or ignores the myriad realigning and reassembling efforts already taking place: new alliances, movements, economic arrangements, and educational, health, and social service developments emerging in the face of opposition. It is precisely in highlighting and engaging with the multiple, overlapping centers of influence that enables a different approach: one which does not seek to reduce complexity to more manageable forms, or to simply eschew complexity for political convenience, but rather embraces the inherent messiness of complexity with a set of tools which can map coherence and clarity despite the lack of any visible horizons.

Such tools need to do several things. Firstly, they need to move beyond liberal/state-centric and Eurocentric analyses which treat structures such as the state, or governments, as "given" realities, often leading to binary, reductionist portrayals of complex problems. This is highlighted by David

Brenner (2024) in a recent article on Myanmar's post-coup crisis:

> Understanding the war in Myanmar primarily as a fight for democracy is reductionist to the point that it risks misunderstanding its drivers, dynamics and potential solutions. Privileging questions of the political system over questions of postcolonial state formation fails to sufficiently explain political processes and conflict dynamics in Myanmar. Nor can it offer satisfactory solutions to persistent military power, authoritarianism and violence, which have tormented Myanmar since independence in 1948, including in the past decade of 'democratization.' Instead, it risks sanitizing Myanmar's politics of nationalism, ethnic conflict and genocide, which have underpinned—and arguably driven—much of the country's past and present experience [...] Studying 'forgotten conflicts' in the global South, then, not only necessitates a turn to specialist literature, but also demands moving beyond Eurocentric frames of reference. (p. 752)

Moving beyond a state-centric approach can allow for the second "move," which is embracing polycentric analysis (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019). Such an approach looks at systems of organization and power emanating from different "centers," often overlapping or at times competing. These are "multiple, overlapping decision-making centers with some degree of autonomy [...] choosing to act in ways that take account of others through processes of cooperation, competition, conflict, and conflict resolution" (Carlisle & Gruby, 2019, p. 237).

Instead of privileging one system or actor (such as the state) and mapping other entities and actors in relationship to that entity, polycentric analysis identifies multiple centers and seeks to explicate relationships between them. This pays more attention to marginal voices and the peripheries (Jones, 2014).

Thirdly, polycentric approaches enable multiple entry points and perspectives for analysis, policy development, and political engagement. Analytic suspension of the privileging of state actors has the advantage of legitimizing an approach which, paradoxically, better embraces principles of neutrality and inclusion. Particularly in contexts where control of territory is mixed or contested, where multiple actors make claims to legitimacy, where the dominance of violence as the means of control renders governance both messy and ambiguous, and where the fluidity of territorial control obscures longer-term objectives, polycentric analysis has the merits of identifying entry points for policy which can effect smaller-scale, localized interventions which retain the potential to contribute to an as yet unclear, emergent future.

Defining assemblages

There has been a growing interest in utilizing assemblage theory in broader political analysis. Assemblage theory "moves away from reified general categories and ill-defined abstract concepts," replacing them with "concrete histories of the processes by which entities are formed and made to endure" (Acuto & Curtis, 2014, pp. 2, 7). In contrast to the state-centrism of much mainstream international relations theory, in assemblage terms, "the 'state' can only be talked about in terms of the heterogeneous elements that comprise specific historically situated states, and the processes and mechanisms that provide it with the emergent properties and capacities of statehood" (Acuto & Curtis, 2014, pp. 2, 7). Rather than systems (such as states) being the "sum of their parts," they are instead viewed as something which emerges and is sustained (but in an inherently unstable way) from the interactions between different "parts" or components. These components are both human and non-human, and assemblage pays particular attention to that which influences how these relate in ways that generate forms and systems. This in effect produces a different ontology of "things," moving away from the "givenness" of particular structures and instead paying attention to their construction. Viewing entities as complex systems also "opens up a new theoretical vista, and engages fully with concepts such as emergence, non-linearity, openness, adaptation, feedback and path-dependency" (Acuto & Curtis, 2014, pp. 2, 7).

Proponents of assemblage theory point to three primary advantages it offers: firstly, the challenging of existing structures and systems. As Saskia Sassen puts it: "I deploy assemblage as a tactic to dismantle some established categories" (Sassen & Ong, 2014, p. 20). Aside from the rejection of reification of particular categories, assemblage, by highlighting the constructed nature of power, also reveals the contingent nature of systems. Secondly, assemblage allows for boundaries to be interrogated or challenged: returning to the category of the "state," assemblage provides a way to conceptualize the state configured at a variety of different "levels" and with different boundaries (Sohn, 2016). For example, an assemblage approach may consider what the "state" is at a village or neighborhood level. Thirdly, assemblage is a "tactic to deal with the abstract and unseen" (Sassen & Ong, 2014, p. 18). Again, as Sassen puts it, "[I] ask myself, when I invoke one of these powerful categories [the "state" and the "global"], what am I not seeing?" (Sassen & Ong, 2014, p. 18). The value of assemblage in enabling us to "see what we couldn't see before" (Buchanan, 2020, p. 4) alerts us to more peripheral, minority, and marginalized voices. These advantages suggest that assemblage theory could be useful in enabling an approach that moves beyond the reification of states and systems, and which enables a polycentric approach to both analysis and policymaking.

What is termed "assemblage" or "assemblage theory" is, however, both diverse and contested. Whilst most iterations of what is termed "assemblage" or "assemblage thinking" derive from the original expression by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), the inherent openness of the theory itself has led to multiple trajectories and often a lack of clarity about what is meant by assemblage:

> What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of heterogeneous terms [...] the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiances that are important, but alliances, alloys. (Deleuze & Parnet, 2002, p. 69)

As a term, "assemblage" is an approximate translation of the French word *agencement*, rendered in English as "arrangement," "fitting," or "fixing." Apart from human elements, non-human elements of assemblages include material and non-material components, including biological and constructed elements like buildings, as well as non-material constructs like laws, norms, and beliefs. What assemblage pays particular attention to is the connections between components: not simply how they are arranged, but why their arrangement has emerged and been maintained in that specific way. This "why" is less interested in the goal of the arrangement—rather, the underlying conditions which have resulted in this particular form of composition are the subjects of inquiry.

For example, if we consider a university as an assemblage, we pay attention to a large number of human and non-human components: buildings, staff, students, books, rules, green spaces, computers, signboards, security personnel, etc. These components could be arranged in many different ways to produce a different form (it could be a religious monastery, for example, or a library), but we are interested to know why the form is a university, and perhaps more specifically, this particular type of university. We can learn the answer to that question by looking at how different components in the assemblage relate to each other and determining what factors influence those relationships. In a university, relationships between students and staff, between staff and books, between students and books, and between students and buildings, or students and signboards, are influenced by a transactional understanding, where students relate in a certain way to different elements in order to gain knowledge and qualifications. Whilst the information taught at the university is technically available by other means, there is a conferred legitimacy on the education provided through that university. However, if students do not regard the education from the university as legitimate, their relationship with the teachers, books, and curricula may change; they may simply not turn up for classes, or might occupy spaces within the university in protest. In either case, the assemblage changes: without students, an empty, self-referential space, or with striking students, a protest camp.

This points to an important aspect of assemblage termed "affects." An affect is somewhat tricky to define: neither sentiment nor emotion as such, but a kind of "flow" between different components. Ghoddousi and Page (2020) use the example of affirmative politics, which

> depends on building convivial ties through exchange of positive affects (e.g. care, humour) and creating new solidarities and collective

> subjectivities rather than negative and dividing affects (e.g. anger, hatred) that so much [other] politics depends on. (p. 5)

However, whilst affects are "the glue that hold assemblages together, as well as the vital forces that drive the processes of becoming," they are not simply emotions. They are considered to be "pre-cognitive and therefore not dependent on individual human subjects or their interactions as emotions are" (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020, p. 6). Particular fears, hatreds, aspirations—even deeper, precognitive notions about land and belonging—can all function as flows between different material and non-material elements to influence how they relate, and what emerges from that relationship. In our example of a university, a key affect is the perception of legitimacy and respect, which influences how different components relate to each other to produce a different arrangement of the components which may yield a different entity.

Assemblages are considered to have an inherently unstable ontology: they are subject to change. "Territorialization" refers to the components within an assemblage which give it "its defining boundaries and maintains those boundaries through time" (DeLanda, 2016, p. 27). These are things which maintain a particular arrangement. In social assemblages, these may include rituals, rules, rights, and obligations. "Deterritorialization" describes elements that destabilize the assemblage. These could be innovations, invasions, and in particular, new or different affects.

For example, if there is a perception by students that the transactional nature of education at the university has been betrayed by political interference, the affect of legitimacy and respect may change, and, in turn, alter the way in which students relate to teachers, teachers to students, etc. Students either withdrawing or occupying spaces in protest deterritorialize the university assemblage, thereby producing a different form. Reterritorialization describes the progressive "recoding" after deterritorialization, whereby the new arrangement is gradually stabilized. Because affects can "bind humans with non-humans to produce bodies politic [...] It is [...] essential to study the political role of affects in order to create new solidarities" (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020, p. 6).

To summarize:

- Assemblage is interested in how an entity is derived from the arrangement of its constituent components.
- Within a "body" (or some entity or "thing"), the relationships between component parts are neither stable nor fixed. They can be displaced and replaced within and among other bodies.
- The connections between components (human and non-human) are what provides meaning.
- Assemblage is particularly interested in "affects"—deeper "emotional movements" which influence the relationship between elements.
- Assemblages can be conceived at different levels—for example, "governance" can be conceived at both the national level and at more local levels.

Thus, assemblage asks five key questions:

- What are the components? (human, non-human)
- How are they arranged? (territorialization)
- What factors influence that arrangement? (affects)
- What "becomes" from that arrangement? (assemblages)
- How might the nature of the "body" be different if arranged differently? (potentialities, deterritorialization, reterritorialization)

Assemblages and the state: Avoiding "failure"

How can assemblage theory provide a useful, alternative perspective in contexts where conventional international relations analysis would label a state as "failed"? The rhetoric of "failed state" considers the state from a set of criteria, asking whether it can still be considered a state and typically shaping responses around what would restore it to a prior level of coherence and competence. Such a system-oriented analysis asks what was and what should be (a future contingent on historical arrangements). In considering the context of Somalia, Albert Schoeman (2021) argues that the

> state-centric approach [...] embraced by fragile state discourse and Western state-building efforts has failed to provide an objective, counter-hegemonic, and emancipatory perspective on states labelled as weak, failed, or collapsed [...]. Current international relations theory, with a particular emphasis on statehood, the fragile state perspective, and state-building, is accused of being exclusive and catering to a small minority at the expense of most of the world's population. Rather than exaggerating the politics of public bodies, political science and international relations theory should place a greater emphasis on people or politics at the grassroots level. (p. iii)

In contrast to state-centric approaches, an assemblage approach pays more attention to how the particular arrangement has come about in terms of concrete history and processes of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization. Instead of considering what was and what should be, assemblage is more interested in what is and what could be (a future emerging from current potentialities). Using assemblage theory, we are not asking if Myanmar, Somalia, or Yemen are failed or failing states, but rather asking what they are now, in critical ontological terms, and what could emerge from the current situation.

Crucially, an assemblage perspective pays attention to the ways in which rearrangements are already taking place, and where "assemblages of statehood" may in fact already be emerging through different configurations of component parts. This should not simply be done at the level of mapping different actors, such as armed groups or political organizations. Assemblage pays close attention to critical materialities—such as weapons, narcotics, and information—and how relationships among these play a key role in shaping the assemblage.

State-centric	Assemblage
Frames the current situation in largely binary terms (civil war, “rebels vs. government”)	Frames the current situation in polycentric terms (multiple actors, overlapping claims)
Retains the primacy of the state and bases international relations upon that	Considers the state as one of many possible emergent systems and instead calls for a nuanced plurality of relations with relevant actors
Envisages a future which restores the unitary state in some recognizable form	Does not have a template for the future, but seeks to identify sites of possibility where different forms of being and governance may emerge
Shapes policy which will contribute to a return to central state authority	Shapes policy which will contribute to the practice of “statehood” at different sites and levels

Table 1. *Characteristics of state-centric vs. assemblage perspectives on failed or conflict states*

Assemblage also critically investigates factors that influence relationships between different components. For example, perceptions and attitudes toward violence, particularly in a context like Myanmar, are critical in shaping the relationship between different human components, as well as between human and non-human components. What kinds of violence are permissible, and under what conditions? How do attitudes toward violence influence relationships with materialities such as weapons? How do such attitudes influence the relationship between different groups of persons—for example, young people and elders, or laypeople and religious leaders? Attitudes toward violence are crucial in influencing the control of the means of violence, which is in turn a critical aspect of governance (considered in more detail in the next section). Consideration of affects is important for two reasons: by highlighting the inherent instability of the assemblage, it draws attention to how changes in, for example, attitudes toward violence, can in turn influence how the assemblage is shaped. Secondly, this itself indicates possible pathways of deterritorialization, which, viewed positively, suggest potential sites of possibility for changing the form of an assemblage whose current arrangement is considered undesirable.

Assemblage-derived analysis also enables a polycentric approach. DeLanda (2016) describes different layers or hierarchies of assemblages, and how some assemblages are "nested" within a larger arrangement. This allows a phenomenon like governance, or statehood, to be analyzed from different perspectives—particularly the grassroots perspectives which Schoeman (2021) advocates. Such a polycentric analysis, coupled with the heightened alertness to new sites of possibility, may enable a policy approach which is also multi-layered and multi-faceted, and not simply tethered to a goal of restoring a "failed" state. Such a plural approach could engage multiple actors simultaneously, acknowledging and taking seriously their own nested assemblage within a broader arrangement. From the perspective of local governance, this can inform policies which, rather than seeking a single, all-embracing solution, seek to influence the shape of multiple sites of governance. In a context where the final goal, in terms of the form of the assemblage, is unclear, this nonetheless enables significant and useful policy work.

In summary, an assemblage approach toward policy analysis may have the following advantages:

1. By rejecting the reification of prior structures, assemblage can provide new insights into what is—particularly ongoing "assembling" that may be taking place.
2. By refusing to reify prior structures, assemblage allows us to see other possible future configurations, thus avoiding the traps of becoming stuck in binary, oppositional thinking which tends to support state-centric approaches.
3. By identifying a wider range of elements in the process of mapping the assemblage, more attention is paid to the role of different actors, materialities, and affects, such as guns, narcotics, and attitudes toward violence.

4. By focusing on how small changes (for example, changes in trust between key actors or materialities) can radically alter the emergent assemblage, an assemblage approach can help identify sites of possibility wherein policy interventions have the potential to effect meaningful change.
5. Enables a polycentric analysis and approach, which can facilitate a plural, multi-tracked approach to policy engagement.

Inherent in the assemblage approach is a particular politics: one not concerned with "power and structures, organizational strategy or theoretical clarification" but rather with "asserting an alternative […] ontology of creativity and resistance […where] our everyday practices and experiences promise us the immanent possibility of alternatives" (Chandler, 2014, p. 100). This contrasts the "constrictive power of the actual" with the "alternative ontological reality of the possible." In broader terms, this represents a challenge to "hegemonic power's attempts to control or constrain the creative vitality of life" (Chandler, 2014, p. 100). Ultimately, it is an insistence on constituent, relational power, as opposed to constituted, essentialist power. The focus on agency, possibility, and emergence contrasts with structured, closed, and given systems. As Chandler (2014), Sassen and Ong (2014), and others point out, this is to some extent enabled by an act of seeing: a profoundly "human" hubris. However important this act of "seeing things differently" is, critics have rightly highlighted the need for such analysis to yield concrete change. As Stephen Collier (2014) points out, assemblage thinking has to get beyond simply

> showing how associations are assembled, or that they are assembled rather than pre-given, natural or self-evident. The analysis needs to make it possible to redescribe or reconstruct major elements of our contemporary reality and history in a way that changes our understanding, allows us to think in a more discerning and [...] critical way. (p. 36)

The revelation of alternative possibilities should in turn point to alternative strategies. It is not enough to simply show how something is assembled: analysis needs to demonstrate how and why it is so, what factors have contributed to that form, and how, and under what conditions, it may change. From an international relations perspective, whilst inherently anti-authoritarian politics may be less attractive to some, the possibility of alternative policy approaches, particularly where more conventional, state-centric approaches have failed, may be desirable.

Doing assemblage in the field—Step 1: Mapping the assemblage

Given its relationship with post-structuralism, assemblage theory as a polycentric approach to analysis is perhaps better suited than state-centric approaches to analyzing the complexities of failed or fragile states. Rather than examining how different elements are inserted into a system, assemblage theory instead contends that the system itself is comprised of the elements themselves, and how they interact with each other. In other words, the system or structure (be it a state, a market, a university) does not exist independent of the components within it. Rather, it is itself derived from them (emergence).

One of the common criticisms of assemblage theory is that it tends to produce dense, complex analysis which is of little practical use. However, this need not be the case. Using assemblage in the field entails identifying the field of analysis, and within that, the particular scale of analysis, whether national, sub-national, regional, or even smaller. Often a larger assemblage is itself formed from a number of smaller ones. Typically, we would first look at an assemblage in relation to a particular function—for example, local governance at a village or regional level. The next step involves identifying different interacting components within that assemblage and the ways in which they interact with each other to produce the assemblage.

In this section, we will use assemblage to analyze the nature of local governance in areas of Myanmar currently controlled by non-state forces—either ethnic-affiliated armed groups or more recently formed people's militias (People's Defense Forces, or PDFs). Many such "semi-liberated" areas maintain their own administrative systems within a bounded area with overlapping (and sometimes competing) roles of administration, defense, and security.

Authority is claimed based on three legitimizing factors: locality, legality, and control of the means of violence.

- **Locality** (referring not only to geographical proximity and belonging, but also ethnic affiliation): *We have authority in this place because we are from here.*
- **Legality**: *We have authority because we have been appointed (e.g., by the National Unity Government).*
- **Control of the means of violence**: *We have authority because we hold the guns.*

People living in such areas experience local governance in practical terms, usually based around particular functions such as protection, material support, intimidation, taxation, and control. Applying assemblage theory, we seek to do three things: first, to iterate the different forms of local governance which have emerged; second, to understand how and why they have emerged in the forms that they have; and third, to identify sites of possibility through which policy initiatives can potentially influence the shape of local governance toward more inclusive, equitable forms.

The first stage requires a decision on roughly what it is that is being considered as an assemblage. For example, local governance in an area controlled by several different armed factions may be considered as the notional assemblage. We then seek to propose what different elements may be part of local governance. These include human elements, such as armed actors, civilian actors, religious leaders, merchants, village elders, teachers, and farmers. It also includes a range of non-human elements, from specific materialities such as buildings, stamps and seals, guns, vehicles, roadblocks, phone towers, and money, to less tangible immaterialities such as rules, aspirations, traditions, histories, and boundaries. In each case, subcategories are developed: for people, we may consider armed actors of different types, as well as non-armed actors who have influence, such as religious leaders, elders, and politicians. These are tentatively mapped out, usually in a way which allows them to be easily moved around to demonstrate multiple or shifting relationships.

Following Helen Briassoulis (2019), we can map out the different elements of a local governance assemblage in contested territory as shown below in Table 2:

Biophysical	Man-made/ Material	Immaterial	Collective	Individuals
river	guns	communications	armed groups	religious leader
hills/terrain	buildings	laws	*parahita* (social welfare) organizations	political leader
water	aircraft	history	shadow governments	village elders
soil	artillery	prior policy	opposing militia	youth leaders
crops	roads	village traditions	trade networks	villagers
	money	revolutionary symbolism		informers
	technology			

Table 2. *Elements of an assemblage of local governance*

The second stage considers how these elements relate to each other, and in particular, how certain materialities or affects play a role in the relationship. For example, the role of guns as a materiality within the local governance assemblage is critical in that it transforms the relationship between often younger community members with elders and religious leaders whose authority is derived from other non-material sources. The role of particular commodities (such as narcotics) may also be significant in the relationships between different armed factions, as well as between armed and non-armed governance personnel. A critical aspect of local governance in a village in a semi-liberated area in Myanmar is the control of the means of violence and how it relates to civic-based governance. This often involves particular human, material, and symbolic elements. In many cases, armed groups represent the sole authority within local governance, arbitrating on all matters of security, welfare, service delivery, and infrastructure.

In numerous semi-liberated areas, the relationship between civic and armed elements is strained. Community members more often support the role of armed elements because they tend to be local and able to deliver a visible, tangible "performance" (physical protection). This sustains the role of the gun as a critical materiality in the assemblage, as without it, the performance of the armed elements would not be effective. However, long-term, the entrenching of power derived from the control of the means of violence is not desirable. Therefore, we seek a site of possibility—how might that kind of power be relativized?

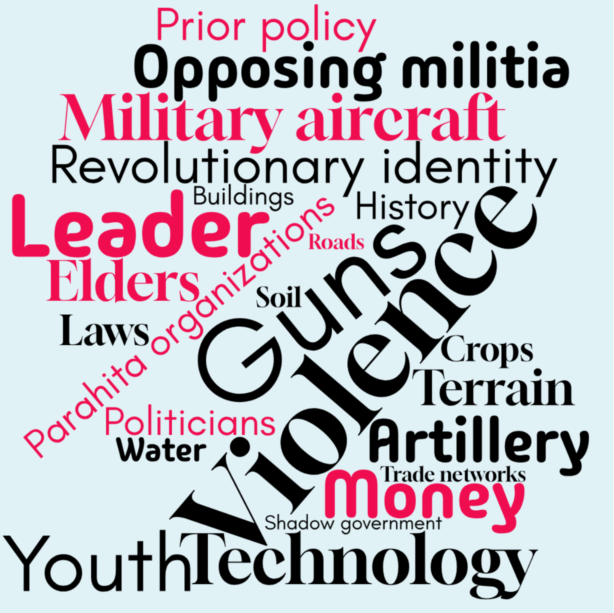
Prior policy
Opposing militia
Military aircraft
Revolutionary identity
Buildings
History
Leader
Roads
Parahita organizations
Elders
Soil
Guns
Violence
Laws
Crops
Terrain
Politicians
Water
Artillery
Trade networks
Money
Shadow government
Youth
Technology

Figure 1. *Local governance elements with the relative size of each element corresponding with its importance (larger size equals greater significance)*

Finally, a critical third step in considering the assemblage is investigating what things influence the relationship between different elements in the assemblage. For example, how do village elders, religious leaders, armed groups, and merchants relate to each other? How does the relationship with opposing militia (for example, a military junta-aligned *Pyusawhti* militia in a neighboring village) influence local governance? Data shows that in many cases, the relationship between elements can range from overtly hostile, to one of mutual avoidance, to occasionally collaborative, particularly where business interests may be involved. That relationship may in turn influence the form of local governance. Likewise, key materialities also influence the shape of local governance: territorial control (whereby armed groups can protect against raids by the Myanmar Armed Forces (MAF) or affiliated militia) is crucial to maintaining operational space for civilian governance. But this is also threatened by other materialities—such as long-range artillery and fighter jets operated by the MAF. This too is subjected to affective flow: where there is a culture of indiscriminate targeting by air and artillery strikes, civilian structures and populations are immediately threatened.

In some areas, the village abbot exerts a huge influence on the nature of armed groups, mobilizing claims of religious protectionism to motivate junta-aligned militias. Such relationships are shaped by powerful affects, which are best described as animating ideas, emotions, or values which can cause different elements to be attracted or opposed. For example, a strong desire to affirm a distinct ethnic identity in a particular territory may have a powerful influence on how particular elements in an assemblage relate to each other. Likewise, the comradeship within a particular army grouping may be a powerful influence on that group's performance and unity. Revolutionary fervor may have a strong influence on how different actors within the local governance assemblage interact with relation to issues of justice, particularly in relation to acts of violence by revolutionary-aligned armed groups.

Citing the above example, appeals to religious ethnonationalism in some areas of central Myanmar have been significant in tilting militia support toward the military junta, resulting in a form of local governance which is aligned with, and armed by, the Myanmar military. Conversely, a strong loyalty to the National League for Democracy, and personal experiences of oppression by the Myanmar military, serve to stoke a revolutionary fervor amongst younger generations that has displaced or relativized traditional leadership in some rural areas. Within this, other affective flows operate to shape the assemblage. Revolutionary fervor also tends to tilt justice away from any actions which may harm the reputation of the resistance as a whole, encouraging at times the turning of a blind eye to resistance-aligned excesses or a deflection of blame to the "other" side.

Doing assemblage in the field—Step 2: Directing affective flows

With an assemblage like the one described above, we can ask three questions:

1. What particular affects (emotional movements) influence the shape of local governance?
2. What could change that, and how?
3. What kind of affect could alter the relationships within the assemblage to result in a different form of governance?

Assemblage theory is interested in how relationships might be changed by the introduction of different elements or affects. How, for example, does the acquisition of powerful new weapons by one particular faction change its relationship with others? What impact would the establishment of a cryptocurrency network have on local commerce, including commerce relating to arms purchases or the narcotics trade? How do these in turn enable or constrain particular actors or factions? Of interest to humanitarians, what effect does the introduction of social welfare systems have on the hegemony of armed authority? How do particular patterns of economic redistribution affect the viability of civilian (non-armed) authority, in contrast to armed authority?

Mapping governance in this way confers three distinct advantages over a more structurally deterministic perspective:

1. It draws more attention to particular materialities (such as guns, drugs, and technology) and to key non-materialities (such as alliances, public trust, and personal charisma) and how these play a critical role in the actualization of local governance.
2. In doing so, assemblage theory provides a more grounded, quotidian perspective on what governance actually is, and how it is experienced

as a phenomenon. To the vast majority, the "state" or "governance" is experienced as small-scale, often infuriating or disappointing bureaucracy, and in some cases, as indiscriminate terror. It is rarely experienced as a coherent, intelligible, and logical system.

3. In mapping this way (paying attention to the fluid and complex relational construction of elements, and retaining a deep regard for emergence and possibility), assemblage theory also generates space for unimagined alternatives. It is always alert to sites of possibility where the emergent future may indeed look very different to its antecedents. This moves the question away from attempts either to "reassemble" Myanmar (Steinberg 2024) or to revive the failed state (Menkhaus, 2006), instead allowing for other, more open-ended possibilities which may as yet not be apparent.

But how does all of this assist with policymaking? I would argue that assemblage provides a particularly helpful focus for policymaking in fragile states, which instead of seeking to restore, revive, replace, or shadow prior national systems, seeks to identify sites of possibility in which elements of good governance, equitable redistribution, and inclusive development could be enabled to provide an injection of fresh ideas and effective resources in ways which, through shifting the externalities in the assemblage, move the assemblage toward a form in which better governance is possible. Inherent in this, of course, is an element of determinism: our interventions are oriented toward influencing the emergence of a particular form of the assemblage. We have an idea, if not of what final form it will take, then at least of some of the key characteristics. This differs, however, from the more rigid determinism of the state-centric view, in that the interventions are not directed toward a template, but rather a set of principles or characteristics.

As we consider emergent governance, where might new sites of possibility be found? If local governance is an emergent phenomenon arising from the interaction between the human and non-human components shown in Figure 1, a key objective may be toward an assemblage whereby a key materiality (guns) is relativized in terms of its influence on the overall assemblage. In essence, the desire is for governance which is increasingly derived from civic rather than military authority. This requires a shift in how certain elements relate to each other—particularly how civil and military elements relate to each other and to other elements in the assemblage. There could be a number of viable sites of possibility, such as control of weapons acquisition, imposition of no-fly zones to restrict the impact of air power, or manipulation of commercial flows through cryptocurrency networks to direct resources toward certain actors.

However, the idea of "affective flow" points to another site of possibility: the ability of humanitarian support to influence the emergence of an effective performance of public service which can in turn increase the public legitimacy of non-armed actors in the governance assemblage. In the absence of functioning government-led administrations in Myanmar, governance is a patchy, emergent affair. Health, education, and social services are constructed and led by a coalition of local actors, striking civil servants, and new volunteers, with varying degrees of support and legitimization by external actors such as ethnic armed groups or the National Unity Government. The ability of local actors to effectively deliver such services confers them significant legitimacy, which in turn strengthens their ability to mobilize and disperse resources. The more that civil-led initiatives can demonstrate a credible, consistent, inclusive, transparent, accountable, and sustainable performance of key public services, the stronger the legitimization of forms of local governance that do not rely solely on the control of the means of violence for their authority. A strong civilian performance of "government" marginalizes the role of guns and violence as the sole arbiter of local disputes. The affect, if it can be labeled, is the social contract between people and authorities, but in this case, it is shaped by both expectations and performance. The more that the civic authority can deliver a performance which meets public expectations, the more the public confers legitimacy on civilian groups. This changes the relationship between different elements of the assemblage—particularly between the public and civilian groups, between the public and armed groups, and between armed groups and civilian groups.

In assemblage theory, such changes are referred to as "deterritorialization" when an affect or another element causes a disruption to the structure of the assemblage; "reterritorialization" refers to the new settled state of the assemblage after the disruption. Essentially, the policy intervention seeks to disrupt an existing assemblage (deterritorialization) in ways which will alter key relationships, resulting in a new configuration (reterritorialization). In the case of using a humanitarian service such as social protection as a site of possibility, the policy intervention seeks to strengthen the provision of key services such as welfare and protection of vulnerable groups by local civilian actors as a means to enable a credible performance of accountable, inclusive, and equitable public service. This in turn is designed to stimulate an affective flow, strengthening the social contract between the public and civilian service providers, which in turn increases the legitimacy of non-armed elements within the broader local governance assemblage. This in turn deterritorializes the hegemony of armed authority, relativizing its role to that of physical protection, rather than being the arbiter and gatekeeper of all facets of governance. This deterritorialization is to some extent a preliminary stage to eventual demobilization, but in the short term at least, seeks to establish a more civilian-led governance structure.

This may seem somewhat theoretical and idealistic, but robust evidence from case studies in conflict-affected Sagaing Region points to the humanitarian-governance nexus as a promising site of intervention (Aung Naing, 2024). Whilst not removing the need for armed protection, this approach seeks to decentralize guns in the wider assemblage, thereby centralizing civilian roles as the key mode of local governance moving forward. Here, humanitarian policy intersects clearly with local governance, in that particular strategies of humanitarian assistance can indeed play a significant role in shaping grassroots governance, not by supplying templates for local administration, but by supporting the emergence of credible, civilian alternatives to armed authority. Central to this is the establishment of a viable social contract between civilian governance and the population that can provide a necessary counterbalance to authority largely vested in the control of the means of violence.

Conclusion: Myanmar—Reassembly or new assemblages?

Where the state has failed, fragmented, or simply faded away in Myanmar, the reality of "governance without government" may become a more permanent reality, at the same time subject to multiple changes in form. Where a more state-centric approach may continue to persist with efforts to "integrate" local assemblages into a state structure, an assemblage-driven approach asks, How do these local expressions in themselves represent a form of statehood? And what kind of broader assemblage might emerge if different elements were connected? The difference? The assemblage approach does not presume that the final desired form would be a recognizable "state"; multiple possibilities continue to exist, determined by relationships between different elements, and between different assemblages themselves. To put it more specifically in the Myanmar context: what may emerge from the current context is as yet undetermined—multiple independent statelets, a relatively coherent federal union, or a looser confederation of semi-autonomous territories. In the midst of this, assemblage theory-informed perspectives recognize that governance continues, albeit in plural and at times overlapping forms, and that these expressions are themselves generative of future, larger-scale possibilities. In other words, the form of local governance at the community level in Rakhine State, in Kayah State, or in Sagaing Region is likely to be highly influential on forms of governance at higher/larger levels. Hence, paying attention to quotidian expressions of "governance without government" is critical: this will inform the shape and character of whatever larger settlements eventually emerge. Moreover, assemblage theory identifies different sites of possibility whereby a policy intervention may, by altering the relationships between constituent parts of the assemblage, influence the emergence of a different (and hopefully better) form of governance.

The current crisis in Myanmar has been accompanied by a plethora of analysis and proposed solutions from both academics and policymakers. Whilst the language of federalism is a relatively common thread, what is envisaged in terms of a federal state is more ambiguous. More state-centric approaches seek to develop a constitutional framework, either broadly within the boundaries of prior arrangements (Crouch, 2020; David & Holliday, 2023) or with a greater focus on more emergent processes (South, 2021). However, recent scholarship has begun to draw attention to multiple, emergent forms of "citizenship" where broader political arrangements are not in place (Ko, Rhoads, Tinilarwin, Aung, & Khaing, 2024). Governance, citizenship, and the "state" are experienced in more everyday, localized, and unstable ways, with power and authority both fluid and overlapping, sometimes described as mandalas (Lwin & Aung, 2024). This highlights both an analytical and operational fault line between an approach broadly committed to restoring a unitary state, albeit under altered terms and largely through the development of constitutions and top-down arrangements, and one which recognizes that an extraordinary level of rearrangement is already taking place at multiple levels, often yielding new sites of both possibility and conflict.

The first broad approach (state-centric) seeks to define, as far as possible through a consensus perspective, a common goal, pathway, and structure. The second approach, emphasizing the "local" as the key site of transformation, instead seeks to enable a framework which can accommodate multiple goals which may overlap, and where the common goal emerges from overlapping and relationship, rather than being predetermined. This may at first glance seem terrifying, and a surefire recipe for maintaining chaos, anarchy, and internecine conflict. However, closer analysis may reveal critical pathways for change, particularly attention to relational dynamics and affects. Rather than placing all the emphasis on higher-level constitutional agreements by political elites, assemblage-informed policy focuses attention on strengthening quotidian-level citizenship and politics, which more explicitly include grassroots voices, fears, concerns, and aspirations, and which, crucially, build on smaller systems which are already "emerging" and "becoming." In policy terms, this is neither simply "grassroots development" nor "hands-off emergence," but rather taking concrete steps to influence the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization within localized assemblages to effect different arrangements. This treats various levels, assemblages, or entities as being in the same class or category, enabling a polycentric approach to engagement with communities, actors, and groups, including armed groups. Such an analysis treats the Myanmar military as one of many entities in the same category, and not in a separate, privileged category, such as “government.” Instead of treating one group as the de facto authority, an assemblage analysis sees power and agency as differentiated and multi-sited. This permits engagement not on the basis of any kind of given legitimacy, but on a pragmatic analysis of power. The goal of policymaking following this approach is not to preserve or restore a particular prior arrangement, but to nourish the conditions for the emergence of new arrangements which permit and sustain life—not only of the “self,” but crucially, of neighbors also.

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Chapter 2

Unsettled Spaces: Territorial Assemblages in Northern Shan State

Sai Tun Aung Lwin and Aung Naing

Chapter summary

This chapter explores the complex political, social, and historical dynamics of Northern Shan State in Myanmar, particularly in the context of the 2021 coup and subsequent resistance, by analyzing case studies from Namhkam, Kutkai, and Hsenwi. The authors critique the simplistic characterization of Myanmar's conflict as a "civil war," emphasizing the intricate interplay between ethnic groups, external actors, and local governance in shaping territorial assemblages. Northern Shan State's geographical and historical significance stems from its strategic location near the China-Myanmar border, rich natural resources, and diverse ethnic composition, including Shan, Ta'ang, Kachin, and Kokang groups. Historically resistant to centralized control, the region has seen tensions rise due to forced assimilation, military interventions, and external influences such as China, which wields significant power in the area through economic and political means. The resistance in Northern Shan State is shaped by multiple, often competing, desires: avoidance of centralized authority, assertion of cultural identity, economic pragmatism, and geopolitical strategy. This chapter applies assemblage theory to understand the region as a fluid and contested space where authority emerges from the interaction of ethnicity, coercion, historical narratives, and material factors. The chapter concludes by advocating for rethinking governance beyond centralized statehood, emphasizing local consent, participatory governance, and negotiated coexistence as pathways to sustainable peace in Northern Shan State and beyond.

Keywords: Shan State, Shan, Ta’ang, Kachin, Kokang, narrative, territorial claim

Introduction

The nationwide resistance to the 2021 coup d'état by Myanmar's military leaders has been described by uninformed observers as a "civil war" between "rebels" and the "government." This kind of lazy analysis ignores the complexity of resistance, and in doing so, misses or willfully ignores significant points of inflection in the terrain of shifting conflict. This is largely due to the dominance of the state-centric model, which continues to assume both the historical legitimacy and the contemporary privilege of the unitary state over and against competing historical claims and everyday realities. Much is made of the lack of unity between different armed actors resisting the Myanmar military, leading to the assumption that, even in the event of an eventual defeat of the Myanmar military, various groups will simply turn on each other and descend into a spiral of anarchy. Politically, this reinforces the "better the devil you know" perspective, seemingly advocated by most international actors, that the Myanmar military remains the only force capable of maintaining unity and order. Aside from being a view at odds with that of the majority of people in Myanmar itself, and representing a capitulation to a narrative which seems to endorse coercion by lethal force as a legitimate peacebuilding strategy, this view also ignores centuries of historical data which demonstrate that, despite a legacy of contestation, diverse ethnic groups have established mechanisms of coexistence, often in spite of, or in the absence of any central authority. In other words, history suggests an opposite conclusion: that in the absence of forceful coercion by an external, central force, diverse ethnic actors have a long legacy of negotiated settlements upon which to shape future arrangements. This is no guarantee of immediate, comprehensive, peaceful settlements, but it represents sufficient evidence to repudiate the notion that, absent the *Tatmadaw* (Myanmar military), the ethnic "children" will simply squabble their way to mutual destruction.

The previous chapter has challenged the idea of the "state" as having any sense of privileged ontology and instead highlighted the emergent, contingent nature of the state as an assemblage, a product of the interaction of material and non-material elements shaped by powerful affective flows. This becomes more acute when considering the state from the perspective of those who live within a particular space that is somehow said to be a constituent part of the state. When ASEAN speaks of engaging "Myanmar" as shorthand for dialogue with the military junta, this tends to represent a casual, intellectually negligent referral to all that exists within the internationally determined borders of Myanmar, ignoring the ground realities whereby the "Myanmar" represented on maps is an irrelevance. The naming of a space is itself a power grab: what a space is called is an integral aspect of what the space is constituted to be. The naming of a space is a performative act (O'Reilly, 2023).

However, territorial claims should not be elided with nationalism; some may instead represent resistance to nationalist hegemony (Etherington, 2010). The aspirations of groups seeking territorial control may not be to establish a "nation," but rather to avoid being part of a national system that denies crucial elements of identity. As Etherington (2010) points out, this challenges the idea that "all nationalist movements must conceive of the nation, at least partially, in exclusive, noncivic terms" (p. 321). Arguably, the claims and aspirations for self-governance in Northern Shan State represent four intertwined, at times competing, desires: (1) following James C. Scott (2009), the desire to not be governed by the center, and hence, an act of evasion and avoidance of central control. Whilst this does not fully endorse the notion of Zomia[1], nonetheless, modern-day territorial claims appear to be a continuation of an informal policy of evasion of central control on the part of ethnic communities; (2) assertion of cultural hegemony in the face of pluralism; (3) pragmatic economic concerns regarding control of resources, including land and minerals; and (4) a foundation upon which to manage political relations with powerful neighbors such as China. In assemblages, and the ebb and flow of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, no single entity is decisive. Even considering the present-day context in which China's covert colonial ambitions in Myanmar are expressed through the maintenance of informally constituted vassal state arrangements, Chinese influence is never decisive. The assemblage remains resistant to hegemony, always subject to new moves and iterations.

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[1] "Zomia" was originally used by van Schendel (2002) to describe the mountainous region of Southeast Asia characterized by political remoteness. In *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009), James C. Scott uses the term to describe historic resistance to state control by certain ethnic groups in highland Southeast Asia.

Northern Shan State: Defining the space

Northern Shan State is part of the administrative region of Shan State, commonly divided into three sub-states: Northern Shan State, which includes Kyaukme, Muse, Laukkaing, Kunlong, and Lashio districts; Southern Shan State (Taunggyi and Loilem districts); and Eastern Shan State (Kengtung, Mong Hsat, Mong Hpayak, Tachilek, Hopang, and Matman districts—the latter two being part of the Wa Self-Administered Division). Three factors have shaped the politics of Northern Shan State. Firstly, geography itself: the confluence of mountains and plains, often serving as identity markers and lines of demarcation between groups; secondly, the relative inaccessibility from traditional central power bases in Myanmar, contrasted with proximity and shared border and history with China; and finally, its location along significant trade routes with China, making it an area long resistant to British or Bamar-centric colonization. Muse district alone facilitates more than 50 percent of Myanmar's border trade with China (Dang Seng Lawn, 2022). Alongside this, rare earth mining, particularly silver, lead, and zinc from the Bawdwin mine, as well as trade in teak and rubies, are significant elements in the complex economy.

Pre-coup census data recorded a population of 1.9 million in Northern Shan State (Department of Population and Immigration, 2015), and although data on ethnicity has been withheld, estimates suggest that the Shan are the largest group (700,000), followed by Ta'ang (or Palaung, 300,000), Kokang (200,000), and Kachin (150,000), with the others comprised of Bamar, Chinese, and Wa. However, there have been significant changes in the ethnic composition in some areas. For example, in Kutkai Township, the population has grown from 98,130 in 1953 to 171,440 today, but the ethnic proportions have shifted dramatically, with ethnic Chinese now outnumbering the previously majority Kachin and Ta'ang. This decline in the proportion of the Kachin population, combined with repression and armed conflict, has contributed to a sense of insecurity among local Kachin communities, fueling a belief that the Kachin must be armed or supported by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), even in areas outside of Kachin State.

The recent history of Northern Shan State is in some ways characterized by three dynamics: Firstly, the forceful denial of ethnic autonomy by Myanmar/Burma's central governments, resulting in frequent armed suppression and driving instability. The 1962 military coup intensified civil war and armed resistance. The abolition of the federal constitution and the arrest and death of Shan leader Sao Shwe Thaike (also the first president of the Union of Burma following independence in 1948) escalated tensions. In 1964, his widow, Sao Nang Hearn Kham, led a coalition that formed the Shan State Army (SSA), a major resistance force. To combat insurgencies, the government supported the *Ka Kwe Ye* militia program in 1963, recruiting local warlords and transforming their forces into home guard units. This strategy was partly aimed at challenging the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), headquartered at the time in Eastern Shan State, which received substantial support from China. Prominent *Ka Kwe Ye* militia leaders included Lo Hsing Han (Kokang) and Zhang Qifu (drug lord Khun Sa). Northern Shan saw heavy displacement during the Revolutionary Council and Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) eras, during which Shan people lost formal political power as their insurgencies weakened due to factional splits. The CPB and Burmese military contested Kachin areas, shifting the center of Kachin power. For the Kokang, government pressure and shortages of arms caused splits; leaders fled to Thailand and China, while Lo Hsing Han's government-backed forces rampaged locally. Crucially, the role of the Myanmar military in forcefully displacing Shan language, culture, and political organization as a lingua franca and broad operating system in Northern Shan is also a critical factor in the splintering and fragmentation of Northern Shan State.

Secondly, the role of China, overtly or tacitly supporting certain armed groups and influencing all-important border trade. The 1990s brought ceasefires and new economic dynamics along the China-Myanmar border. Border trade flourished, transitioning the local economy from small-scale trade to capitalism. Though some benefited economically, lack of protections led to growing inequalities and concerns over the appropriation of natural resources by non-local actors. Ceasefire zones became "brown areas"—territories under joint government and armed group control, dominated increasingly by the military, which exploited natural resources and expanded its influence.

Thirdly, land grabbing, forced displacement, and migration ruptured prior political settlements. Increased military control by the Myanmar forces brought extensive land confiscations in many areas of Shan State, forcing local populations into vulnerability (Aung Naing, 2024). The number of migrant laborers from Myanmar's central plains and Chinese migrants increased along the Sino-Burma trade routes, further transforming the demographic and economic landscape. Despite Myanmar's liberalization era (2011-2020), Northern Shan State remained a battleground between the Myanmar army and various ethnic armed groups, reflecting the incomplete nature of the central authority's national integration or forced assimilation efforts. This points to the failure of the state-building task by Myanmar/Burma's governments, substituting institutional strengthening and civic representation for coercive control of resources.

Within this context of long-term, festering contestation, different political identities became crystallized in Northern Shan State in the decade prior to the 2021 coup. These can be roughly categorized as:

Persistence identity
Common among groups such as Shan and Kachin (and in other areas, Karen and Karenni) who feel betrayed by historical events (e.g., the central authorities' non-fulfillment of the 1947 Panglong Agreement) and remain deeply suspicious of the central government, the Burmese majority, and the national military, and express continuous resistance to central control.

Emerging identity
Found among new or strengthening political-ethnic identities appearing mainly in the last 30 years[2], such as the Wa and Ta'ang (Palaung) ethnic groups, whose political and cultural identities have grown more prominent in recent decades.

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[2] This does not imply that the ethnic group only appeared in the past 30 years; rather, that the expression of political organization is relatively recent.

Siege mentality identity
Mainly held by groups such as the Bamar in Northern Shan, which feel targeted or besieged, viewing demands from other ethnicities as unfair or threatening. Those holding this identity are often linked to Burmese Buddhist nationalists, especially vocal in 2017-2019, who use it to justify the maintenance of Bamar control.

Integration and peripheral identity
Seen among groups like the Kokang, who combine integrationist nationalism (leaning towards China) with demands for autonomy in Myanmar. Despite holding the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) as their political entity, the Kokang pursue both citizenship rights and claims for political independence.

These prior conditions arguably made the events launched on October 27, 2023, entirely predictable, at least in terms of ambition. In a two-phased operation from 2023 to 2024 known as Operation 1027, an alliance of three organizations—the Kokang MNDAA, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Arakan/Rakhine Army (AA), supported by People's Defense Forces (PDFs) formed after the 2021 coup and mainly drawn from central Bamar-dominant areas—launched successful campaigns to capture large swathes of territory from the Myanmar army, including the Northern Shan State capital of Lashio, economically significant border towns such as Muse, and areas such as Kutkai, Namhsan, Kyaukme, Hsipaw, and Laukkaing. Whilst control of some of these areas has since been given up following political pressure from China, effective control of much of Northern Shan State remains under ethnic militias. Key armed groups expanding territory significantly include the TNLA, KIA, SSPP/SSA (Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army), and MNDAA. Territorial control and governance expansions by ethnic armed groups in the region typically follow four main strategic objectives: removing rival bases or armed groups threatening their security; gaining control over economically valuable areas, including trade routes and resources; establishing zones of governance and administration to consolidate control; and seeking to gain formal or informal recognition for their governance and territorial claims.

Many armed ethnic groups in Northern Shan State today claim territories beyond their historical autonomous regions, including former Kachin sub-states. The MNDAA and TNLA seek arrangements similar to those that led to the creation of the autonomous Wa Self-Administered Division in Eastern Shan State. In December 2023, the TNLA, backed by the United Wa State Army (UWSA), took control of Namhsan (a predominantly Ta'ang town), and has since expanded into Shan and Kachin areas, exacerbating conflicts. As ethnic armed groups gain power, they often disrupt multi-ethnic local communities, increasing tensions. This chapter does not intend to present data to support or refute the legitimacy of claims by one or another group, but rather, to show, through assemblage thinking, the elements which serve to shape and propel those claims.

Settlers: Contesting the space

Claims to place are often derived from narratives of settlement, which are used to justify relative indigeneity. This highlights the role of narratives as a key affective flow in territorial assemblages, particularly where claims to place are interwoven with ethnic self-identity. In Northern Shan State, such contested claims involve peoples identifying as Kachin, Ta'ang (Palaung), Shan (Tai), and Kokang, but with significant influences from other actors, such as Bamar, British, and Chinese. This section provides brief descriptions of the settlement history of each of the four primary ethnic groups populating Northern Shan State today, along with an overview of their intergroup relations in the area.

Kachin settlement and interethnic relations in Northern Shan State

The Kachin people settled in northern areas of Myanmar, including Shan State, after migrating through southern China from their ancestral homeland on the Tibetan Plateau between the 14th and 15th centuries (Kachin Literary and Cultural Association, 2014, p. 3). Their society is shaped by a balance between egalitarian values and hierarchical respect for elders, though modern political changes have lessened the authority of elder-based decision-making.

Kachin communities traditionally formed around clans, maintaining social order through ideological and territorial structuring (Sadan, 2013, p. 17). Kachin territorial expansion was aided by their use of geographical advantage, military strength, and alliances with central rulers. Although both the Kachin and Burmese belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, their relationship was historically more cooperative than rivalrous. The Kachin often fought alongside Burmese dynasties in military campaigns, particularly when the central monarchs' power declined.

Initially, the Kachin clashed with the Ta'ang people, who accused the Kachin of destroying their territories before the 16th century (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 52). This Kachin expansion displaced many Shan and Ta'ang populations. In *Great Lords of the Sky: Burma's Shan Aristocracy*, Sao Sanda Simms (2017, p. 144) describes how the majority Shan and Ta'ang people who lived in Namhkam and Kutkai were pushed out to the plains and other areas by the arrival of the Kachin. Conflict between the Kachin and Ta'ang in Shan State subsided after the British arrived in 1893, but tensions continued into the mid-20th century between the Kachin and Ta'ang after the Chinese Communist Party came to power in 1949.

Despite past conflicts, Kachin, Shan, and Ta'ang communities eventually coexisted stably under shared chieftain rule. Their economic practices complemented each other: the Kachin hunted in the mountains while the Shan farmed the lowlands (Dr. Sai San Aik, personal communication, May 29, 2023). However, relations between the Kachin and the Kokang have remained hostile from the beginning, involving territorial battles (Yang Li, 1997, p. 26).

Ta'ang settlement and interethnic relations in Northern Shan State

The Ta'ang, a Mon-Khmer ethnic group, are believed to have settled in present-day Myanmar over 2,000 years ago, migrating from southwestern China through Namhkam to Namhsan (Ashley, 2004). Though composed of many clans, they are broadly categorized into two groups based on whether the women wear rattan rings around their waists (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 1).

Historically, the Ta'ang have coexisted with the Shan (who called them *Pu Lwal*, meaning "Lords of the Mountain") since at least the 8th century AD. Other ethnic groups had different names for them: the Kachin called them *Balaung*, the Wa called them *Praung*, and the Chinese had no formal name for them until the 8th century. The Chinese also identify the Ta'ang as the longest-existing tribe in the southwest border region and recognize that they have had relations with the Han Chinese for more than 2,000 years. The Ta'ang once shared linguistic roots with the Mon people but likely diverged during periods of warfare among Shan and Burmese feudal states, prompting them to retreat to mountainous regions (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 31).

Ta'ang relations with the Shan were generally peaceful, marked by cultural exchange. However, they had frequent conflicts with the Kachin, including the killing of Ta'ang *saopha* ('lord of the heavens'; title used by hereditary rulers of Shan states) Hkun Se Dwe Hon by Kachin forces in the Kodaung-Taung Pai area, where a Kachin sub-state was later established (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 31). This event is largely absent from official historical records.

Shan (Tai) settlement and interethnic relations in Northern Shan State

The Shan (Tai) people are believed to have settled in Northern Shan State around the 10th century AD (Sai Zin Didi Zone, personal communication, May 28, 2023), with some studies suggesting their presence as early as the 8th century BC (Shwe Zin Maw, 2018). They likely migrated from southern China, becoming a major ethnic group in the Nanchao Kingdom, and later spread across Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Assam in northeastern India (Milne & Cochrane, 1910). Historical and linguistic evidence indicates that many regions, including central Myanmar, were originally named in Shan or Mon languages, meaning the arrival of these groups predated that of the Burmans in these areas. The Shan established a group of small kingdoms, princely states ruled by leaders known as *saophas*, and developed a lowland rice-farming culture. Whilst initially displacing lowland Ta'ang into the highlands, the two groups share religious and cultural ties, with Ta'ang using Shan scripts and language for centuries (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 37). Relations between the Shan and the Kachin were more complex: lowland Kachin tended to be Buddhist, use the Shan language, and be loyal to the local *saopha* (Shan ruler). But Kachin from mountainous regions were more detached and isolationist and occasionally raided Shan villages. Under colonial rule, there was segregation of highland and lowland groups, but after the Second World War, the Kachin from the mountains moved to the plains en masse. This migration was encouraged by the British as a reward for their help during the war, but it was not a desirable situation for the Shan (Sao Sanda Simms, 2017). It was at this stage that a Shan *saopha* approved the designation of Kachin sub-state territories (Sai Kham Mong, 2005).

Kokang settlement and interethnic relations in Northern Shan State

In the Shan language, there is one translation of "Kokang" that means the heads of nine villages, while in another translation, the term means nine guardians (Sao Sanda Simms, 2017, p. 220). The Kokang region, now part of Northern Shan State, has historical roots tied to Chinese migration, particularly the Yang clan from Nanjing during the Ming Dynasty (Yang Li, 1997). They arrived in Myanmar in 1738, establishing local authority amidst regional instability, and expanded their control under Yang Weisin, who fought the Kachin in a significant territorial battle (Sao Sanda Simms, 2017, p. 220).

Originally inhabited by Han, Wa, and Shan peoples, the Kokang region later became a vassal of Baoshan (Yunnan), maintaining autonomy through tribute. After British colonial demarcation in 1897, Kokang became part of the Shan state but retained a self-governing status, especially after assisting the British against Japanese invasion (Yang Li, 1997, p. 64). The Kokang-Shan relationship has generally been peaceful and cooperative, with strong cultural ties and mutual respect. Many Kokang speak Shan, while only a small percentage speak Kachin, reflecting closer integration with the Shan. Incidents of violence and distrust have lingered due to historical military incursions and differing political alignments, such as clashes between the Chinese Kuomintang and Kachin Village Defense Forces (VDFs). A prominent Kokang resident notes: "Kokang Chinese and Shan relations have always been good. The Shan also did not discriminate against Chinese people.

With the Kachin, it is different. In the past, the KIA was very unpleasant in the Chinese villages of Northern Shan" (personal communication, 2023).

The rise and fall of sub-states

The history of the emergence and contestation of sub-states in Northern Shan is driven by three dynamics: internal desires for greater autonomy, principally as a means of protection; external pressures, such as colonialism, conflict, and pressure from central authorities; and opportunism, whereby historical particularities generated favorable conditions, often for one group.

Historically, the Kachin people in Northern Shan State established two notable autonomous sub-states: Kodaung in Mong Mit region and Kutkai in Hsenwi region. These sub-states emerged during key political shifts: firstly, during the late Konbaung Dynasty (1752-1885), when the Kachin helped *Saopha* Hkun Santon Hoon gain power in Hsenwi but were later betrayed, prompting a Kachin revolt. Secondly, they reemerged after World War II, when Kachin fighters who had aided the British against the Japanese were rewarded for their loyalty, strengthening their political influence.

The Kodaung sub-state was located within the Mong Mit principality, shared by Ta'ang and Kachin communities, and was the first ethnic autonomous region in Shan State. After the Manaw victory ceremony at the end of World War II in 1945, Kachin leaders declared intent to form an autonomous government. With the support of Sao Khun Cho (*saopha* of Mong Mit and a Cambridge graduate), the sub-state was recognized, and by 1957, Kodaung had 179 villages and 16 tracts administered by a council headquartered in Manton (now part of the Palaung Self-Administered Zone) (Sai Kham Mong, 2005).

The Kutkai sub-state in the Hsenwi region emerged from similar wartime conditions as Kodaung. Compared to Kodaung, it had more political representation, being eligible to send representatives to the Ethnic House in Parliament. After Burma's independence, it became a separate sub-state, distinct from the rest of Hsenwi. In both cases, autonomy was both ethnically driven and strategically supported by the British during and after WWII.

These sub-states were early examples of ethnic self-governance in Shan State that later lost status under centralized state control.

Ta'ang claims to sub-states go back to the legacy of traditional governance mirroring the Shan feudal system (Ashley, 2004, p. 17) with the Tawngpeng principality (modern-day Namhsan) serving as their administrative and cultural center. Tawngpeng was ruled by a line of 15 *saophas*, the last being Hkun Pan Sein who abdicated in 1959 (Mai Aik Kaw, 2018, p. 37). He was a prominent figure, serving as president of the Shan States Federation Council. Initially, the Ta'ang were aligned with the Shan movement, even operating under the SSA umbrella. However, as Shan leadership declined and Shan State lost its Union-level status, some Ta'ang began pursuing a distinct ethnic identity and political direction separate from the Shan.

The Kokang region, located along the China-Shan State frontier, has long been inhabited by ethnic Chinese from Yunnan (with smaller populations of Shan, Wa, and Kachin) with rulers of Kokang being descendants of the Yang clan, who were originally from Nanjing. The Kokang are considered as one of the 135 ethnic groups of Myanmar. The region's political identity and autonomy have historically been closely tied to China, particularly Baoshan (Yong Chang) in Yunnan, to which the Kokang paid tribute prior to British colonization (Ai Sai, 2023). Under British rule, Kokang became a territory under Hsenwi State, and the period from 1897 to 1942 was its most peaceful (Yang Li, 1997). During Japanese occupation, while many Shan *saophas* accepted Japanese rule, Kokang leader Sao Yang Wen Pin resisted, fleeing to Yunnan for support, which ignited early Kokang nationalism. Between 1945 and 1951, Kokang gained independence from Hsenwi and its leader assumed a hereditary *saopha* title.

However, the period of parliamentary democracy (1948-1962) failed to deliver equality or development for the Kokang, and their autonomous dreams collapsed after the forced abdication of Shan *saophas* in 1959 and the military coup by General Ne Win in 1962, which abolished all autonomous statuses. The Kokang *saopha* was arrested and rebellion ensued in 1963, fluctuating over the successive decades with ceasefires, Chinese mediation, and "ceasefire capitalism" (Woods, 2013) driven by Beijing's shift from ideology to trade.

After a decisive military campaign by the Myanmar military in 2009, much of the Kokang resistance, along with thousands of refugees, was forced to flee to Yunnan, sowing the seeds for the reemergence of subsequent armed struggles in 2015 and after the 2021 military coup. Post-2021, public resentment toward the military junta and its Kokang-aligned Border Guard Forces (BGF) has grown. The lack of national ID cards issued by the central authorities for the Kokang, harsh restrictions, and severe socioeconomic hardships have fueled local support for the MNDAA. Widespread abuse and economic oppression by the authorities have led to comparisons between the suffering of the Kokang and that of the Rohingya.

Why were autonomous sub-states lost?

Autonomous sub-states were abolished primarily due to the central government's military-led interventions and policies during two of General Ne Win's periods in office (the "caretaker government," 1958-1960, and the Union Revolutionary Council, starting in 1962). Key factors include:

1. Disarming of local forces: Ne Win's caretaker government disarmed ethnic armed groups like the Volunteer Defense Forces (VDFs) in Kachin areas, undermining local security and autonomy.
2. Territorial and administrative pressures: The Shan principalities were pressured to relinquish power, while Kokang's autonomous state administration was absorbed into a central district administration after the abdication of its leader.
3. Border issues and local grievances: Measures around the China-Myanmar border, including disputed territorial concessions and restrictions on traditional shifting cultivation, increased dissatisfaction among the Kachin people.
4. Military brutality and loss of local protection: Before the 1962 coup, ethnic populations suffered from abuses by the Burmese military, and local leaders (such as the *saophas*) were unable to protect their people, eroding trust and support.

5. Abolition of ethnic self-governance: Following the 1962 coup, the military junta abolished ethnic state councils with partial self-administration, moving toward totalitarian rule that rejected ethnic autonomy.
6. Resulting insurgencies: These actions provoked and fueled insurgencies among the Shan, Kachin, and other ethnic groups, and many took up arms in resistance against the central authorities.
7. Limited restoration of autonomy: Although the 2008 military-drafted constitution reinstated some previously autonomous territories (for example, the Kokang and Palaung Self-Administered Zones), these regions lacked the independence and power of the former autonomous sub-states, reducing Shan State's status and influence.

Reemergent sub-states: After October 27, 2023

This section presents an analysis of three sub-states that reemerged following operations by the Three Brotherhood Alliance of the TNLA, MNDAA, and AA in 2023 and 2024. Namhkam, Kutkai, and Hsenwi are studied here as examples of overlapping administrations, armed movements, and ethnic diversity. Assemblage theory is used to consider three aspects: locality (authority derived from being indigenous or rooted in the local area); legality (authority granted through formal political appointment or recognition, e.g., by elected representatives or NUG structures); and control of the means of violence (authority maintained by armed force). Further, this analysis considers how these factors intersect with the economic base, external actors, governance, and social cohesion in each area.

Namhkam: A mini-state under TNLA control

Namhkam is a key town on the China-Myanmar border with an estimated population of around 170,000 made up mainly of Shan (in urban areas) and Ta'ang (in rural areas), as well as substantial Lisu (Kholon Lishaw) and Kachin minorities. Since the TNLA captured Namhkam in 2023, it has established a mini-state governance model primarily based on Ta'ang ethnicity. An inclusive township committee was proposed but remains largely unrealized at village levels where former government officials from the Myanmar military regime's

General Administration Department still serve as administrators. TNLA authority is strongly linked to control of the means of violence, supported by its military dominance and alliance with the UWSA.

Locality	ethnic-based support primarily from Ta'ang; other groups marginalized or disengaged
Legality	weak formal legitimacy; fragmented administration with former regime officials still in place
Control of Violence	strong TNLA military control, contested by KIA and SSPP/SSA
Economic Base	extractive economy linked to illicit activities; heavy reliance on cross-border commerce
External Actors	China and UWSA wield significant influence on governance and security. Chinese strategic interests are deeply embedded in Northern Shan State's infrastructure projects (gas pipelines, railways), with TNLA acting as local guardians of these investments.
Governance and Services	limited municipal services, partly functional but with shortages and inefficiencies; TNLA's taxation (e.g., vehicle licenses) adds to local burdens and dissatisfaction; local governance is top-down, with little genuine community participation or inclusiveness
Social Cohesion	ethnic divisions deepened, traditional social ties weakened

Table 1. *Aspects and intersections of Namhkam as an assemblage*

Kutkai: A complex multi-ethnic, multi-actor assemblage

Kutkai township is highly ethnically diverse, with at least five major ethnic groups totaling over 40,000 people—mainly Kachin, Ta'ang, and Chinese (both Mong Wun and Kokang), with substantial Shan and Bamar minorities. Historically, Kutkai has been a Kachin cultural hub with multilingualism (Kachin, Chinese, Shan languages) and strong intercultural engagement. Since 2023, Kutkai has been fragmented into multiple power centers controlled by different ethnic armed groups: the TNLA controls urban Kutkai, the KIA controls northern areas, and the MNDAA controls Tar Mong Nye and Mong Si in the east/northeast. These groups compete over territory and taxation, resulting in frequent disputes and occasional armed clashes.

Locality	strong ethnic diversity with some interethnic interaction and multilingualism; Ta'ang, Kachin, Chinese cores
Legality	fragmented authority with three competing armed groups; no clear, inclusive local governance; TNLA has attempted to establish local government since late 2024, inviting community elders as advisors but excluding key Kachin civil society actors, reflecting lack of inclusive governance
Control of Violence	militarized contestation over urban and rural spaces among TNLA, KIA, and MNDAA
Economic Base	mixed economy with formal and informal sectors; reliance on cross-border trade; emerging Chinese-led enterprises
External Actors	Chinese authorities play a critical mediating role, urging armed groups to avoid fighting each other and the Myanmar military
Governance and Services	partial municipal services; significant NGO/missionary involvement for education, health, and internally displaced persons
Social Cohesion	multicultural traditions persist despite conflict-induced fractures; traditional village elders and missionaries critical; local Chinese communities are complex; Kokang MNDAA enforces a policy of "one Chinese identity," subsuming various subgroups under a unified label, causing some friction

Table 2. *Aspects and intersections of Kutkai as an assemblage*

Hsenwi: MNDAA control and Chinese influence

Hsenwi is a historic political center of Northern Shan State, deeply rooted in ethnic and local histories, with the Shan population forming the majority in both urban and rural areas. It holds cultural significance, with many ethnic autonomous territories historically linked to the town. Since 2023, following the MNDAA's capture of Hsenwi, two parallel processes have unfolded. The first is the development of local administration. The MNDAA has established administrative structures that operate largely independent of elected representatives; notably, MPs such as Nang Khin Htar Yee report exclusion from decision-making. The second is economic development driven by Chinese business ventures. This has led to a rapid increase in crony capitalism, including forced land grabs, which have caused local discontent and social strain. Attempts by locals to petition the administration have been met with dismissive responses.

Locality	Shan majority with multiple historical links
Legality	MNDAA administrative structures with exclusion of elected lawmakers and legitimacy undermined by lack of coherent service delivery
Control of Violence	MNDAA control
Economic Base	significant Chinese involvement, but threatened by conscription and taxation
External Actors	Chinese businesses a proxy for wider pressure from China
Governance and Services	weak delivery undermines legitimacy
Social Cohesion	challenging for the Kokang to maintain cohesion as they represent a colonial/external power

Table 3. *Aspects and intersections of Hsenwi as an assemblage*

Despite tensions, the MNDAA makes efforts to cultivate some social legitimacy by preserving Hsenwi Palace and engaging religious leaders. However, official use of Chinese language in governance has sparked uproar among the majority Shan population. The MNDAA-controlled area lacks formal legal jurisdiction and state-like institutions; electricity remains undelivered in the area, though internet service is somewhat functional. Many local Chinese (Mong Wun, Kokang, Han) residents have fled to avoid conscription and taxation. The handover of Lashio to the military junta prompted some Civil Disobedience Movement staff to leave Hsenwi, though the cessation of airstrikes encouraged some locals to return. Trade and commerce have somewhat revived due to the Kokang-China border reopening and relaxation in Lashio, but overall governance in Hsenwi under the MNDAA resembles a colonial imposition: foreign military actors controlling the town without deep local integration or legitimacy.

Across the three reemergent sub-states, governance is characterized by fragile and unstable assemblages where territorial control rarely translates into local legitimacy. Authority emerges from the complex interplay of violence, ethnicity, historical narratives, diplomacy, and economic flows, shaped by both internal diversity and powerful external actors such as China and the Myanmar military. Assemblage theory helps us understand these townships not as stable entities governed by a singular, coherent system but as temporary, shifting configurations in which power is continuously negotiated and reassembled.

From state-centric to statelets: Trajectories

Each of the sub-states described above exists as the product of interactions of different elements, shaped by powerful affective flows—narratives, nationalism, fears, language, and greed. In this there are critical materialities, which are not explored here due to a lack of space: weapons, drugs, various forms of currency, physical borders, digital flows (implicated in cyber-scam centers), and of course, aircraft and bombs. The concluding analysis focuses primarily on affective flows potentially under the control of key ethnic actors. These have the capacity to shape the assemblages towards a more heterogeneous, competitive form or towards greater cohesion and cooperation. There are three main "flows" which would tend to promote less cohesion and stability: conflicting territorial projects and claims to legitimacy; lingering social fragmentation along ethnic lines; and broader alliances and brokerage.

Conflicting territorial projects and legitimacies

Each ethnic armed organization advances its own distinct narrative and territorial claim, complicating efforts to form shared governance. For example:

- The MNDAA attempts to legitimize itself through a "One China" ideology and territorial expansion aligned with Kokang identity.
- The TNLA claims representational authority based on Ta'ang ethnic identity, revolutionary justice, and expansionist aims.
- The KIA focuses on protecting Kachin people and opposing the military junta.

These contradictory territorial visions produce competing symbolic orders and legal claims, making unified governance unfeasible.

Fragmented local populations and conflicting social contracts

The ethnic composition of the sub-states—including Kachin, Shan, Kokang, Mong Wong Chinese, Yunnanese, and Ta'ang—embodies diverse historical memories and governance expectations:

- The MNDAA's administration in Hsenwi is widely perceived as a colonial imposition.
- Ethnic Chinese communities in urban Kutkai feel alienated under Ta'ang-dominated TNLA rule.
- Shan majorities question external military actors ruling their ancestral lands. The absence of a shared social contract or collective identity undermines the legitimacy of any single governing actor.

Overlapping military alliances and strategic calculations

Multiple armed groups engage in pragmatic, often opaque negotiations with the Myanmar military or with China to strengthen their positions. Such alliances generate deep mistrust among locals, some of whom view negotiations with the junta as a betrayal. China's role as a broker often sustains fragmentation rather than fostering unified governance.

These three external pressures continuously disrupt governance assemblages, preventing long-term stabilization. Likewise, there are three opportunities for cohesion and cooperation: intentionally inclusive governance with an urgent transfer of power to non-military entities; governance which builds claims for legitimacy on efficient and inclusive delivery of public service; and strengthening of local mediation, which can in turn negate the overweening influence of external actors (China) and the handwringing of observers.

Inclusive governance

Strengthening of inclusive governance structures beyond military control is essential to reduce ethnic tensions and increase legitimacy. Informal arrangements like non-aggression pacts and shared taxation/security zones may stabilize areas.

Public service-based legitimacy

Improving the delivery of public services and economic opportunities could increase local acceptance and reduce outmigration. Groups that provide education, health, and conflict mediation can build functional legitimacy beyond mere military power. Addressing the needs and concerns of displaced persons, youth, and vulnerable populations is essential to stabilize Kutkai. Economic development should aim to be inclusive and reduce dependency on illicit or extractive activities dominated by armed groups or elites.

Strengthening of local mediation capacity

Strengthening civil society and supporting elder/missionary-led peace initiatives may mitigate local tensions. Community organizations can bridge divides between armed actors and civilians. Conflict mitigation among armed groups needs sustained dialogue, possibly mediated by neutral parties or regional organizations. Whilst external actors (China, UWSA) have a critical role, engagement with them must be factored into peace strategies. External pressure from China to avoid intra-armed group fighting could be leveraged to foster dialogue.

This chapter has examined evolving territorial assemblages in Northern Shan State through the lens of assemblage theory, focusing on the dynamics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 military coup. The case studies of Namhkam, Kutkai, and Hsenwi reveal governance formations that are not anchored in formal legality or centralized authority but have emerged through unstable, contested configurations of ethnicity, coercion, historical narratives, material infrastructures, and external influences, particularly from China. As an external actor, China is considered a force constraining stability, but in reality it pushes to revive and sustain dictatorial military rule in Myanmar.

While the weakening of central state control appears to create space for post-state alternatives, in practice, such possibilities remain constrained. Most ethnic armed organizations pursue legitimacy by negotiating with dominant powers—either the Myanmar military junta or Chinese authorities—thereby reinforcing hierarchical and extractive arrangements. Pragmatic resource and economic concerns and competing ethnic ideologies result in continual cycles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. These strategies inhibit inclusive, civilian-led governance and deepen social fragmentation. Civil society efforts, though present, struggle to gain traction in a heavily militarized environment where authority is derived from control of the means of violence rather than social consent.

Assemblage theory enables a more nuanced understanding of these contested spaces, not as failed states or proto-states, but as fluid constellations where power is continuously reassembled. However, these assemblages remain deeply fragile. The persistent pursuit of legitimacy through external patronage undermines prospects for inclusive governance or local autonomy rooted in shared civic contracts. A meaningful transformation of these unstable/unsettled spaces requires more than the collapse or replacement of the central state. It demands a rethinking of political legitimacy, one grounded in local consent, participatory governance, and negotiated coexistence. While such a vision remains aspirational under Myanmar's current conditions, recognizing the contingent and affective nature of territorial authority is critical for imagining governance beyond the binary of centralized statehood and militarized fragmentation.

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Chapter 3

Reactionaries in Myanmar's Democratic Revolution: Assemblage and Identities

Naing Aung and Aung Naing

Chapter summary

Whilst there has been extensive analysis of the capacities, motivations, and ideologies of both revolutionary and counterrevolutionary actors in Myanmar's current crisis, there has been less attention on those less explicitly partisan. In the context of Myanmar's complex political landscape, the construction and propagation of reactionary identities have emerged as significant barriers to the nation's democratic revolution and progress toward becoming a democratic federal union. This research aims to critically analyze how various actors such as religious leaders, crony capitalists, and ethnonationalists construct and perpetuate reactionary identities, as well as the implications of these constructed realities for social cohesion and transformative change. Reactionaries are typically perceived as less driven by ideology than pragmatism and self-interest; however, a closer analysis reveals a more complex, diverse, and fluid set of identities. Using assemblage as a theoretical tool, this chapter seeks to analyze the elements and affective flows constituting different reactionary identities that impede social and political development in Myanmar. This research offers insights into the challenges faced by Myanmar's democratic revolution and the barriers created by reactionaries. Moreover, it provides a deeper understanding of the impact of these identities on social cohesion and the potential avenues for fostering transformative change in the country's current context. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on the intersection of identity, politics, and social development in Myanmar, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and progressive narratives for the nation's future.

Keywords: reactionary identity, democratic revolution, Myanmar, constructed reality, social cohesion, transformative change, power dynamics, religious leaders, crony, ethno-nationalists, assemblage theory

Introduction

In the early stages of resistance to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, revolutionary forces rapidly mobilized the public to engage in various forms of demonstration and protest. After the initial groundswell of public demonstrations was violently crushed by authorities, new forms of protest included strike days, perhaps most vividly demonstrated by the "silent strikes" whereby people demonstrated their support for the resistance and opposition to the military junta by staying indoors, closing their offices or businesses, and not traveling on public roads between stipulated hours, usually between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. (Egreteau, 2023; Ratcliffe, 2024). Junta-allied forces applied pressure in an attempt to intimidate the public into non-compliance, including arrests or seizure of property for owners of businesses which were closed on those days. Substantial jail terms were handed down for offenses as innocuous as a flower seller wearing a flower in her hair on the occasion of the birthday of jailed State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. Estimates of the proportion of the population that supported these strikes vary, as do individuals' motivations for supporting, evading, or defying initiatives designed to rally and demonstrate support for the junta. However, to date, despite considerable evidence of significant popular support for the revolution and widespread hatred of the current military junta, resistance movements have failed to reach a "tipping point" in more densely populated urban, central areas of Myanmar.

There have been numerous significant protests, demonstrations, uprisings, and attempted revolutions throughout Myanmar's modern history, including the 1962 Rangoon University students' protests (also known as the 7 July Student Uprising), the U Thant "funeral crisis" riots of 1974, the 1988 pro-democracy People Power Uprising (also known as the 8888 Uprising), and 2007's monk-led Saffron Revolution. These events, whilst significantly shaping the sociopolitical landscape of Myanmar and reflecting resilience amongst the public in their struggle for democracy, human rights, and freedom, all failed in their efforts to dislodge authoritarianism and military rule. Despite the huge mobilization of public support in 1988, 2007, and most recently in 2021, the legacy to date remains one of violent failure. Among these significant events, the 8888 Uprising and the Spring Revolution stand out as the largest and most widespread, having involved varied communities across the entire country. Exhaustive analysis of military strategy, revolutionary tactics, and a broader social analysis typically highlights the lack of unity amongst diverse social and ethnic groups as the main factor in the failure of Myanmar's anti-authoritarian movements. There has been less focus on the non-military elements of society that may tacitly oppose or resist revolutionary movements. In revolutionary terms, these have often been termed as "reactionary."

Classic typologies of resistance, such as Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (EVL) framework, have been modified and applied to the Myanmar situation most recently by Ardeth Thawnghmung et al. (2023), who argue for additional categories of "grudging acceptance" and "neglect/passive resistance" as part of a fourth category of "accommodation":

> This refers to a strategy adopted by people who do not openly side with the regime (loyalty), leave the country (exit), or engage in open resistance (voice), but resort to a number of actions ranging from compliance and grudging acceptance to neglect and passive resistance [...]. While accommodating strategies have been used by many supporters of the NLD [National League for Democracy], they are also practiced by people who dislike both the NLD and the military junta, as well as those who do not have clear political positions. Individuals who are subjected to complicated and confounding social situations either play both sides while retaining an unclouded consciousness about what side they are on [...] or are on both sides because they may not have clearly articulated political views [...]. As a result of the coup, some people have accommodated the military regime in a potentially politically resistant way while others have done so in an expedient and/or opportunistic way to maximize their self-interest. (p. 5)

Hirschman's framework has been criticized for assuming relatively fixed, defined stances, whereas the realities of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary identities may be more complex and fluid. Moreover, even with the modifications proposed by Thawnghmung et al., two significant categories of actor are somewhat excluded: those who purport to be "neutral" based either on ideological principles or self-interest, and those who neither exit, resist, or show loyalty, but whose actions are not easily categorized as simply accommodation. The opposition to the revolution from individuals in these two categories stems less from loyalty to the military and more from other, often diverse motivations:

> The level and degree of support for the military varies, however, with high-ranking military personnel being the most loyal and hardcore supporters of military institutions. Included among military supporters are people who dislike both sides but see more positive aspects to military rule, or members of political parties that allege the NLD committed voter fraud and who supported the military coup. One respondent who dislikes both sides but believes military dictatorship is the only way to reduce overall chaos and human suffering said, "I dare not say anything on Facebook against the NLD. I will be grilled or killed by NLD supporters." (Thawnghmung et al., 2023, p. 13)

Defining reactionism and reactionaries

In revolutionary terminology, "reactionary," derived from Marxist thought, is a term used to refer to those who oppose revolutionary change, as discussed by MacKay and LaRoche (2018):

> By reactionary, we mean a specific political attitude toward long-run historical change. The word is more commonly used as a term of abuse than one of self-attribution—a pejorative description for those who "unthinkingly" reject the fruits of progress. In contrast, we find a potentially systematic, influential, and important tradition, predicated on a distinctive attitude toward history. Liberal progressives and radicals alike view change, explicitly or tacitly, as both possible and often desirable. Realists emphasize fundamental continuities in politics and tend to discount the significance of apparent changes in world politics. In contrast, reactionaries neither embrace historical

> change nor discount its importance. Instead, they understand deep historical transformations as both real and catastrophic. For reactionaries, the world was once better: a past political order, now lost, shows us retrospectively how things should be but no longer are. Fixated on this prelapsarian world, reaction is a doctrine of political nostalgia. It imagines a past it hopes to recreate. (p. 1)

For Marx, this was neatly summarized: “Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history” (Marx & Engels, 1848). This reading of reactionism links squarely to perceptions of history and has more recently been invoked in relation to populist movements in the USA, Europe, and the UK, ironically, in reference to political movements aimed at changing the current status quo and restoring previous arrangements. As such, the European Center for Populism Studies (2024) defines a “reactionary” as:

> [...] a person who wants to reverse political changes and seeks to restore society to a state believed to have existed before. In political science, a reactionary or reactionarist can be defined as a person or entity holding political views that favor a return to a previous political state of society that they believe possessed characteristics that are negatively absent from the contemporary status quo of a society. As an adjective, the word reactionary describes points of view and policies meant to restore a past status quo.

According to Capelos and Katsanidou (2018), reactionism shares a connection with traditionalism, which involves a commitment to preserving familiar cultural beliefs and practices, along with a strong aversion to change. However, reactionism goes further by incorporating an emotional element of resentment into these traditionalist values. In this framing, reactionism favors predictability and traditional values, such as conventional family structures, a shared culture, a sovereign nation-state, and secure borders. However, reactionism goes beyond traditionalism by incorporating an emotionally charged element, which manifests as xenophobia and subtle forms of racism. Robin (2011) thus views conservatism and reactionism as synonymous, using terms such as conservative, reactionary, and counterrevolutionary interchangeably. He further contends that while not all counterrevolutionaries are necessarily conservative, all conservatives exhibit counterrevolutionary tendencies to some extent. Based on Robin's perspective, conservatives or reactionaries can be considered counterrevolutionary in nature. However, despite the overlaps between broader anti-liberal sentiments, a rejection of cultural relativism, and a preponderance for older "grand narratives," reactionism may also be rooted, for different reasons, in a more postmodern framing, deriving less from ideological leanings and more from a deeper existential fear of loss of place, describing

> [...] the angry and prideful post-modern conservative who seeks to totalize their identity across society [...] they [post-modern conservatives] demonstrate a reactionary demand to reassert the authority of historically powerful social groups. They are of course critical of and even outright dismissive of liberalism. And while they do tend to support institutions such as nation, family, culture, church, and so on, this support is at least in part driven by a desire to stabilize their sense of self in the uneven seas of neoliberalism. (McManus, 2020)

However, recent scholarship questioning the value of reifying a particular "reactionary" identity or character is often cited by liberal politicians alarmed at the growing support of populist politicians. This "dispositional approach," according to Shorten (2021), proposes that there is a

> [...] distinctive reactionary 'personality type' [...] reactionaries are a mixture of the mad, bad and stupid. In the more formal accounts, dispositions are the unit of analysis abstracted (and the dispositions of individuals—not groups). [...] The original theory suggested the reactionary personality-type inhered in the confluence of three specific personal attitudes: a rigid attachment to social norms; an antipathy towards outsiders and inferiors; and a submission to authority figures. Historical fascism was a model. And, mistakenly, to have generalized

> from fascism is one reason why, rather than put a finger on reaction, the dispositional approach lays a ham fist. (p. 6)

This categorization of reactionary is problematic for a number of reasons: a tendency to project particular concerns, ideologies, or fears onto those opposed to the "liberal project"; an assumption that such "types" or categories tend to be relatively fixed; and assuming a relative heterogeneity in those who may be labeled as reactionary:

> The dispositional approach also turns rapidly into making the reactionary personality-type static. Either individual dispositions to reactionariness are fixed since birth. Or else they are rigidified by an unprogressive childhood, leaving the person who is 'raised to rage' in 'denial' about his or her internalized anger, and thereby prone—for resolution, for release—to 'project' that anger onto others, especially minority groups [...] it is safer to suppose that political reactionaries are no exceptions to normal processes of ideological belief-formation. Hence, what matters is a context of belief-formation which is both changing and socialized: one is not born a reactionary, one becomes one. (Shorten, 2021, p. 7)

Capelos et al. (2021) highlight the close relationship, in terms of desire, between reactionism and revolutionary radicalism:

> Uncompromising reactionism and revolutionary radicalism share disaffection with the present but their realities collide as they gaze in opposite directions: the reactionary orientation towards the restoration of an often-idealized past, and the radical orientation towards the establishment of a different, imagined future. (p.186)

Assemblage, desire, micropolitics

There is a danger in conflating reactionism with fascism, despite the political left's attempts to do so. However, insights from the application of assemblage thinking on the issue of reactionism can helpfully draw from

Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) insights into the nature of fascism as a form of micropolitics centered around desire. The authors' core question centers on why totalitarianism appears to attract public support, despite the loss of public freedoms amongst the very ones who support it: "Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?" (p. 29). For Deleuze and Guattari, it is not simply that people are fooled by the promises of political leaders and movements, but that they in fact have a subconscious desire for their own repression. Here, the concept of microfascism is introduced, using the framework of assemblage and its focus on "desire" not as sentiment or a response to lack, but as a productive force that shapes and transforms assemblages by driving the formation and movement of connections between different elements within an assemblage:

> What makes fascism dangerous is its molecular or micropolitical power, for it is a mass movement: a cancerous body rather than a totalitarian organism. […] Only micro-fascism provides an answer for the question: Why does it desire its own repression, how can it desire its own repression? The masses certainly do not passively submit to power; nor do they 'want' to be repressed, in a kind of masochistic hysteria; nor are they tricked by ideological lure. (Deleuze, 1987, p. 215)

Fascism, then, "constitutes an unconscious space within the individual subject that is distinct from group identities and political/ideological systems" (Faramelli, 2018, p. 7). Rather than representing a distinct ideology or concrete movement, fascism is instead considered as a much more diffuse distribution of desire: a "micro-fascistic drive within 'ordinary people' who [are] reduced to 'tiny cogs' going about their daily lives within larger machines" (Faramelli, 2018, p. 8).

Stepping back from the specifics of fascism, the notion of a "micropolitics of reactionism" is plausible when applying assemblage theory with its emphasis on contingency, desire as a "creative force," and the rejection of static expressions. Building on the theoretical work of Deleuze and Guattari, Manuel DeLanda (2016) contends that the English term "assemblage" does not fully express the meaning of the original French term "*agencement*," which describes the process of fitting together different parts. DeLanda (2016) provides a simpler explanation of an assemblage, describing it as a grouping of diverse components that combine in a specific manner:

> It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind. (p. 1)

DeLanda's analysis emphasizes the connections and relationships formed between varied elements, which can span various boundaries such as age, gender, and time periods. The essence of an assemblage lies in the cooperation and mutual dependence of its parts, akin to a symbiotic relationship. Rather than focusing on lineage or inheritance, assemblage theory highlights the significance of collaborations and the blending of elements.

In terms of a micropolitics of reactionism, assemblage theory considers how different elements combine to form something recognizable as a "reactionary" whilst at the same time allowing an analysis of different expressions and forms, and of the dynamic and contingent nature of those expressions. Central to this is desire as the primary "affective flow" which influences the relationships between different elements within an assemblage. This can be considered at different levels: the broader category of "reactionary"; sub-groups categorized as reactionary; and within this, individuals as those somehow desiring their own repression.

The construction and propagation of reactionary identities have emerged as significant barriers to Myanmar's democratic revolution and progress toward a democratic federal union. Three sources of reactionary resistance to the current revolution are religious leaders (especially extreme Buddhist monks), crony capitalists, and ethnonationalists. The first source of reactionary resistance to the post-2021 revolution can be found in the *Sangha* (Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community). There has been a great shift in the role of the *Sangha* from 2007's Saffron Revolution to the present-day Spring Revolution. The second source of resistance is the military crony capitalists' backlash to the National League for Democracy's (NLD) reforms of powerful business interests, as the cronies profit from isolationist economic policies. The third reactionary force is ethnonationalists, both from dominant ethno-religious groups and minorities whose oppression was maintained or increased under democratic rule.

In the context of Myanmar, the reactionary identity can be seen in the "*Wunthanu*" or "Loving One's Race" movement. Tharapi Than (2015) explores several key aspects related to Burmese nationalism and the *Wunthanu* movement, including the historical origins of the movement, its connection to Burmese nationalism, and the rationalization of violence against the other by the contemporary *Ma Ba Tha* movement (commonly translated into English as the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion). The objectification of the "other" as an existential threat, framed in religious terms, has been a recurring theme in both pre- and post- independence nationalist movements, and there is a persistent overlap between protectionist religious rhetoric and the preservation of class interests by the wealthy, mainly Bamar Buddhist elite. In this sense, the appeal to the protection of race and religion is more of a tool utilized by the elite class, rather than a primary ideology.

To better understand these dynamics, this study employs assemblage theory, focusing on the following key aspects:

1. Heterogeneous elements: The diverse range of actors—including religious leaders, crony capitalists, and ethnonationalists—within the assemblage.
2. Relationships and alliances: The authors investigate the power dynamics and interactions among these actors in forming reactionary identities and explore how these relationships contribute to hindering the Spring Revolution.

3. Co-functioning and symbiosis: The study examines the interplay between these diverse elements and their symbiotic relationships within the assemblage to better comprehend the obstacles posed to the revolutionary movement.
4. Contagions and epidemics: Using assemblage theory's metaphor of contagions and epidemics, the research analyzes how reactionary identities spread across society and the challenges they pose to fostering more inclusive and progressive narratives.

The silent *Sangha*

> *The* Sangha*, Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community, has largely stayed out of politics since the 2021 coup. As youth take the vanguard of resistance, a long-term shift in the country's civic life—and a conservative backlash—could be in the offing. The issue bears close watching.* (International Crisis Group, 2023)

Whilst in past instances of political unrest in Myanmar, such as the independence movement of the early 20th century and protests in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, monks played a noticeable role despite concerns about their involvement in politics, the monastic community has been divided in its response to the Spring Revolution. Some prominent monks, typically older and more senior, have sought to gain favor with the military regime by openly supporting it, while a few others have been outspoken opponents. The majority of monks, though, have largely refrained from publicly taking sides due to apprehensions about supporting a secular resistance movement engaged in armed struggle, the potential repercussions of challenging the regime, and the fear of facing public anger for supporting it (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Reactionism amongst members of the Buddhist clergy, however, is derived from more than fears of loss of personal status or reprisals. Buddhism in Myanmar has a long history of political involvement, being at the vanguard of anti-colonial protests prior to World War II, and later a prominent element of popular protests in 1988 and 2007. However, there has been a significant shift in the role of Buddhist monks in Myanmar's current Spring Revolution compared to their involvement in the Saffron Revolution. The Spring Revolution, which began in 2021, emerged 14 years after the Saffron Revolution. This timeframe witnessed a notable transformation in the ways Buddhist monks participate and contribute to Myanmar's ongoing political and social movements. Six years after the Saffron Revolution of 2007, the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion (abbreviated in Burmese as *Ma Ba Tha*) was established on June 27, 2013 (Kyaw, 2017). This organization today plays a significant role in Myanmar's political landscape.

According to Than (2015), Buddhist monks have a long history of political engagement, positioning themselves as guardians of tradition, race, and religion. Some of the *Sangha*'s construction of reactionary identity is also based on the supposed need to protect race and religion as propagandized by the *Ma Ba Tha*. This is rooted in a fear of loss of identity and role in society, and overlaps with some populist discourses on race.

According to Ashin Kovida (Insight Myanmar, 2024), a prominent activist monk, the *Sangha* faces considerable internal challenges. Many monks remain influenced by the military regime, perceiving it as their guardian, while viewing democracy as a threat. This ideological rift within the *Sangha* hinders its unity in advocating for human rights and democracy.

Ven. Zawana (DVB Multimedia Group, 2023), a former prisoner of conscience and member of the *Sangha* who now resides in New York, reveals that he is totally unsatisfied with the extent of Buddhist monks' participation and contributions to current resistance movements:

> As I was saying earlier, the education system for the people changed in a positive way recently but monastic education has remained the same. I know a monk who has done very well in academics but he still believes the lie that the country will be converted into an Islamic state if the National League for Democracy (NLD), which is led by the detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi, continues to govern it.

In addition, Ven. Zawana emphasizes that his young and bright students, who are novice monks, are also fed the same false narrative. He argues that the military has systematically disseminated this misinformation for decades, resulting in many monks believing it. This distorted belief has led some monks to view those who support the resistance as traitors to their religion and ethnicity. According to Ven. Zawana (DVB Multimedia Group, 2023), the monastic education system's inability to foster independent, critical thinking is a significant contributing factor to this situation. He laments that even today, the *Sangha Maha Nayaka*, the governing body of Buddhist monks, does not deem it necessary to include English language instruction in Myanmar's monastic curriculum, citing the misconception that teaching English will prompt monks to leave the country.

Another monk, Ven. Detta (Insight Myanmar, 2023), describes his thoughts on the role of Burmese monks:

> Without a doubt, monks can play a huge, tremendous role [in social and political issues]. Many people in Myanmar are religious, and will no doubt listen to what a monk will have to say. And there are several dozen monks who have immense sway over public opinion. I think they need to stand up; they need to be on the right side of the history. They need to speak from a religious perspective.

The military coup has led to a disappointing lack of support from the majority of monks and monasteries for the people of Myanmar (International Crisis Group, 2023). This has prompted a decrease in food and other donations to many monasteries across the country. People are questioning the need to continue supporting monks who have failed to reciprocate support during this challenging period (Frydenlund & Wai, 2024). This situation highlights the importance of Ven. Detta's hope that Myanmar's monastic community will eventually leverage their spiritual influence to guide the security forces in alleviating the suffering inflicted upon the nation's citizens (Insight Myanmar, 2023).

An analysis of the factors contributing to reactionary identities within the *Sangha* community reveals several sources of reactionary behavior. For some monks, their reactions are shaped by their role as spiritual guides to state leaders (the status of teacher of the king, or *Minn Sayar* in Burmese), while others are driven by concerns over losing financial support from the junta or their monasteries. Power dynamics between monks and the military junta play a significant role in shaping the reactionary identities of the former group. In the context of the Burmese Buddhist community, where monks hold a highly esteemed position in society, the military seeks to bolster its public image and legitimacy by portraying itself as devoutly Buddhist. This is achieved through visible acts of generosity towards prominent monks, as well as the construction of pagodas. These actions ultimately contribute to the formation of reactionary views among the monks, who perceive their elevated social status as intertwined with the military's patronage.

Another group's reactions stem from the perceived need to protect their religion and ethnicity, influenced by the Islamophobic narratives propagated by *Ma Ba Tha* and the military junta. Examples of such narratives include the supposed threat of federalism leading to the disintegration of the union due to external forces and the belief that embracing democracy would lead to the decline of Buddhism and ethnic dilution. As noted by Ven. Zawana (DVB Multimedia Group, 2023), these distorted beliefs have led some monks to view resistance supporters as traitors to their religion and ethnicity.

The cronies return

Myanmar's economic landscape has long been influenced by crony capitalism, characterized by a close-knit network of military-aligned business elites reaping the majority of the benefits. According to observations by researchers such as Stokke et al. (2018), Myanmar's large informal economy is supported by informal elite agreements established during previous military eras, often involving individuals associated with the military and crony companies. During the era of direct military rule under the State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council (SLORC/SPDC) from 1988 to 2011, the country witnessed a significant shift as the socialist economic policies of General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP, 1962-1988) were abandoned, while the military's role in the economy expanded. This was achieved through military-owned enterprises and crony networks that gained control over key sectors such as construction, natural resource extraction, and tourism (Jones, 2013; Selth, 2001).

Recent reforms under the NLD-led government (2016-2021) threatened the economic hegemony of Myanmar's cronies, prompting a return to more isolationist and authoritarian economic policies following the 2021 coup that allowed cronies to reassert their power. Since the coup, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has sought to strengthen Myanmar's ties with Russia, relying on Moscow's cooperation in the military, economic, and energy sectors (The Irrawaddy, 2023). Several Myanmar tycoons have been eager to help Min Aung Hlaing in this endeavor, viewing it as a lucrative opportunity (Hein Htoo Zan, 2023).

As highlighted in Justice for Myanmar's (2023) "Dirty over 30" list, several of Myanmar's wealthiest tycoons have established their businesses in Singapore, taking advantage of its favorable business environment, with some even enjoying luxurious lifestyles in the city-state. Despite operating in various industries, the individuals mentioned share two significant similarities: they have amassed their wealth by backing the military's atrocities, mass killings, and war crimes in Myanmar, and their age suggests the potential for direct personal experience with the likely consequences of their actions at some point in the future. The report emphasizes that Singapore has the ability and responsibility to prevent such unethical practices from continuing by obstructing the Myanmar military junta's access to financial resources, weapons, equipment, and technology. Numerous other reports published by Justice for Myanmar (2021a, 2021b, 2024) have exposed the connections between crony capitalists and the military junta, as well as the ways in which these tycoons have provided support for the junta's human rights violations and war crimes in Myanmar.

However, to attribute the cronies' reactionism as mere economic opportunism is to fall into the same trap as the liberal labeling of all things populism as fascist. The overlap between overt, public support for the junta regime, on the one hand, and participation in donation ceremonies for religious groups (particularly regime-sponsored projects) on the other, may not be rejected as mere virtue-signaling opportunism, but as a symptom of a broader desire for a return to a social ordering based on class hierarchy underpinned by religious conservatism which would tend to mutually sustain a system of benevolent protectionism. In other words, whilst cronies may or may not be motivated by the ideological or religious particularities of either junta fascism or Buddhist nationalism, they may be motivated by the desire for a certain social order threatened by democratization, and potentially protected by religious conservatism and political authoritarianism. Again, this should not be dismissed as mere self-interest—given that, in the long term, protectionism may in fact be economically disadvantageous even to the cronies—but rather an unarticulated desire for a stable, predictable social order.

Pyusawhti, or the new ethnonationalists

> *A network of hardline, pro-military groups known as* Pyusawhti *is doing its best to spread terror among the population as it fights a dirty war against the democratic forces resisting the coup.* (Frontier Myanmar, 2021)

Pyusawhti, a collective term used to refer to a range of pro-junta militia groups, are often motivated by a perceived need to defend religious and ethnic identities, often rooted in specific geographies. This explains the role of some Buddhist monks and other religious leaders as sponsors and organizers of these armed groups. According to Kavi (2024), Myanmar's ruling regime has reportedly been forming "people's militias" in various regions, including Yangon, Bago, Tanintharyi, and Mon State, to bolster its depleted military forces. The militia members are reportedly offered incentives such as weapons, cash, and food in exchange for their service. According to the International Crisis Group (2022):

> Today's [*Pyusawhti*] groups evolved out of pre-existing local networks consisting of individuals who are ideologically pro-regime, as well as others—such as members of the military-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)—who fear being targeted by the resistance, whether or not they actively support the junta.

In Sagaing Region, an ultranationalist Buddhist monk is at the forefront of the military regime's fight against the armed resistance (Radio Free Asia [RFA] Burmese, 2023). This monk has reportedly created a network of pro-junta militias by employing tactics of violence and fostering fear among the local population. Here, narratives linked to the protection of race and religion are a key tool in motivating both local participation and regime support, as well as providing a convenient justification for the direct involvement of Buddhist clergy, traditionally bound to rigid precepts of respect for life and opposed to all forms of violence. There is a generally negative perception locally of Buddhist monks involved in the conflict in Sagaing, with the belief that these monks manipulate people's religious beliefs, exploiting their faith to mislead them (International Crisis Group, 2022). Consequently, the people consider these monks to be malevolent figures.

In addition to *Pyusawhti*, there is also an ultra-extreme version of a pro-junta militia called *Thway Thauk*. According to an unnamed Mandalay activist (quoted in Nachemson & Hlaing, 2022), "*Thway Thauk* is believed to be linked to the ultranationalist Buddhist hardline group *Ma Ba Tha*, which was banned under the NLD, and the infamous anti-Muslim monk Wirathu." He said this "poses a great concern to those of other religions, especially the Muslim community."

However, not all *Pyusawhti* members can be categorized as ethnonationalists, as some harbor reactionary views stemming from personal interests. These individuals often enjoy the status of authority within their local communities, where pro-military supporters predominantly reside. Operating under the guise of "people's militia,"[1] they exploit their positions of power in various ways, ultimately serving their own agendas rather than purely ideological motivations. Some *Pyusawhti* members exhibit reactionary behavior rooted in their drive for survival. This motivation encompasses both basic needs and the fear of being targeted by the military, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of their actions. According to RFA Burmese (2024), residents in Myanmar's southwestern Bago region are reportedly being pressured by the military to join pro-junta militias. Those who refuse face fines and even threats of having their villages destroyed.

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[1] The terms "*Pyusawhti*" and "people's militia" are used interchangeably here.

Assemblage theory-based analysis of reactionary identities in Myanmar

Using assemblage theory, which emphasizes the complex interplay of heterogeneous elements and power dynamics, the development and persistence of reactionary identities in Myanmar can be better understood. Reactionary actors—including Buddhist monks, crony capitalists, and ethno-nationalist groups like *Pyusawhti*—form part of an assemblage that hinders Myanmar's democratic progress. This theory highlights how fear, self-interest, institutional structures, and symbiotic relationships function together to sustain the status quo and obstruct transformative change.

Reactionary Buddhist monks

During the years between 2007's Saffron Revolution and the ongoing Spring Revolution, Buddhist monks in Myanmar have increasingly aligned with reactionary ideologies, largely due to the confluence of fear, self-interest, and power dynamics. These elements interact within the monastic community, creating a networked assemblage supported by the military junta and groups like *Ma Ba Tha*:

- Fear propagation, concern for financial stability, and the defensive stance towards protecting race and religion play a crucial role in solidifying reactionary tendencies among members of the *Sangha*.
- The monastic education system, which discourages critical thinking, contributes to the stagnation of progressive values and openness.

- Reactionary monks often collaborate with the military regime, forming a symbiotic relationship that benefits both sides while actively undermining democratic values.

This collaboration between Buddhist monks and the military regime and its supporters spreads like a contagion, undermining efforts towards democratization and fostering mistrust and resentment among the general population. The regime offers preferential treatment and economic opportunities to these monks, further deepening societal inequalities.

Crony capitalists

The reactionary identities of Myanmar's crony capitalists are shaped by an assemblage of business interests, economic power, and political alliances with the military regime. These actors benefit from the existing order and therefore resist any movements that threaten the current structure:

- Cronies leverage their alliances with the military to maintain control over lucrative industries and monopolize opportunities, reinforcing their loyalty to the regime.
- This economic entanglement perpetuates a system of inequality and corruption, blocking pathways to transformative change.
- Like the reactionary monks, the relationship between cronies and the military operates as a contagion within the assemblage, spreading resistance to democracy and entrenching the dominance of the regime.

The mutual dependence between cronies and the junta erodes public trust, creating deep-seated divisions that weaken the pro-democracy movement. With their wealth and influence, cronies form a powerful bulwark that sustains the authoritarian system and obstructs any momentum toward democratic reform.

Ethnonationalists and Pyusawhti

The reactionary identities among members of *Pyusawhti* are similarly shaped by an assemblage of ethnonationalism, survival instincts, personal interests, and fear of retaliation. These groups form strategic relationships with the military regime and ethnic armed organizations, creating a complex web that destabilizes national unity:

- Their fear of retribution, combined with an ideology rooted in ethnonationalism, leads them to oppose democratic movements that could threaten their status or security.
- The presence of *Pyusawhti* members in resistance organizations creates internal fractures and undermines trust, acting as an epidemic that weakens collective efforts for change.
- Their activities hinder the objectives of the Civil Disobedience Movement, disrupt social cohesion, and dilute the strength of pro-democracy alliances.

The emergence of regions governed by ethnic armed resistance groups adds to the complexity of the assemblage, making the push for a unified democratic Myanmar more difficult. The interconnectedness of these elements—ethnonationalist drives, military alliances, and regional autonomy—intensifies the challenges faced by the democratic revolution. The lens of assemblage theory reveals how diverse reactionary groups—monks, cronies, and ethnonationalists—form a multi-faceted assemblage that actively resists democratic transformation in Myanmar. Motivated by fear and self-interest, these groups sustain a system that benefits them while undermining efforts for progressive, transformative change.

To confront these challenges, pro-democracy forces must focus on creating counter-narratives that dismantle the ideological foundations of reactionary identities. This involves:

- Exposing the interests served by these reactionary narratives and their role in maintaining authoritarian rule.
- Offering tangible alternatives that address the economic, cultural, and existential fears that drive individuals to support the regime.
- Building inclusive platforms that recognize and bridge divisions, especially those grounded in religion, ethnicity, or class.

Only by understanding and addressing the assemblage of reactionary identities can Myanmar's democratic movement hope to achieve enduring, transformative change. The task is not simply to replace powerholders, but to reconfigure the very systems that uphold authoritarianism by realigning power, disrupting collusions, and fostering genuine unity among all forces for democracy.

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Chapter 4

The Fifth Cut: Undermining Moral and Spiritual Capital in the Myanmar Military's Drive for Hegemony

Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, and Thida

Chapter summary

This chapter explores the aftermath of the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, which has displaced nearly four million people as military forces employ its infamous "four cuts" strategy to deprive resistance forces of food, funds, information, and recruits. The nature of the military's violence is planned and systematic, with targeted arson, looting, and torture applied incrementally to maintain a climate of fear. The application of the four cuts strategy includes the destruction of livelihoods as well as deliberate actions to prevent the resumption of social and economic life, such as the laying of landmines along roads and pathways to fields. However, the military's expansion of violence into areas populated mainly by Bamar Buddhist communities has been accompanied by what appears to be an intentional strategy to undermine and degrade moral and spiritual capital through the targeting of Buddhist institutions and clergy. This "fifth cut" aims to deny moral and spiritual resources to communities deemed supportive of resistance, undermining their ability to self-organize and rehabilitate, rendering them chronically divided, poor, and vulnerable. Whilst the ruling military elite maintain a high-profile performance of fealty to select Buddhist leaders, the current campaign of violence against local Buddhist communities suggests a deliberate subversion of Buddhism in favor of state-controlled, military-supporting, ethnonationalist expressions. Far from being the "protectors of Buddhism" as they claim, the military elite instead rely on a submissive *Sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) to perpetuate their rule over the country. Humanitarian work in the peri- and post-conflict context needs to be deeply alert to the deleterious effect of this degrading of moral and spiritual capital and pursue approaches to relief and rehabilitation that both engage with and seek to restore the reemergence of moral and spiritual resources. In assemblage terms, this chapter looks at the deterritorialization process enabled through violence, achieved less through the introduction of new elements as by the undermining of key affective flows crucial to maintaining a particular community arrangement.

Keywords: four cuts, counterinsurgency, affective flows, religion, *Sangha*, Buddhism, arson, moral capital

Four years after the Myanmar military's 2021 coup d'etat, the new conflict zones that emerged in the central Dry Zone regions of Sagaing and Magwe in response to junta violence now form the core of both resistance and suffering, with over three quarters of all conflict incidents and casualties occurring here. These regions are also the homelands of the bulk of the country's nearly four million internally displaced persons who have been driven from their villages by military raids since the coup. What was once the experience only of those on the geographical margins of Myanmar has now become mainstream—a matter for the majority, not just assorted and somewhat distant ethnic and religious minorities. The expansion of violence has increasingly targeted sites and agents of moral authority, including religious and charitable organizations. This research suggests that the targeting of moral authority is not incidental, "collateral" damage, but rather represents a specific, intentional strategic approach by junta forces to undermine the unity, cohesion, and morale of the resistance by denying access to sources of spiritual and moral support. This represents a fifth "cut" in the Myanmar military's age-old counter-insurgency strategy, but one oriented to impeding the recovery of viable human communities in the years to come.

Of monks and morals: Religion, social capital, and crises

The links between social capital and community resilience, particularly in the face of disasters, are well documented (Kaluarachchi, 2018), with the existence of both "bonding" and "bridging" capitals associated with more effective community responses to disasters (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014). Religion plays a key role in establishing and maintaining social capital (Candland, 2001; Greeley, 1997), both through the mode of associational identity and mutuality and by providing commonly validated sites of moral authority. The role of religion in promoting or fueling conflicts is also well documented (Cox, Orsborn, & Sisk, 2014), as is the importance of religion in post-conflict peace-building efforts (Powers, 2010). Numerous studies have highlighted the role of faith and spirituality in the maintenance of resilience in displaced communities (Schlechter et al., 2021; Schweitzer, Greenslade, & Kagee, 2007). Whilst the maintenance of cultural identity, the fostering of a sense of belonging, and the leverage of mutual assistance are key pathways by which religion contributes to resilience, a study of Somali Bantu refugees (Frounfelker, Tahir, Abdirahman, & Betancourt, 2020) also highlights the importance of spiritual practice:

> Thus, religion was both central to their identity and also functioned as a guide to how they could be better individuals. The deep connection members of the community had to their faith fostered hope, comfort, and guidance in times of distress. Faith-based activities such as reading the Quran, prayer, and going to a mosque were all mechanisms participants used to build hope and receive guidance. (p. 18)

In post-disaster recovery, faith-based organizations and leaders are often well-placed to function as service providers and coordinators, focal points for community organization, advocates to external agencies, and crucially, arbiters of disputes and grievances. As Rivera and Nickels (2014) point out, "Faith-based organizations are capable of breaking through ideological boundaries to advocate for policies that best meet the needs of vulnerable communities in the disaster recovery process" (p. 184).

This is particularly important in post-disaster, post-conflict scenarios, whether or not religion has played a significant role in the initial conflict. The role of moral authority, both in arbitrating disputes and in promoting unifying, altruistic values and norms, is critical. Such moral authority is not exclusively located within religious institutions or faith leaders. Indeed, there are compelling counterarguments from studies of religion and social capital which draw attention to the capacity of religion to function in more negative terms, serving to enhance a sense of "otherness" and intensify social cleavages and exclusions in the pursuit of the resilience of one's own group (Auguste, 2019; Saal, 2021). This points to the dangers of an oversimplification of religion's role and moral authority in community resilience, and likewise the importance of considering exactly what kind of moral authority contributes to what kind of resilience.

Studies of rural communities in Myanmar have demonstrated a strong association between the existence of traditional welfare organizations and higher levels of resilience (Griffiths, 2019b). Whether a greater degree of social cohesion is itself a marker and prerequisite for the emergence and maintenance of mutual welfare associations, in many places called *parahita* organizations, or whether the organizations are a key contributor to greater social cohesion remains unclear; what is evident is that such organizations frequently occupy a space between village traditions, religious authority, and formal governance structures, and rely heavily on religious values, symbols, and moral authority for their legitimacy (Griffiths, 2019a; McCarthy, 2017). This appears to be true regardless of the majority religion of the community. Whilst Myanmar is multi-religious, with large Christian, Muslim, and Hindu populations, the particular focus of this study is on the expansion of violence by the military into areas which are largely populated by majority Buddhist Bamar people.

In the Bamar-majority, Buddhist-dominated central Dry Zone, comprising the southern and central parts of Sagaing Region, much of Magwe and Mandalay Regions, and the northwestern part of Bago Region, *parahita* organizations have been in existence for decades, and whilst suppressed during past periods of military rule, had flourished under the two administrations prior to the coup. *Parahita* organizations in rural communities in this area frequently overlap with formal religious institutions—mainly Buddhist monasteries—using the spaces of the monastery and often with a village abbot as a key patron or overseer of the group. Most villages will have at least one religious institution—typically a monastery, but in larger villages, it may also have an attached school. Whilst monasteries often express local particularities such as an emphasis on particular meditation techniques, education, or development, in most rural communities in the Dry Zone, the monastery is a central point of reference for meetings, events, and crucially, for shelter in times of crisis. The authority of the village abbot may vary, dependent on a range of factors such as length of ordination, religious qualifications, and the degree of active involvement in village affairs—but again, in most cases, the abbot of the monastery occupies a key role as a moral guide, arbiter, and protector of the village. As Nash (1963, p. 288) points out, monks do not have "power in any direct, temporal sense over people in the community," but exert considerable influence over "education, morals, values, relationships among different social groups and within social groups, and indirectly influence investment, consumption, distribution of income, and even production decisions" (Than, 1987, p. 81). The undermining of monastic authority thus serves to restrict the flow of moral and spiritual resources to the community, both at the time of the crisis and, crucially, in its aftermath.

Legacies of violence: The four cuts

The resort to violence by the Myanmar Armed Forces[1] (MAF) when encountering resistance is nothing new: many commentators point to the common practice of the so-called "*Tatmadaw*" of using multiple forms of violence against its own people to ensure subjugation (Myoe, 2009). Aside from the more obvious physical violence embodied in the notorious "four cuts" strategy, successive military governments have engaged in multiple forms of structural and institutional violence, including land seizure, abrogation of rights, and arbitrary controls over various ethnic-identifying populations, such as restrictions on movement and birth control (Sabbir, Al Mahmud, & Bilgin, 2022; Selth, 2018). The use of violence to maintain hegemony has for decades been framed largely in terms of ethnic identity and territorial claims, essentially setting the Bamar majority against myriad ethnolinguistic groups who have asserted their historical claims to lands, rights, and freedoms, and at times defended those claims with physical force of arms.

Arguably, the history of Myanmar/Burma can be characterized as the relentless pursuit of dominance by the center over the periphery (Dove, Jonsson, & Aung-Thwin, 2011; Scott, 2009), whether by the Burmese kings, the colonial rule of the British, or the post-independence state. The quest for hegemony has almost invariably been pursued by violent means, particularly where authoritarian regimes have been concerned. Post-independence political settlements negotiated by General Aung San quickly unraveled, partly in the wake of his assassination, but mostly in the realization by signatory ethnic associations that long-cherished dreams of self-determination were being quietly strangled. Widespread insurgency, which included communist groups and ethnic armed organizations, nearly toppled the post-independence government of U Nu and ushered in a prolonged period of military and quasi-military rule.

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[1] This paper refers to military personnel operating under the command of the current and previous military regimes as the "Myanmar Armed Forces" (MAF), as opposed to using the term "*Tatmadaw*." Various commentators have noted that the term "*Tatmadaw*" bears connotations of military professionalism and honor codes, and have argued that the legacy of the *Tatmadaw*, particularly in the aftermath of the Rohingya massacre of 2017 and the current post-coup violence, nullifies any claims to legitimacy on the part of the *Tatmadaw* (Desmond, 2022).

Following counterinsurgency techniques honed by the British in the Malaya campaign, the MAF employed a strategy known as the "four cuts" aimed at depriving resistance groups of food, funds, information, and recruits through the systematic targeting of civilian communities considered to be supportive of insurgents (Fishbein, Lasan, & Vahpual, 2012). The burning of villages, destruction of livelihoods, and terrorizing of civilian populations had been used by the British in suppressing resistance prior to independence, and was now deployed against mainly ethnic minority areas in Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Shan, Mon, and later Rakhine State (Smith, 2007; South, 2008). This was accompanied by the embrace of Burmanization as a means to reinforce territorial dominance with cultural dominance, with the added advantage that it could also be used to appeal to Buddhist Burmans to support campaigns against "ethnic insurgents" (Walton, 2013). This enabled successive military governments to portray their use of violence as counterinsurgency against groups who were seeking to undermine the Union or groups that threatened the peace and tranquility of the majority—such as Myanmar's Muslims (McCarthy & Menager, 2017). Using this strategy, hundreds of thousands of people, mainly along the country's eastern borders, were estimated to have been displaced as villages were raided, burned, and land confiscated by military forces (Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2003). Whilst ceasefire agreements between the Myanmar military and a number of ethnic armed organizations in some areas reduced the level of active violence, such arrangements often enshrined and encoded land seizure and displacement within a complex web of what Kevin Woods (2001) and others have termed "ceasefire capitalism."

Whilst popular uprisings, such as that of 1988, were met with force directed indiscriminately against protesters drawn from multiple ethnic and religious backgrounds, the four cuts strategy has, for the most part, been implemented in areas populated by ethnic and religious minorities (Grundy-Warr & Dean, 2011). Land grabs in those areas also represent a strategy of dominance (BadeiDha Moe, 2020), along with repopulation with majority-background populations and preferential permission and protection to establish Buddhist monasteries, schools, and other institutions in areas where other religious adherents had previously been a majority:

> [R]eligious minority identity has sometimes been seen and treated by the state as a threat to its security and/or sovereignty. The state's heavy involvement in Buddhist patronage, its discriminatory application of laws such as the Offense of Religion (in recent years applied to those accused of defaming Buddhism, but rarely other traditions), and restrictions on religious freedom defended as necessary for national security, are all seen as reflective of state preference for Buddhism and a broader cultural Buddhist hegemony that shapes Myanmar's political culture. (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 3)

The use of both physical and structural violence by successive military regimes in Myanmar to achieve and maintain dominance of the peripheries by the center thus primarily targeted non-Bamar, non-Buddhist "others," and in the past decade, more explicit linkages have emerged between Buddhist extremist movements such as *Ma Ba Tha* and violent suppression of minorities by the military (McCarthy, 2015; Subedi & Garnett, 2020). The Myanmar military has made the promotion of Buddhism a key element of its public performance, both through visible, public demonstrations such as pagoda building, and through the explicit preference and promotion of Buddhist missions such as the *Dhamma* School movement. This has regularly been supplemented by nationalist rhetoric in state-run newspapers, positioning the military as the defenders of the "national race and religion" (Htet Naing Zaw, 2019). This in particular was a key tool in the mobilization of public sentiment in relation to the Rakhine crisis, where Muslim Rohingyas were portrayed as a threat to national race and religion (Maung Zarni, 2013; McPherson, 2017).

An important aspect of the framing of violence as the defense of national race and religion is the relative sparing of Buddhist institutions, buildings, and clergy from violence, in contrast to the often-specific targeting of non-Buddhist buildings and institutions (such as mosques and churches) during violent suppression. Whilst the violent quelling of the Buddhist clergy-led Saffron Revolution of 2007 may appear to somewhat contradict this, analysts noted considerable hesitation on the part of the military to use force against demonstrating monks, and also a calculated effort post-2007 to cultivate stronger links between the military and the Buddhist clergy "to forge alliances within the sangha [sic] to ensure a network of support and tamp down future opposition from the monks" (Hayward & Frydenlund, 2019, p. 3). This laid the foundations for the later, more explicit alliance between the military and movements such as *Ma Ba Tha*, which in turn consolidated a significant degree of support for the 2021 coup d'état from leading Buddhist clergy (The Irrawaddy, 2022a, 2022b). This suggests that, whilst a degree of *Sangha* exceptionalism is exercised by the military in terms of preferential treatment and protection of Buddhist institutions and property, that exceptionalism remains contingent on its support of the military and its allies (such as the Union Solidarity and Development Party, or USDP), or at least, refraining from active resistance to authoritarian rule.

New threats, evolving strategies

In the aftermath of the coup d'état of February 1, 2021, the military response to both demonstrations and strike action became incrementally violent, as armed police were backed by military personnel, including snipers instructed to kill demonstrators with shots to the head (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Resistance movements quickly adopted a range of tactics to provide physical protection to strikers and demonstrators, drawing on long-standing traditions of community solidarity (such as the *Kalatha Kaung Saung* youth-based protection societies in many rural communities—see Griffiths, 2019a) to form local defense groups, which later came to be called “People’s Defense Forces” (PDFs). Initially using improvised weaponry, more sophisticated tactics and equipment became available as PDFs made contact with long-established ethnic armed organizations sympathetic to the revolutionary cause (Ye Myo Hein, 2022).

The military’s pattern of violence increasingly employed the four cuts strategy, which involved targeting of civilian populations by MAF personnel. Columns of troops, initially at company strength, conducted raids on rural communities, looting property, burning houses, and detaining, torturing, and sometimes killing residents. Reports of beheadings, mutilation of corpses, fatal torture, and the burning alive of people with intellectual disabilities illustrate the psychological objectives of the four cuts strategy, aiming not simply to undermine financial and physical support for resistance, but to terrorize civilian populations into submission (The Irrawaddy, 2021). In the two years following the coup, nearly 60,000 households had been burned, over two-thirds of those in Sagaing Region. Martial law was applied to 14 of the 37 townships in Sagaing Region, in addition to another 36 townships (of a total of 330), mainly in Chin, Kayah, Kayin, Kachin, and Mon States. Martial law places all civilian government mechanisms under direct military control, with the result that civilians may be detained for any reason, and would be tried in military courts, with no right of appeal except directly to the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing himself (Manny Maung, 2023).

This turned large parts of the central Dry Zone, known to be the traditional heartland of Burmese Buddhism, into a battleground. Whilst the targeting of religious buildings belonging to minority religions has long been a practice of the Myanmar military, current patterns of violence show a targeting of religious buildings belonging to Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim traditions, with reports of raids on nearly 50 religious sites and destruction of over 200 religious buildings, including over 40 Buddhist monasteries in Sagaing Region alone (US State Department, 2022). The traditional understanding of Buddhist monasteries being a place of safety and refuge in times of trouble, whether natural disasters or in conflict situations, has been undermined by the targeting by the MAF of monasteries, particularly those either housing refugees or being used as impromptu schools for children displaced by conflict (Myanmar Now, 2022). This demonstrates a new phase of conflict, which is increasingly targeting those who are not traditionally ethnic "others," such as in Mon, Kayin, Shan, or Rakhine State, or who are minority Christian or Muslim, but those who are visibly Burmese and Buddhist. To date, the majority of internally displaced persons are in these central Dry Zone areas, mostly from villages which are predominantly Buddhist.

This study examines patterns of violence used by MAF in these areas and, in particular, analyzes strategies and tactics used to undermine social and moral capital. Between November and December 2022, local researchers affiliated with a relief program conducted extended narrative interviews with 42 residents of seven villages in two townships in Sagaing Region which had suffered raids and arson attacks over the previous month[2]. The researchers were well known to the communities, having been collaborating on relief and development activities since prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and coup d'état. Arrangements were made for continued relief and psychosocial support to the communities concerned, recognizing the ongoing physical and psychological impacts of the conflict.

These seven villages were part of a larger network of over 100 villages, and amongst residents of these villages, over 80 percent had been displaced by conflict at least once in the previous three months, and the majority had been displaced multiple times. Other contemporaneous research has demonstrated the profound and prolonged impact of repeated displacement, aside from losses due to arson, looting, violence, or extortion (Aung Naing, 2023). The following section presents extended narratives of separate events of conflict displacement in three of the seven villages, followed by more detailed analysis of the other narratives on the nature and scope of violence.

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[2] For security reasons, the names of respondents, villages, and administrative townships have been redacted, and anonymization was applied to the interview transcripts.

Fire: Eyewitnesses

30-year-old man whose father is a person with disabilities

> It happened on the 25th of the 10th month of 2022. Around seven o'clock in the morning the soldiers entered the village and started shooting. They [villagers] ran away in a commotion. My father was the only one left in the house. Because my father is blind, he couldn't get away. Because the [artillery] bombardment continued really violently, we didn't have time to carry him and pick him up. We didn't even have time to get our shoes.
>
> We also had our seven-month-old baby, and we had to get away so quickly, we couldn't take anything. Also, that day, there was a storm, it was cold, the wind and rain were strong. Later we heard that one person had been shot [in the village]. Then also we heard that people were injured from the shrapnel from the artillery. A lot of houses were damaged, roofs blown off. Also, the village clinic was damaged.
>
> [...] From that day until now, the people in the village are still afraid. Since that day, some of them have not entered the village and are still staying in the forest. Now, the people in the village are always afraid and worried if they hear the slightest noise. Now, I have to be more prepared, I mean, we don't know when they will come back. I have to prepare documents and important things; I have to prepare how to take my father away if they come again. We have to flee, you know. Last time, there were two brothers who were close to where the soldiers came and started shooting. They tried to hide, but the soldiers found them and took them away.
>
> Food is quite difficult [to obtain] nowadays. Sometimes I can't go to the food market all the time. I'm afraid that even if I have money, it becomes difficult to buy, the prices have gone up two or three times. We can't do much work because of the danger. When we tried to plant [crops] before, the column of soldiers came and we had to run away again. (personal communication, Sagaing Region, 2022)

50-year-old woman whose son was shot in a military raid

> We [in this village] hate those dogs [derogatory term for MAF soldiers]. Our house was burnt down, and they tried to say it was the PDF. We know it was them who did it, those army dogs. They came 10 times, destroying every time. Each time we ran away. If it's just a house, you can rebuild it. There is no house, but there is still land. But what they took from me, what they took, they took my son. It has been three months now. My son, he was on guard duty, and I had a stomachache. He came back to care for me. I said, "Stay here, rest a bit." But then they [soldiers] came suddenly, and he ran out to get back to his place. On his way, that's when they shot him. All the time, they blame us, they blame the PDF, but it is them who start it. Even now, it is a struggle, it is not safe. If the dogs are not doing raids, if they are quiet, we can go out, but if they are not quiet, you have to stay [where you are].
>
> I am proud of my son, because he went head-to-head with them. I'm not depressed, I don't give up, but I miss my son. I cry every day, and I donate once a month to the monastery. That's what I can do. I can't go to them [the dogs] and shoot them, but they can come here and burn the village. You know, they can come and burn everything, however many times, but they can never take it over. (personal communication, Sagaing Region, 2022)

65-year-old farmer

> It happened in our village; the village was burned. It was the soldiers who came and set it on fire. It was about a month ago now. They came in firing guns, so we had to flee. We went to […] village, then we had to go further to the northern forest area. By the time we got to that place, the village was already engulfed in flames, so we couldn't return to the village. Other villages were also raided. The next morning, we went to try and put out the fire, but they were shooting people who tried to get in and put out the fire. We had to run again. We could shelter in the

> monastery, and the monastery and nearby villagers provided food for us. There were donations to the monastery to help us.
>
> The fire was burning all night, and we could only return the next day, and we went to the village, and we were surrounded by burned houses. It took two days to put out the fire, and all the surrounding villages also suffered. There is just ash, ruins. The fire destroyed a lot of food as well. [People from] Other villages nearby came to help us, and those with no homes could stay in the monastery. There are donations, but gradually these are getting used up. Right now, we are living in a temporary shelter, and it is hard to talk about the future. For some people, like elderly people, it is even harder. At first, because it was difficult, in the beginning, the elderly people stayed in the village. But now, because they [soldiers] start fires, the older people dare not stay. They have to move. Some people with cars or motorcycles, they can get away more easily. But others don't have that. We all have to prepare because they come again and again. (personal communication, Sagaing Region, 2022)

Tactics: Means and motives of violence

Analysis of the narratives of violence demonstrates particular expressions of the "four cuts" strategy, utilizing violence as a means of achieving domination. Despite the often sudden, explosive appearance of violence in the form of raiding troops, the narratives reveal the extent to which the military forces conducting the violence are doing so in a planned, calculated manner. Accounts given by villagers detained by soldiers reveal the existence of military orders detailing which villages should be raided and even which households should be burned. Whilst junta media consistently portrays military actions as a response to PDFs or local defense forces, the selection of houses for arson was based on prior knowledge of political loyalty. Houses known to be supporters of the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) were spared, whereas houses known to be supporters of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were targeted for burning:

> They have a clear objective [in burning]. They know which villages to burn, which houses they should burn. I mean, they have a list. If the village is green [USDP] then they don't burn. If the house is green [USDP] they don't burn. (76-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

> They came on the 20th day of the fifth month; they came and burned the village down. Around 100 houses were burned, and they also took away 100 people. The column entered the village. They said they burned because we didn't support them, saying we burn this one, that one. (70-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

> They targeted the big houses first. They said, "Those are supporting PDFs" and burned them. They came around 4:30. They accused some people of supporting PDFs, but we didn't do anything. Some people went to them [soldiers] to request not to do it, but they said, "We have to do it according to our list, whatever." (60-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

Violence was repeated and often incremental. Initial raids would often be conducted primarily for reconnaissance and to detain potential informants; subsequent raids would increase the levels of violence and destruction. Troops came prepared with particular kinds of accelerants for burning houses, as well as using petrol seized from local village shops opportunistically:

> They even broke women's oil jars. They just took whatever they wanted. They cut open the rice sacks; they took what they wanted. They did it very purposefully, very intentionally. (47-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

> The way they did the burning, it was very systematic. Like, we had a table downstairs, and it was in a place which would not get damaged by fire if the houses burned, but they moved it into the house to catch

> fire. They broke water pipes so that it would not be possible to put the fires out later. They planned very systematically how they could really oppress us people. (64-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

A key part of the four cuts strategy is the destruction or disruption of livelihoods to deny food and funds to resistance groups. Respondents reported the wanton destruction of crops, seeds, implements, and animals, and the looting of funds. The persistent threat of repeated raids was cited as the major impediment to recommencing agricultural livelihoods in the villages surveyed. Many farmers in these villages were already heavily indebted and relied on cyclical agriculture to maintain their subsistence. The failure of even one agricultural cycle threatens catastrophe, as loan defaults and a lack of access to finance have resulted in crisis measures such as selling or mortgaging land.

> They didn't respect anyone. Anything of value in this village, all the stored rice seeds, all our fertilizer bags, they just slashed with their knives, just spread it everywhere. They smashed the water pumps with sticks, they cut electricity cables, they destroyed everything. They didn't even spare our eyeglasses; they broke those too. This army really has sunk to the lowest point. (47-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

> It has happened again and again: we flee, we creep back, we flee again. We have had to sell all our stuff; we have so much debt. I can see they have done this very deliberately to make us weak and afraid. But honestly, we don't need to be afraid. (55-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

In the medium term, the MAF also sought to maintain a state of fear through mining of entry and exit roads from the village and pathways to fields, making it dangerous for villagers to return or restart livelihoods:

> How long have we been in the forest? I'm not sure, maybe a month now. We want to return, but they put mines here, they put mines there. We have some food in the village, but it is quite dangerous to try and get back. (60-year-old man, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

Raids by the MAF have also featured tactics designed to inflict psychological violence on rural communities. This has taken on three forms: firstly, the maintenance of a regular tempo of raids, but fraught with unpredictability. This perpetuates a sense of never being safe and, as noted above, causes detrimental effects on normal activities such as livelihoods. Secondly, the use of symbolic violence, such as torture, dismemberment, and rape, as well as the willingness to burn alive older people and people with disabilities trapped in their homes, sends a clear message that there are no limits to the violence and that any prior social norms and restraints (such as respect for the elderly) are now invalid. Thirdly, the selective targeting of particular houses or people for destruction or arrest serves not only as a warning to others, but fosters division, particularly between those who have suffered and those who have not. In particular, by pointedly sparing some houses or releasing some detainees, the MAF creates suspicion that these are either covert informers or collaborators, and as such, they are then unlikely be trusted by other community members:

> In one village, they arrested several young people. Some of them they killed, but some they released back. So, everyone wonders, why did they release that one? Were they *dalan* (an informer)? So, nobody in the village trusts them now, and the others suspect their family. This way, people begin to suspect each other instead of working together. (field notes, November 2022)

This means that to be spared arson, arrest, or destruction could be a mixed blessing, as being spared could lead to accusations of collusion.

Targeting for violence on the basis of prior support for either the NLD party or the armed resistance has enhanced and highlighted prior social divisions. The 2020 election in particular saw an increase in tension between NLD and USDP factions; post-coup, these divisions have been exacerbated to the extent that USDP supporters in villages where the majority are aligned with the NLD have often moved to USDP-majority villages, and vice versa. However, aside from the physical destruction of property, detention, and killing of persons, the psychological trauma and the sustained assault on social cohesion, our research also identifies a further dimension to the strategy of the MAF: the deliberate undermining of moral and spiritual capital—in this case, of Buddhism itself.

Othering the *Sangha*: The undermining of moral capital

Prior to the coup, the targeting of religious institutions, personnel, and buildings was limited to non-Buddhist minorities, Christian and Muslim. However, post-coup, the extension of violence into Buddhist heartland areas has been accompanied by what increasingly appears to be a concerted strategy to undermine the moral authority of Buddhism in these areas and, in doing so, subvert Buddhism into a vassal institution primarily positioned to act as a support for ongoing authoritarian rule by the military elite. Analyzing informant narratives alongside the public statements of the military regime suggests that the damage to Buddhist institutions in the conflict areas of the northwest is not incidental, but part of a strategy to weaken traditional, localized Buddhism, which is a source of moral and spiritual resourcing for self-organization and mutuality. In the long term, the junta seeks to replace these localized expressions of Buddhism with more uniform, nationalist forms loyal and subservient to the military elite.

At a local level, this is achieved through four main tactics: the destruction and desecration of sacred spaces; the undermining of the moral and spiritual authority of the local Buddhist community (the *Sangha*); the undermining of the humanitarian and pastoral capacity of the local *Sangha*; and the promotion of anti-*Dhamma* sentiments and practices by the sponsorship of violence. Traditionally, Buddhist religious buildings would be considered immune from violence and destruction, and universally afforded respect. As such, monasteries were considered reliable places of refuge, as they would not be bombed or attacked. In almost all of the narratives, villagers described either fleeing to monasteries in neighboring villages or, in some cases, leaving elderly or disabled family members in the village monastery, on the assumption that it would be a safe place. However, monasteries are increasingly being attacked or even targeted, especially if they are known to house displaced people:

> Another time, on the morning of the 10th day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar, those 14 houses were burned. They went to the monastery on the far side of the village and they did the same thing. (70-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

Troops of the MAF would garrison in monasteries, bringing weapons into the temple area (forbidden under monastic codes) and forcing monks and villagers to cook and clean for them. Villagers also reported troops firing artillery from hilltop pagoda sites. Normally sited on hilltops to provide protection for the village, pagoda sites were turned into launch pads for mortars:

> They shot from the top of the temple with big weapons [artillery], from the corner of the temple, from the big hill. (87-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

More disturbingly, accounts of rape, assault, and sexual violence committed by MAF soldiers on 12 village women were reported. This took place not only within the monastery grounds, but in front of the Buddha shrine area, and despite the entreaties of the abbot. To date, these incidents have not been publicly reported due to the deep sense of violation and shame endured by the victims.

The MAF troops have also sought to undermine the authority of the local *Sangha*. Whilst there is a degree of cooperation and oversight of Buddhist monasteries in Myanmar, local monasteries and abbots operate in a far more independent way than other religious groupings. This renders the task of achieving domination by the military junta (previously self-styled as the State Administrative Council, or SAC) more difficult, but also reduces the potential of wider collective resistance. In some cases, monks have been coerced into passivity, essentially encouraged to retreat into purely religious activities such as meditation. MAF troops also seized vehicles and property of monks and openly restricted travel by monks for purposes of preaching and collecting donations. The garrisoning of troops in monasteries served to create divisions and suspicions between abbots and local villagers. Whilst an abbot has little choice but to house and feed occupying troops, in doing so, he is seen to be aiding and abetting those who are committing arson, theft, and murder in that same community. This, in turn, undermines the moral authority of the local *Sangha*. MAF commanders have also sought to use the *Sangha* as a mediator between themselves, village leaders, and resistance leaders. Ahead of a regular troop movement, the local MAF battalion commander in one of these townships requested a local abbot to ask the village PDF not to set off improvised explosive devices in return for the exemption of that village from arson:

> The army requested PDF via abbot 'don't set off mines, we want to pass through, and if you don't set off the mines, we won't burn your village.' But village refused. 'Burn if you want to.' (field notes, November 2022)

This created suspicion toward the abbot and weakened his moral authority in the eyes of the local community.

The MAF has also sought to undermine the humanitarian and pastoral capacity of the *Sangha*. By destroying food stocks, disrupting livelihoods, and looting goods and money, villagers, in turn, have less to donate to the monastery, which would ordinarily assume the role of primary humanitarian aid provider to those who have been displaced. As the financial capacity of a monastery declines, so too does the wider authority of the *Sangha*:

> The displaced people, they can stay in the monastery. There are donors who come. But we know that the donations are getting less now. (70-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2022)

In such circumstances, with villagers scattered and displaced, and with financial resources constrained, the ability of monks to provide spiritual instruction is also reduced.

The final tactic is one of promotion of attitudes and practices which are contrary to standard *Dhamma* teaching and principles. Whilst it is arguable if this represents a deliberate tactic, the effect of the type and scale of violence used by the MAF is to stimulate emotions of anger, hatred, and revenge, all contrary to basic Buddhist teaching:

> I hate them. But I can't go and shoot them, because I would just be killed. But I want to get revenge for my son. (53-year-old woman whose son was shot and killed by MAF, personal communication, Sagaing Region, 2022)

In other parts of Sagaing Region, the MAF have supported nationalist monks who have formed and led armed militia, called *Pyusawhti*, which are loyal to the Myanmar military and conduct armed raids together with junta troops. Nationalist propaganda, issued by the military-aligned USDP, references the ongoing threat of religious and ethnic others, framing the current civil conflict as a religious war between Buddhism and other religions, particularly Christian-aligned ethnic armed organizations. The recent massacre of Buddhist monks in a village in Southern Shan State was widely considered to be an attempt by the MAF to foment religious identity-based conflicts between the Christian-affiliated and Buddhist-affiliated ethnic armed organizations in that area (Hunt, 2022). On a more abstract level, the targeting of certain households based on perceived affiliation or support of resistance and the maintenance of constant uncertainty also promote division, and a trend towards inward-looking self-preservation over and against mutuality and cooperation. At the fundamental level of Buddhist ethics, this represents the dominance of *attahita* (self-concern) over *parahita* (concern for others).[3] This, in turn, drains the moral and spiritual underpinnings of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and cooperation, and from a *Dhamma* perspective, represents a negative ethical trend and a decline in the authority of the *Dhamma* itself.

The "other" *Sangha* as an agent of authoritarianism

Viewed strategically, what do the MAF achieve through the undermining of the local *Sangha* and related institutions? Viewed as a component of the so-called counterterrorism strategy, the key short-term objective appears to be the undermining of local capacity for self-organization and resistance. Recognizing the key role of religious institutions in maintaining social cohesion and organizing support for displaced persons, the MAF has correctly identified religious institutions as a key enabler of resistance, even if indirectly. Long-term, the undermining of moral and spiritual capacity exerts a negative impact on socioeconomic rehabilitation, undermining the social capital and cooperative resources necessary to restore livelihoods and local economic and welfare exchanges. Crucially, the undermining of religious authority removes or constrains the capacity to address grievances, divisions, and conflict, in turn rendering cleavages permanent. The long-term objective of this is to keep villages weak, divided, and inward focused, reducing their future capacity to resist military rule. Akin to the effect of land seizure, forced displacement, and dispersal of minority populations in border areas, the strategy of undermining religious capital also seeks to chronically undermine any sense of collective agency of local communities, thereby facilitating ongoing domination. The undermining of moral values within communities also exerts a "decivilizing" effect, providing a justification for the ongoing use of force to pacify and rule.

By pressuring local *Sangha* members to choose between, on the one hand, either passive obeisance or tacit support for military rule, or on the other hand, overt identification with, and protection of, its local community, the military elite ultimately seek to transform the identity of the *Sangha*, gradually replacing it with a state- (military-) sponsored, nationalist, and submissive version. For the local *Sangha*, the choice is essentially Hobsonian, in that either passive obeisance or more overt resistance both represent risks to medium- and long-term viability. To remain passive or to provide tacit support for the military alienates monks from their core source of support, which is the local community. To overtly identify with the needs and aspirations of the local community—even if only to the extent of providing shelter and food for displaced persons—risks direct attack from the MAF. Either choice, in the medium term, represents a genuine threat. Whatever the choice, the outcome is also divisions between different monasteries and *Sangha* groupings, weakening the collective authority of Buddhism within Myanmar. This carries a rather deadly irony, as much of the rhetoric of the current military junta, and indeed of the Myanmar military in previous times, appeals to their role as the protector of the Buddhist religion and the Bamar race, openly aligning with nationalist movements such as *Ma Ba Tha* and its subsequent iterations (Aung Kyaw Min, 2017; Htet Naing Zaw, 2019).[4]

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[3] A detailed description of the application of *parahita* ethics to traditions of reciprocity can be found in Griffiths (2019a, pp. 119-120).

The MAF's ultimate objective is dominance and supremacy of the military elite, who are seeking to usurp Buddhism with their own, state-controlled version. Buddhist universities espousing military-aligned, nationalist teachings are heavily sponsored by the military elite, whilst those aligning with popular resistance and protests have suffered raids, arrests, seizure of property, and restrictions on activities (Amresh Lavan Gunasingham, 2021). New graduates are largely from military-aligned institutions and being posted to resistance-supported areas with the aim of supplanting localized Buddhism with a nationalist version supportive of ongoing authoritarian rule. In that sense, the "religious war" in Myanmar is between a nationalist Buddhism aligned with the military, and Buddhism and other religions which are not. The military elite will continue to maintain its performance of protecting Buddhism, but with the intent of degrading forms of Buddhism which do not submit to its authority. Subedi and Garnett (2020) argue that "Buddhist extremism in Myanmar is a product of militarized state-building and exploitative development" where "the interface between hegemonic state-building and exploitative development has promoted Buddhist ultra-nationalism as the state's ideology for state formation" (p. 225). Our analysis would concur, but previous regimes have largely relied on coercive, non-violent tactics. The current crisis, apart from the events of 2007, represents a new phase of sustained violence against local Buddhist institutions.

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[4] This includes comments made in a 2019 sermon by the influential Sittagu Sayadaw which appeared to justify violence and the taking of life in the cause of protecting Buddhism (see Lynn Htwe, 2019).

This analysis serves to expose the nature of the relationship between the current military elite and Buddhism as deeply conditional: the *Sangha* will continue to enjoy patronage and protection provided it, in turn, supports the rule of the patron—in this case the military. What is perhaps ironic is that, for all the rhetoric of the military elite as being the protectors of race and religion, in reality, the roles are reversed: it is the military elites who are subverting Buddhism as a means to protect their own position, and in doing so, in all likelihood weakening the broader integrity, authority, and fundamental appeal of Buddhism for people in Myanmar.

Conclusion: Deterritorialization

In assemblage terms, moral authority represents a significant "affective flow" influencing the shape and nature of the community assemblage. Affective flow in assemblage thinking refers to the concept of "desire," a subconscious, productive, and creative force which "give[s] rise to the relational capacities brought to bear by a particular assemblage" (Kahn, 2022, p. 758). The nature of affective flows means that "at any given time, there are affective flows stabilizing relational capacities that cement or 'territorialize' [the] emergent sociocultural formation, as well as those which simultaneously and conversely 'deterritorialize' the assemblage" (Kahn, 2022, p. 758).

Deterritorialization in assemblage terms does not always require the introduction of new entities; rather, a change in the affective flows which "bind" different elements of an assemblage in a particular form can also effectively destabilize, and hence deterritorialize, the assemblage.[5] Where communities in this region were often organized around the moral center of Buddhist institutions, clergy, practices, and morality, the undermining of these results in significant “rearrangement” within the community. An immediate impact of this is a decline in the authoritative role of village abbots in village affairs: “Previously, whatever the issue, the village abbot [would] manage. But not now” (31-year-old social organization volunteer, personal communication, 2022).

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[5] A good example of this is the impact of morale on military formations. Morale, and unit camaraderie, serve to bind together different human and non-human elements within a combat unit. Changes to morale can effectively deterritorialize such

The Myanmar military’s “fifth cut,” undermining moral agency and authority in conflict-affected communities, presents a deep challenge for post-conflict reconstruction. Beyond the importance of moral authority to reestablish social capital, cooperative networks, and modes of reciprocity, the exposure of both younger and older generations to violence, and to violence as a principle means of resolving conflict, means that there is an urgent need for deep resourcing of moral capital. Where various stages of relief, recovery, and rehabilitation also involve the distribution of goods, the sharing of resources, and often challenging processes of prioritization, the potential for both new conflicts and exacerbation of old resentments, tensions, and divisions is considerable. This highlights the critical importance of social cohesion and social capital in post-conflict recovery—a challenge made all the more difficult by the strategic undermining of moral authority by the MAF.

The consequences of this “fifth cut” for humanitarian assistance for socio-economic rehabilitation are both profound and complex. Firstly, any such rehabilitation is taking place against a backdrop of profound and sustained physical, social, and psychological trauma, with deep divisions and enmities and a largely exhausted and angry population. In such scenarios, the role of moral and spiritual resources is clearly critical. Secondly, in contexts where there is an absence of established governance or where governing authority is contested, the role of informal arbiters becomes more prominent. In such situations, religious leaders or institutions frequently play a significant role, highlighting again the deeply negative consequences of such authority being undermined. Thirdly, as noted above, moral and spiritual capital are critical

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a unit, rendering it into a very different shape and form.

elements for collective and cooperative actions. In relief, recovery, and rehabilitation efforts, issues of inclusion and exclusion, inequality or priority become enhanced, and require deep moral resources to sustain attitudes and practices of mutuality. Where old divisions and enmities still persist, the entry of humanitarian resources may cause tensions to flare up. Beyond this, rehabilitation involves the restoration of social systems, which, in turn, require commitment, consensus, and collaboration. Numerous studies have highlighted the role of moral and spiritual capital in such processes (Fanany & Fanany, 2013; Frounfelker et al., 2020), not simply in reestablishing bonds between individuals in communities and reaffirming of collective identities, but in nurturing hopefulness, endurance, and altruism. At just the time when such resources are desperately needed, they are being systematically degraded by the MAF.

Firstly, actors and agencies should avoid viewing reconstruction as a technical issue; it is inherently political and complicated by profound trauma, destruction of social norms, and the generation of new, often horrifying narratives. This demands a sensitive, listening approach which eschews quick, ready-made solutions and instead seeks to identify the nature of both cohesion and cleavage in the community. It also alerts to the dangers of prioritizing individual support over community processes. Whilst identifying a small number of "vulnerable groups" may be operationally more straightforward, attention to wider community issues should generate processes which seek to identify, strengthen, or reestablish different forms of social capital.

Secondly, as part of that process, there is a need to identify potential sources of moral authority in the community, as well as potential inequalities, cleavages, and lines of conflict. This should not assume that all previous arrangements were optimal: often, previous social cohesion has sustained profound inequalities and exclusions, and entrenched the power of vested interests. Hence, the contribution of external agents may involve critical dialogue, both seeking to identify and affirm agents and institutions which contribute to positive, transformative social capital, and seeking to engage in constructive discussion on processes and arrangements which may perpetuate inequalities and exclusions.

Thirdly, the process of strengthening social capital and social cohesion should seek to promote wider cooperative networks, pushing back against the creation of new, excluded “others” and competition over scarce resources. Recent studies (Yutwon, 2024) confirm a rapid shrinking of the range of cooperative networks, particularly in conflict-affected areas, resulting in more competitive and less cooperative arrangements. External agents have a unique role in fostering wider inter-community networks, which can, in turn, lead to more synergy.

This challenges humanitarian approaches which eschew non-technical elements, or which define secularism in terms antagonistic to religious belief and practice. Likewise, a relative moral, spiritual, and social capital vacuum presents ideal conditions for increased expressions of social capital, including religious extremism and ethnocentric exceptionalism, resulting in new inequalities and exclusions (Portes, 2014; Saal, 2021). For humanitarians, this strays into issues around neutrality and non-coercion, and avoiding either coercion or complicity in partisan power plays (Slim, 2015, 2022). Yet, if the problem is complex and nuanced, it suggests that the responses are also unlikely to be straightforward. At the very least, humanitarian action in the face of such a deliberate, violent assault on moral and spiritual well-being, agency, and organization should acknowledge the act and seek to undertake actions which do no further harm, and where possible, enable the reestablishment of forms of social cohesion and social capital which encourage inclusion, challenge inequalities, and provide avenues to address the profound trauma of the past four years.

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PART II:

Humanitarian Assemblages

Chapter 5

Tectonics: Assemblage of a Disaster

Aung Naing

Chapter summary

This chapter examines the March 28, 2025, earthquake in Myanmar through the lens of assemblage theory, framing the disaster as more than a geophysical event. Striking Sagaing, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw with a magnitude of 7.7, the quake destroyed infrastructure, monuments, and communities—disproportionately affecting Muslim populations gathered for Ramadan. The military regime's response mirrored its predecessors' actions after Cyclone Nargis in 2008: suppression of news, obstruction of international aid, and prioritization of symbolic repairs to religious and political sites over civilian rescue. Volunteer groups, religious organizations, and resistance actors provided the majority of relief, contrasting starkly with the junta's neglect and reinforcing grassroots resilience as both humanitarian duty and political defiance. Internationally, the quake became an opportunity for the military to regain legitimacy. ASEAN, the UN, and foreign governments used "humanitarian neutrality" to justify renewed engagement with the junta, recalling earlier post-Nargis dynamics. Rescue offers from Taiwan and other actors were blocked, while international assistance funneled through junta-controlled channels risked financing military operations. This response illustrated global "learned helplessness": a resignation to authoritarianism couched in pragmatism, with regional powers preferring stability under the junta over revolutionary uncertainty. The disaster's ontological framing varied by actor. For the junta, it was simultaneously a cosmic threat undermining public legitimacy and an opportunity for external recognition. For the opposition National Unity Government, it represented a risk of political irrelevance despite a declared ceasefire and relief efforts. For ordinary citizens, survival itself represents an ongoing, radical act of resistance.

Keywords: earthquake, humanitarian assistance, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, disaster

Editor's note: The inclusion of this chapter is somewhat of a risk: the pace of events in Myanmar is such that many of the contextual specifics may already be out of date by the time of publication. However, the underlying analysis and application of assemblage theory to a complex juxtaposition of physical and political crises may well continue to be useful beyond its original time and space. Given that many of the observations are more or less identical to those made less than 20 years ago in the aftermath of the 2008 Cyclone Nargis, it seems that critical lessons are seldom learned, forcing history to repeat itself with tragic, bloody consequences.

On March 28, 2025, hours after the annual Armed Forces Day parade in Nay Pyi Taw, and 1,516 days since the military coup of February 2021, an earthquake of 7.7 magnitude ripped down the central fault lines of Sagaing, Mandalay, and Nay Pyi Taw, toppling both modern high rises and ancient monuments. Damage was most pronounced in the three urban sites nearest the fault lines, but smaller towns, as well as sections of the Yangon-Mandalay highway, were also ruptured.

I was in Yangon at the time, where the shaking lasted for what seemed like whole minutes. Strange messages came in from friends in southern China, Bangkok, and Chiang Mai of a large quake—at that time we did not know the epicenter was much closer to home. Soon, messages from friends in Mandalay, accompanied by media images of the collapsing Sagaing-Mandalay old bridge, confirmed the epicenter as being in Sagaing, close to Mandalay, and the largest earthquake in over a century in an area with a history of such tectonic disturbances. Slowly, over the next few days, news filtered through of the damage and casualties, disproportionately borne by Muslim communities who had gathered for the final call to prayer of Ramadan. Despite a news embargo, reports also emerged of substantial damage in Nay Pyi Taw, the capital of the junta regime, built right on the fault line in 2005 following guidance military leaders received from celebrated astrologers due to the location's supposed auspiciousness and immunity from disaster. News also came through of the response, led almost exclusively by local volunteer groups, with the military conspicuous in both its absence and, after it was finally roused into action, its preoccupation with using much-needed construction equipment to repair temples and historical monuments whilst ignoring the plight of victims still trapped under rubble. Whilst the National Unity Government (NUG), formed in opposition to the coup leaders in 2021, declared a two-week truce, the junta continued its campaign of bombing civilian targets, resuming attacks mere hours after the quake.

A surprising appeal for international assistance by the historically xenophobic military leaders was met with naïve enthusiasm by many commentators and weary cynicism by seasoned activist leaders long familiar with the military's naked exploitation of natural disasters (The Irrawaddy, 2025a). Sure enough, expert rescue teams from Taiwan were denied entry, along with journalists, consignments of aid supplies, and foreign personnel not affiliated with the regime. Within days, accounts of seizure of relief supplies and arrest of aid workers and blockades, particularly around Sagaing city, showed that the old playbook was still very much alive, confirmed by sinister warnings from the junta's deputy leader on the necessity of coordination with the military for all relief activities.

As I write, nearly three weeks on, such stories continue, with the response largely split along two lines: small-scale, localized responses by a myriad of civil society actors, including religious, community, and in some cases, resistance-affiliated groups; and the response by larger United Nations (UN) and international government and non-government actors, largely in cooperation, collaboration, or sometimes under the direct supervision of the military junta. The disaster has been used to justify more direct engagement with the military rulers, specifically coup leader Min Aung Hlaing, by the UN, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and most recently, by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which, after having previously excluded senior coup leaders from ASEAN meetings, arranged a meeting during a summit held in Bangkok one week after the earthquake (The Nation, 2025). The moral imperative to provide immediate assistance to victims was deemed a sufficiently compelling reason to ignore the regime's ongoing, willful disregard of the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus for addressing the political crisis in Myanmar, and appeals to the need for humanitarian assistance to be "neutral" and "apolitical" have spawned a slew of articles and statements demanding a "ceasefire" by all sides, with a prioritization of humanitarian assistance over the desire to continue military actions. The subsequent breaching of the ceasefire by military leaders, who in turn pointed the finger at the resistance groups who were "surrounding them on all sides," was entirely predictable to all but a few willfully ignorant diplomats.

The issue and fundamental point of difference is not, however, in either the interpretation of humanitarian neutrality itself, nor in the reasonable demands for a cessation of hostilities during a period of disaster response, or even in the analysis of the nature and intentions of the key actors such as the regime leaders. Differences of opinion on humanitarian neutrality can actually enable and lead to some form of response. A ceasefire is generally a reasonable demand following a natural disaster; and even if at times misguided and naïve, an acknowledgment of the necessity to deal with de facto authorities can justify a degree of temporary rapprochement. However, this presumes a shared understanding of the ontology of a disaster, and based on this, the extent to which normal moral imperatives apply. Scratch beneath the surface, and we find that, whilst the suffering experienced by those impacted by the disaster is viscerally real, the framing of the disaster in ontological terms differs vastly. In the days after the earthquake, one civic volunteer (personal communication, 2025, April 3) pointed out that in at least one village near the epicenter of the quake, no buildings were damaged by the earthquake—because they had all been flattened in successive airstrikes by the military in the months before.

Decisions made, and the reasons used to justify them, hinge upon the nature of what we are responding to. In this case, beyond the fatalities, collapsed buildings, and shattered infrastructure is a more complex, contested "disaster." This paper looks at the disaster from two perspectives. Firstly, the ontology of the disaster itself, as a complex assemblage of historical factors, power dynamics, and powerful affects which supercharged the impact of the tectonic disruptions into something far more devastating. Secondly, where the earthquake has resulted in a deterritorialization of the delicate state of affairs of "Myanmar," including international relations, this paper considers which particular affective flows will influence the "reterritorialization" into some new norm—and what could potentially tilt the direction in different ways.

Disasters in Myanmar: Normal, but not natural

> *One can reasonably argue that there is no such thing as a natural disaster.* (Mizutori, 2020)

Myanmar is considered one of the most disaster-prone countries in Southeast Asia, less due to the frequency of events per se than to the high number of fatalities associated with its disasters (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific [UNESCAP], 2025). Chronic underinvestment in prevention and mitigation coupled with widespread public mistrust in military regimes have resulted in a high level of potentially preventable damage and loss. The recent flooding affecting Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar in the aftermath of 2024's Typhoon Yagi illustrated this: whilst the actual extent of flooding was significantly less in Myanmar, the overall number of fatalities was disproportionately higher (Leelawat et al., 2025; Sun, Song, Han, Song, & Wang, 2024). This illustrates the well-known point on the composition of disasters as a confluence of "natural" events and the broader, human-made context in which they occur. Hence, attempts to distinguish between a "natural" disaster, and one which is considered more "man-made" is misleading, as Aronsson-Storrier and Dahlberg (2022) point out. In this sense, a disaster can also be understood as the manifestation of vulnerabilities that have slowly built up through time until something (such as a hurricane, famine, or disease) eventually disrupts the system and reveals what lies beneath the surface (Aronsson-Storrier & Dahlberg, 2022, p. 2).

It is largely these contextual factors which push Myanmar to the top of Southeast Asia's table of disasters. A historical tendency of military governments to try and obscure the aftermath of disasters from international view influenced the regime's initial response to the devastation of 2008's Cyclone Nargis: news blackouts, followed by denials and obfuscations, followed by refusal to allow international assistance aside from carefully managed cargo deliveries from friendly countries, eventually gave way to an ASEAN-UN-led and managed approach to the crisis several weeks after the initial event—and only after the military had successfully concluded its referendum to ensconce its power in a new constitution (Larkin, 2010; Martin & Margesson, 2008; Seekins, 2009). Myanmar's senior generals seem to have been preoccupied with their referendum over a new constitution and about maintaining regime security. Allowing unrestricted entry of large teams of foreign aid and relief workers into an already devastated region holds potential for political disruption;

but when hundreds of thousands of lives are jeopardized by the regime's determination to minimize the very fact of a hazard-related disaster, it is further politicized. This represents a huge dilemma for the ASEAN "family" (Sidaway, Savage, & Grundy-Warr, 2008, p. 247).

Humanitarian cooperation peaked in the brief period of National League for Democracy (NLD)-led rule before being restricted again after the 2021 coup, where obstructions and harassment of aid workers in the response to multiple crises, such as Cyclone Mocha and Typhoon Yagi, had resulted in a "downward spiral in the humanitarian situation" (Holliday, Myat, & Cook, 2025, p. 6). Even before the coup, humanitarian aid was heavily politicized in Myanmar. It has become far more so since the junta seized power and set itself up in opposition to most of the rest of the country. In line with its attempt to control almost every aspect of Myanmar life, the regime seeks to bring international humanitarian assistance under the state apparatus (Holliday, Myat, & Cook, 2025, p. 8).

Disaster response in Myanmar has always relied heavily on local networks, partly by tradition and partly through the reluctance of military authorities to allow international aid (McCarthy, 2023). Mutual aid societies flourish in most towns and villages, and religious and youth organizations rapidly mobilize in the face of crises. This was illustrated vividly during the COVID-19 pandemic response when, despite the presence of a strong central government apparatus, civil groups formed the backbone of medical and community care (Spring Rain & Aung Naing, 2022). Such a response is integral to the identity of an emergent Myanmar citizenship defined more by activism than by ethnic or religious affiliation, and where the rapid deployment of assistance is not simply a virtue, but is a form of resistance against authoritarian rule. As truck after truck packed with young volunteers and relief supplies pour into the latest disaster zone with banners indicating their association name and origin, the message is clear: *we* are responding, *you* (military regime) are not. The moral high ground is claimed by a disparate army of volunteers, supported by a vast network of primarily individual local and diaspora donors. Their message is simple: these are our people; this is our responsibility. Whilst not every group espouses explicit affiliation to the resistance cause, the public performance of humanitarian relief as an emergent, voluntary (and frequently dangerous) act is designed to contrast with the callous indifference of the military rulers. By flying religious banners, local relief groups also force local military actors into awkward quandaries: do they risk public (potentially international) opprobrium by blocking, stealing, or extorting aid from well-connected religious groups?

This also links to another, more subtle ontological stream: the cosmological significance of disasters. Burmese words for disasters reference different "plagues," which are in turn seen as omens of judgment against people or rulers. The three (sometimes four) plagues include drought/famine, sickness, and war, while occasionally a bad ruler is also listed as a specific plague (အရှင်သုမင်္ဂလာ, 2021).

For many in Myanmar, the immediate interpretations of the disaster are what I term "cosmo-political": an interpolation of astrology with the ruling polity, usually with the hope that this will be a final "plague" on the rulers' house:

> Videotapes of the 2005 tsunami's destruction of Burmese coastal communities circulate through private homes in cities and [villages] demonstrating a truth that is hidden from them by the military […] behind the video representations and people's grieving is the hope that natural disaster is an omen that presages political change. To counter the potential impact of the video pictures […], the Burmese military offers superficial banter about the disasters, initially making statements denying the need for aid and downplaying the damage. (Larkin, 2010, pp. 302-303)

Ever alert to both the ubiquity of such beliefs amongst the public and deeply superstitious themselves, a key response of Myanmar's military leaders in the face of disasters has been denials, obfuscations, and diversions, mainly directed not towards international audiences, but domestic, and to some extent, cosmic ones.

Ontologies of an earthquake

> *Enhancing our understanding of what a disaster is can assist us in breaking down the building blocks of disaster and start interrogating the concept from different angles. Thus, the question becomes not only what 'is' a disaster, but what 'makes' a disaster.* (Aronsson-Storrier & Dahlberg, 2022, p. 1)

The earthquake assumed vastly differing ontologies for different actors. For the military rulers, it represented two somewhat conflicting realities: firstly, an immediate internal threat, in terms of both specific physical security, but more deeply, a publicly visible undermining of legitimacy amongst core supporters, mainly due to the cosmic and astrological symbolism (hence the rapid repairing of palace walls and religious sites, and frantic offering of alms at various sites). Secondly, an external opportunity to leverage the crisis to gain international legitimacy.

Days after the quake, the regime announced that it would welcome international assistance, and shortly afterwards, coup leader Min Aung Hlaing traveled to Bangkok for a rare international meeting (The Nation, 2025). After considerable international pressure and negative comparisons to the NUG, the regime also announced a ceasefire, albeit in grudging terms, which it then breached within hours of the announcement. But photo-ops and reports of the coup leader receiving calls of condolence and support from international leaders were eagerly reported in the junta-controlled press. The ill-judged decision of a large American faith-based organization to establish a field hospital in the regime capital of Nay Pyi Taw provided further photo-ops for Min Aung Hlaing to display a caring, humanitarian face, with the tacit understanding of seeking to establish rapport with the Trump administration through the charity's senior leadership (Myanmar Now, 2025). Beyond this, the crisis also provided significant opportunities for hard cash and building contracts for companies linked to the coup leaders' families and other cronies (The Irrawaddy, 2025b).

For much of the previous four years since the coup, the military leadership had struggled to control a narrative of bad luck: successive natural disasters, military losses, economic collapse, and, in the months before the earthquake, the death of a white elephant considered to be a portent of cosmic approval of a ruler. The fastidiously superstitious leaders continued their program of pagoda building and pilgrimages, whilst seeking to burnish their reputations as protectors and promoters of Buddhism. However, the March 28th earthquake yielded a slew of astrological interpretations: previous earthquakes in the same area nearly two centuries ago resulted in the destruction of the then-capital of the Burmese (Konbaung) empire (Blazeski, 2016). A more potent portent was that concerning the walls of Mandalay Palace: that if the walls fell down, the king would fall (Beech, 2025). Other significant religious sites such as the Mahamuni Pagoda were also damaged—among more than 5,000 pagodas listed as damaged. The narrative of the invulnerability of the Buddhist institution has also been shaken—as such buildings were meant to be protectors against natural disasters and safe havens for people (Sui-Lee Wee, 2025).

For the NUG and resistance groups, the earthquake represented a different threat: a dangerous shift of the wider narrative away from the conflict and daily atrocities committed by the military, and the risk that, as in the aftermath of the Nargis response, the regime would successfully exploit the disaster for its own political and security gains. The NUG response was both immediate and measured, with public declarations of a two-week ceasefire and the deployment of combat troops to assist recovery in earthquake-affected areas under its control. However, given that the majority of the affected population were in areas under junta control, and given the diplomatic norms surrounding disaster response, the NUG gained little international recognition for its efforts. Ceasefire narratives were somewhat complex, as non-NUG-affiliated armed groups in areas not affected by the earthquake continued their activities, and in turn, the regime continued to conduct air and ground raids on a wide range of civilian targets, including those within the earthquake damage zone.

For international actors, particularly those affiliated with the UN and ASEAN, the earthquake came like April rains: a brief shower after a long, hot drought. After the torturous and divisive attempts to manage the Myanmar political crisis through its stillborn Five-Point Consensus, as well as watching China increase its military and political footprint in both the northeast and southwest, ASEAN, alongside India, welcomed the opportunity to use humanitarian assistance as a cover to reengage with the junta. Citing humanitarian neutrality and the old mantra of "people are people," specialist rescue teams, planeloads of supplies, and millions of dollars of cash assistance were all funneled through military authorities, with daily phone calls, meetings, and photo opportunities with junta leaders. The default position of both the UN and ASEAN, as well as the majority of the international community, is to "manage" rather than resolve the broader crisis, which, in effect, translates into ongoing support for the junta in the hope that a more moderate version may finally emerge, rather than supporting the more comprehensive transformation desired by the majority of Myanmar's people. Such a hope is anchored in the post-Nargis experience, where the ASEAN-UN engaged response was considered to be a catalyst for the subsequent political "reforms" which ushered in the quasi-military regime of President Thein Sein, and later, the first free elections in more than five decades. According to activist and commentator Igor Blazevic (2025), the absence of any appetite for the complexities and uncertainties of a more revolutionary path means "[t]hese regional powers prefer the 'devil they know'—a centralized authoritarian regime—over a democratic uprising they cannot predict or influence." Underlying this is a toxic mixture of vested interests and learned helplessness—an acceptance that, particularly for ASEAN and UN actors, their institutional capacity to effect any meaningful change is almost zero. This is sometimes couched in more managerial language such as "deeply entrenched habits of non-interference continue to preclude stronger responses" (Caballero-Anthony, 2022, p. 16), but in effect amount to a surrender to authoritarianism.

In truth, regional actors are not helping the junta to win—they are simply helping it to not lose. In the early days of the coup, they watched silently, hoping the military would swiftly suppress the Spring Revolution. Now, as the junta falters, they intervene—ineffectively, inconsistently, and without principle (Blazevic, 2025). The earthquake, then, represents an opportunity to do something which is ostensibly to help the "Myanmar people," but at the same time, avoiding the risk of either wider criticism from more strident critics of the junta and using humanitarian neutrality as a convenient fig leaf to reengage with the junta authorities.

Aftershocks: Deterritorialization, reterritorialization

> *One characteristic of geophysical disasters is that they force a new future upon a population.* (Donovan, 2017, p. 47)

An earthquake is a trigger for deterritorialization, altering the relationship between different elements of an assemblage. What "affective flows" will influence the subsequent reterritorialization? Assemblage theory seeks to establish a means to examine the "ontology" of something based on the arrangement and relationship of its constituent parts. Reterritorialization occurs when the arrangement of those parts is disrupted, either by a change within the assemblage itself or by an external factor which disrupts and displaces. As the relationship between constituent parts is changed, so the overall "shape" of the assemblage is changed. Whilst its overall ontology may remain in the same category, its nature may be different. But deterritorialization is not stable and is followed by a process of reterritorialization—the reestablishment of a settled state, which may be a return to the previous arrangement or a "new normal," with the changed relationships resulting in a different arrangement.

The earthquake can be considered a disruption to the assemblage which was "Myanmar." That assemblage itself was unstable: long since unworthy of being deemed a "state" (Wells & Aung Naing, 2022), growing resistance to the 2021 coup had rendered a multi-colored map of territorial control, with the regime claiming less than a third. Whilst the UN representative of Myanmar remained firmly wedded to the resistance cause of the NUG, regional diplomatic relations post-earthquake largely favored support for the junta, what was called "Myanmar." On the ground, territory was controlled and administered by multiple armed agents, some affiliated to ethnic organizations, some part of a broad and disparate movement of "People's Defense Forces" more or less affiliated with the NUG. In this section, I will explore one material and three "affective" flows as likely to influence the future shape of "Myanmar" in its current crisis. The first material flow is financial.

A popular opinion amongst external actors, supported by a considerable body of research, is that natural disasters can be a factor in shortening the duration of conflict, increasing the likelihood of a settled peace (Gaillard, Clavé, & Kelman, 2008). However, this is highly contingent on the damage being shared equally by belligerents and by an assumption of rational behavior by actors, as detailed by Nemeth and Lai (2022):

> Specifically, only when governments and rebels are both hit by a disaster do we expect disasters to promote negotiations. When only one of the combatants experiences a disaster—the effect on their expectations about military victory and the change in pre-disaster information for both parties is less clear—the likelihood of negotiations should remain the same. (p. 28)

This appears to be the motivation behind the calls for a "humanitarian ceasefire" by all parties, made by various governments and the UN special representative. However, as Nemeth and Lai (2022) point out, the likelihood of a disaster to prompt negotiations is contingent on the creation of a cost for "trying to win militarily" (p. 39) in which both the public and international community play a role. In the context of Myanmar where the regime has struggled for resources and has been hit disproportionately by the earthquake, the cost of recovery risks diverting resources from the war effort—unless resources can be found elsewhere. Hence, a strategy for "outsourcing" the cost of recovery is required in order to spare funds for ongoing military action:

> In some cases, international humanitarian aid can cushion these financial blows, particularly when foreign governments and international institutions allocate goods and capital through governmental

> channels […]. Because these resources are transferable, often provided in haste and without preconditions, governments in war-torn states might also use them to finance counterinsurgency and supply troops. (Eastin, 2016, p. 327)

International aid, where provided through junta-controlled channels, even if not subjected to explicit diversion, nonetheless enables the indirect resourcing of combat operations—particularly as the regime had previously emptied the coffers of the disaster management fund set up by the NLD regime (Holliday, Myat, & Cook, 2025). Likewise, if aid is diverted from support to the other four million people displaced by conflict, this, in turn, increases the burden on resistance organizations assuming the multiple burdens of social and physical protection.

The second factor, and first "affective flow," is that of legitimacy—not amongst the broader public, but specifically amongst the "reactionary" population who tacitly support the military regime. This includes a disparate collection of religious leaders (mainly Buddhist monks), businesspeople, and civil servants who have declined to join the Civil Disobedience Movement:

> The [...] consequence is a potential loss of legitimacy for not appropriately responding to a disaster in their area. If a [...] group has a presence in an impacted area, there may be expectations that they will assist with the recovery and relief efforts. Failing to do so could cause people to question their ability to govern and weaken their claim about being better able to support people. (Nemeth & Lai, 2022, p. 31)

The disproportionate impact on the regime's capital of Nay Pyi Taw, coupled with the almost immediate news and aid blockade, served both to conceal and exacerbate the suffering of those closest to the regime. Reports of troops abandoning civil servants trapped under rubble, of callous orders to return to work despite a failure to provide adequate shelter and water (The Irrawaddy, 2025c), the tardy and subsequently heavy-handed response in the commercial hub of Mandalay, the ruthless exploitation of the crisis for personal gain (The

Irrawaddy, 2025b), and the wider portents involved where religious buildings were destroyed, with monks amongst the victims, all serve to counter the already incredible claims to legitimacy, competency, and religious protector status. It is less that the claims have proven to be illusory; rather that they have been spectacularly and publicly revealed to be so, despite the regime's best attempts to keep them hidden. This in part explains the frantic attempts to repair the Mandalay Palace wall and to clean up religious buildings even whilst bodies lay trapped in the rubble. What has emerged is a powerful, multifaceted, and irrefutable narrative of the inability of the regime to protect even its own against natural or cosmic threats. Just as the narrative of natural disaster provides a justification for international actors to reengage with the regime, the earthquake narrative provides a justification for reactionaries to disengage—perhaps not in opposition, but a withdrawal of whatever tacit support remains.

The third factor, and second affective flow, can be broadly described as the self-perpetuating "learned helplessness" of the broader international community with regard to Myanmar. Learned helplessness is broadly defined as occurring "when an individual continuously faces a negative, uncontrollable situation and stops trying to change their circumstances, even when they have the ability to do so" (Psychology Today, 2025). As noted in the previous section, a combination of wishful thinking, inherent fear of complexity and the unknown, and vested interests all conspire against any meaningful engagement with agents of change. This "international reactionary brigade," much like its domestic counterpart, is also a somewhat disparate collection of actors, united by an aversion to ideology and wedded to pragmatism. However, underlying this is a sense of resignation to the status quo and a refusal to realistically consider alternatives. However, this sense of resignation is self-defeating and self-referential, such that even when alternatives do emerge, the overwhelming sense of helplessness refutes their possibility. The only language capable of reaching through this fog of despondency is that of fear—fear that the center, after all, will not hold. As Igor Blazevic (2025) points out:

> [...] when it becomes clear that the revolution is going to win, the region will adjust—not out of solidarity, but out of self-interest. They will recognize a new transitional authority because they must—not because they care.

The fourth affective flow is the resilience of the broader public, coalescing around what I term the "non-combatant" activists. The term "resilience" has been broadly misused in relation to Myanmar, largely as a strategy to outsource the means of survival (Diprose, 2014). However, the nation's protracted crises and repeated disasters have served to weaponize resilience: survival is not simply for its own sake, but is itself an act of defiance. Rather, as Diprose (2014, p. 44) warns, resilience may serve to encourage people to tolerate insecurity and inequality, to treat collective struggles as tests of personal character, and to "indefinitely postpone more radical demands for change." The collective response to the earthquake—embodied by the self-organized, self-motivated, and self-funded volunteer relief groups hauling bodies from rubble with their bare hands or driving hundreds of miles with food and shelter items—itself serves as both a manifestation and a signpost to an unbowed spirit. This is no mere romanticization; rather, it serves to illustrate the critical role of agency in emergency response. It is not about external heroes sweeping in to save; it is about the naked act of survival as the ultimate act of defiance in the face of decades of authoritarian cruelty and neglect. You can starve us, beat us, shoot us; you can imprison us, take our young people, burn our houses; you can leave us under the rubble—but the one thing we will not do is to die. We will survive, if that is the last thing we do to defy you. As Spring Rain and others have pointed out,

> [...] these discussions focus on the "how" of citizenship: what being a citizen looks like in a failed state. Humanitarian self-determination is a key part of that expression. To be a citizen implies a commitment to the well-being and aspirations of your fellow citizens. Beyond relief as simply providing aid is ensuring survival by means that do not compromise the broader goals of freedom from oppression. The humanitarian citizen asserts citizenship as defined by those

> who not only belong to this community but who demonstrate their belonging in ways committed to the well-being of that community. This coproduction of citizenship provides hope in an otherwise fragmented context. (Spring Rain & Aung Naing, 2022, p. 62)

Conclusion: Future geographies

Common to all forms of anticipatory action is a seemingly paradoxical process whereby a future becomes cause and justification for some form of action in the here and now. This raises some questions: how is "the future" being related to, how are futures known and rendered actionable to thereafter be acted upon, and what political and ethical consequences follow from acting in the present on the basis of the future (Anderson, 2010, p. 778)?

As the aftershocks continue, as the recovery proceeds, and as the violence remains unabated, what landscape is emerging, particularly considering the influences of the four factors mentioned in the previous section? The likelihood of international "learned helplessness" using the disaster as justification for continued support to the military regime will in all likelihood prolong the conflict, not least through financial means enabling the diversion of funds for military costs. However, the longer-term erosion of domestic support from previously junta-aligned reactionaries is far more damaging. Despite the increased burden on resistance groups of providing both physical and social protection, and the knock-on effect of economic damage to supportive communities, the public earthquake response has coalesced and solidified a broader face of resilience, effectively linking rural (and largely resistance-controlled) areas with urban communities. The dominant affective flow will not, in the end, be either international support or associated funds, but a resilience weaponized by conflict, willful neglect, and exploitation.

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Chapter 6

Care Assemblages and Citizenship Vulnerabilities in Burma/Myanmar

Elaine Lynn-Ee Ho

Chapter summary

Using case studies from Kachin State, where humanitarian aid delivery is sustained less by the Myanmar or Chinese states—often perceived as "uncaring"—and more by networks of local faith-based groups, secular organizations, diaspora communities, and cross-border ties, this chapter argues that mainstream analyses of Myanmar's geopolitics often privilege state-centric perspectives, overlooking the everyday practices and networks that shape humanitarian responses in the country's borderlands. To address this gap, this chapter introduces the concept of "care assemblages," an analytical framework that combines assemblage theory and care theories. Assemblage theory emphasizes fluid, networked relations among heterogeneous actors, while care theories foreground interdependence, ethics, and the contested nature of care. Together, they highlight how humanitarian practice and political contestation in Myanmar are co-produced by diverse actors, from international organizations and ethnic armed groups to cross-border communities and local organizations. The chapter also examines shifting alliances among ethnic armed groups after the 2021 coup, China's role as a mediator and power broker, and the humanitarian politics that followed Myanmar's 2025 earthquake. Care assemblages reveal how vulnerability, agency, and solidarity are negotiated through contingent alignments, offering a dynamic alternative to statist geopolitics and underscoring the importance of grassroots actors in Myanmar's humanitarian landscape.

Keywords: care assemblages, Kachin State, China, humanitarian aid, geopolitics

Introduction

Mainstream geopolitical analyses of Myanmar have long foregrounded the contestations between state and non-state actors, the shifting alignments of international powers, and the macro-structural forces underpinning borderland conflict. While these approaches offer important insights into the grand narratives of violence, sovereignty, and intervention, they often overlook the microdynamics, everyday practices, and affective relations that shape—and are shaped by—the lived realities of those on the ground. In this context, the concept of "care assemblages" emerges as a productive analytical framework, drawing from both assemblage theory and care theories to foreground the provisional, networked, and relational qualities of political life and humanitarian practice in Myanmar.

Assemblage theory shifts focus from rigid, hierarchical models of power to the dynamic, heterogeneous interplay of actors and processes that form social and political life. This perspective, highlighting distributed agency and continual transformation, is well suited to the complexities of Myanmar's border zones. Care theories enrich this view by emphasizing the ethical and political dimensions of interdependency and the contested nature of care. Together, these approaches—conceptualized as care assemblages—reveal how care and control are co-produced and negotiated by a wide array of actors, from international organizations (IOs) and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to cross-border communities and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In Myanmar's volatile borderlands, especially along the China-Myanmar frontier, care assemblages manifest through the collaborative and sometimes conflicting efforts of multiple actors, each responding to the shifting terrain of conflict, displacement, and humanitarian crisis. International and domestic actors—including the Myanmar military, EAOs, international NGOs (INGOs), cross-border communities, and major powers such as China—operate within and through these assemblages, shaping outcomes in ways that often elude conventional geopolitical framings. The recent intensification of armed conflict, evolving alliances among ethnic armed groups, and the unprecedented challenges posed by events such as the 2025 earthquake have all contributed to the reconfiguration of care assemblages, with profound implications for both humanitarian aid delivery and the broader geopolitics of the region.

This chapter advances the argument that adopting a care assemblage perspective yields a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of geopolitics in Myanmar. By situating care at the intersection of humanitarian practice, political contestation, and everyday survival, care assemblages reveal the distributed agency, emergent alignments, and intimate struggles that shape the contours of conflict and cooperation in this contested landscape. In doing so, this approach makes visible the otherwise obscured contributions and vulnerabilities of ordinary people—those whose lives and practices are too often rendered peripheral in traditional accounts of geopolitics.

Care assemblages: An alternative perspective on geopolitics

The concept of care assemblages emerges at the intersection of assemblage theory and care theories. Assemblage theory emphasizes how heterogeneous components—including social relations, processes, and events—converge to form provisional wholes (Allen & Cochrane, 2010; Anderson & McFarlane, 2011; Allen, 2012). These wholes are not fixed; rather, they are always subject to transformation as the underlying components assemble and disassemble in response to shifting social relations and circumstances. Furthermore, assemblage thinking recognizes agency as distributed, relational, and networked, while also allowing for an openness to processes of emergence and transformation (Campbell et al., 2021).

Care theories—advanced by thinkers such as Tronto (1993; 2013), Raghuram (2012), and Robinson (1999)—complement and illuminate assemblage theory in productive ways. Care theories bring to the fore relations of interdependency and extend attention to both the ethics and politics underpinning caring relations. While the term "care assemblages" has been used in research on disabilities (Fritsch, 2010) and housing precarity (Power, 2019), this chapter engages with the term from a geopolitical perspective. Claims to care and acts of caring may be used to legitimize certain actions or to contest others, revealing the ways in which care itself can become a site of political struggle. Bringing together insights from care and assemblage theories is thus especially informative in light of Myanmar's ongoing humanitarian crisis.

This chapter's analysis of care assemblages is further informed by scholarship on feminist and intimate geopolitics, as developed by geographers such as Dowler and Sharp (2001) and Pain (2009; 2015). Adopting this line of inquiry entails a sensitivity to the ways in which geopolitical discourses and outcomes are shaped by the mundane practices of everyday life, rather than solely by the actions of political elites. International and national events, therefore, are shown to be deeply influenced by the lived experiences and routines of ordinary people. Alongside casting a critical eye on the macro-structural force fields that make care urgent and necessary, a care assemblage approach advocates giving attention to how vulnerability can be attenuated by care practices on the ground and brokered through likely and unlikely alliances.

By synthesizing perspectives from care and assemblage theories (i.e., care assemblages), it is possible to develop an alternative perspective to statist or critical geopolitics which highlights how events in Myanmar are always emergent and interdependent, shaped by a diverse array of actors—including those who are less visible in national and international news and discourse. Care assemblages offer a particularly useful analytical lens for exploring events in Myanmar. A care assemblage approach resists simplistic binaries such as public and private, war and peace, or civilian and soldier. Its focus on flat ontology, rather than hierarchical scalar relations such as top-down or bottom-up, is especially pertinent in this context.

In Myanmar, geopolitics and domestic politics are shaped by the interplay of competing and contesting sovereignties. Multiple actors—including IOs, INGOs, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Western powers, China, the Myanmar military, EAOs, and militias, as well as community-based and religious organizations—operate in networked, rather than strictly hierarchical, ways. This chapter also discusses the role of co-ethnics in neighboring countries, namely ordinary civilians who live across the border from ethnic groups in Myanmar. They have different nationality status but share the same ethnicity and similar historical and cultural backgrounds that produce a sense of solidarity and affinity.

Myanmar's borderlands have historically played a pivotal role in shaping the country's political trajectory, a role that has only intensified in the present day. In contested areas within Myanmar, border relations with adjacent countries also influence international geopolitical relations between the Myanmar government, EAOs, and neighboring countries. While there are micro-, meso- and macro-level actors and processes that shape borders, these scalar actants are themselves composed of "complex, emergent spatial relations" (Marston et al., 2005, p. 422) rather than existing as fixed hierarchical scales. The way that borders are governed in Myanmar by plural actors (i.e., as a subject of governance)—who, in turn, enact border governance (McConnachie et al., 2020) (i.e., producing effects on how borders are experienced)—exemplifies the networked, interdependent, and distributed agency that characterizes the domestic political situation and international geopolitics affecting the humanitarian situation (see also Buscemi, 2023; Dean et al., 2024).

Humanitarian aid and care assemblages in Kachin State

Humanitarian aid delivery in Kachin State along the China-Myanmar border illustrates how care and control coexist in networked, interdependent, and distributed ways. The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Kachin State is a product of conflict between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) that reignited in 2011 following the breakdown of a 17-year ceasefire, triggering internal displacement along the China-Myanmar border. Humanitarian aid delivery to camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the area is made challenging by difficult terrain, poor road conditions, and the geopolitical situation in the border area. Both the Myanmar and Chinese states are widely perceived by Kachin communities as "uncaring" (Ho, 2021). The Myanmar military government, accused of decades-long practices of Burmanization, resource exploitation, and human rights abuses, is seen as responsible for the dispossession of Kachin people. Kachin IDPs are often treated as security threats, facing punitive measures such as random arrests and restricted access to international aid. China, meanwhile, refuses to recognize Kachin IDPs as refugees, treating them instead as irregular migrants and forcibly returning those who cross the border. This leaves the displaced in a legal and humanitarian limbo, excluded from formal international protections (Ho, 2017).

In the absence of meaningful state support, a patchwork of non-state actors have mobilized to address the care deficit, creating "webs of connection" (Ho, 2018). The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and KIA provide basic shelter and assistance in areas under their control, despite limited resources. Local faith-based organizations, such as the Kachin Baptist Convention and Catholic *Karuna* Myanmar Social Services, as well as secular groups like the *Metta* Development Foundation, play vital roles in delivering aid. These groups operate through pragmatic networks: faith-based organizations can often access both government- and KIO/KIA-controlled areas, while secular organizations registered with the Myanmar government can coordinate with international agencies for funding. Cross-border networks with co-ethnic Jingpo (Kachin) communities in China are also crucial, especially for camps accessible only via China. These networks help procure and transport supplies, often navigating official restrictions through personal and ethnic ties. The Kachin diaspora, spread across Southeast Asia, Japan, the UK, and the US, further supports relief efforts through fundraising, advocacy, and knowledge transfer (Ho, 2021).

These overlapping "care circulations" not only address immediate material needs but also reinforce Kachin solidarity and aspirations for autonomy. Humanitarian aid becomes intertwined with political identity and contestation, as non-state actors' effectiveness in providing care can bolster support for separatist governance (Ho, 2020). These heterogeneous actors coalesce into care assemblages that enable the contingent flow of resources, including the procurement and delivery of humanitarian supplies via China, often with the tacit support of the KIA and KIO. Importantly, these groups do not merely channel resources from top-down actors; they operate as mediators and managers among the EAOs, IOs, and INGOs, thereby helping to relay support, information, and guidance to affected communities. Yet, even as these actors express care to address the humanitarian needs of Kachin IDPs, their actions can also fuel local grievances and reinforce demands for justice and even separatism, led by the KIA and KIO.

Since the 2021 coup, care assemblages involving community-based organizations, cross-border co-ethnics, and diaspora groups have become even more crucial to border communities experiencing renewed displacement due to military and EAO actions. The realities of citizenship for borderland communities have always been ambiguous and unequal. The coup has extended these precarities to a wider swathe of the Myanmar population, as diverse actors—old and new—compete for territory, resources, and control. This includes the securitization of border routes, with China's involvement further complicating humanitarian access and influencing governance dynamics along the border. The following two sections will illustrate these arguments more fully by exploring developments in post-2021 coup Myanmar and in view of the earthquake disaster in 2025.

Evolving alliances and ongoing tensions: Myanmar's border zones

In February 2021, Myanmar underwent a coup d'état when democratically elected members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were deposed by the *Tatmadaw*, Myanmar's military. The coup's aftermath saw widespread crackdowns on dissent, civilian casualties, and the destruction of villages, fueling resistance and emboldening EAOs to intensify their campaigns against the military. This development escalated armed conflict between EAOs and the military, including at contested border zones. The Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)—three EAOs that together formed the Three Brotherhood Alliance back in 2019—reaffirmed their cooperation in 2021 in response to violent repression by the Myanmar military (Al Jazeera, January 16, 2024). Initially, the KIA chose not to join the alliance in view of its participation in peace talks within the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee and its own strategic operational areas.

Due to shared strategic interests at the China-Myanmar border and the evolving political-military landscape after the 2021 coup, the KIA increased its collaboration with the three EAOs represented by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, forming a four-member Northern Alliance (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024). Doing so enhanced the EAOs' collective military strength, advanced shared political goals and defense against the Myanmar military, and increased bargaining power in negotiations with not only the Myanmar military regime, but also the Chinese government. China's strategic interests in the border zone have shaped geopolitical relationships, as these EAOs have been influenced by or received support from Chinese stakeholders.

Actions by the KIA shifted alliance dynamics when it allegedly leaked details of a March 2024 agreement between the Myanmar military and the Three Brotherhood Alliance (Tower, 2024). Brokered by China to protect its interests, the agreement included a profit-sharing arrangement from trade, enabling the Alliance to facilitate the return of IDPs to Kokang areas along the China-Shan State border and the provision of social services. The leak triggered strong backlash from the Myanmar military, which was reportedly humiliated by the terms that gave it a junior role in trade revenue sharing. China, which had insisted on confidentiality, was also unsettled. China responded by increasing pressure on the ethnic armed groups, closing border crossings, and restricting vital supplies. The fallout led to a more fragile ceasefire, with escalated fighting in some regions and deteriorating relations between the Alliance, the Myanmar military, and China.

Subsequently, the KIA initiated Operation 0307 in the same month, with the goal of driving the Myanmar military out of key strategic border regions, particularly those threatening its headquarters in Laiza and vital trade corridors (Tower, 2024). The operation focused on the Bhamo-Lweje Road and border crossings like Laisin, Laiza, and the Zhangfeng crossing, which are crucial for both military logistics and cross-border commerce. This offensive not only bolstered the KIA's territorial holdings but also disrupted Myanmar's military supply lines and weakened the junta's grip on border trade. Trade crossings along the China-Myanmar border, particularly those under rebel control, were closed by Chinese authorities, severely impacting the livelihoods of traders and local communities on both sides. The impacts prompted China to respond by pressuring all parties to de-escalate and protect its interests, which will be discussed in the next section.

The political-military maneuvers discussed above exemplify the volatile and shifting power formations that emerge from care assemblages, forming and reforming as provisional wholes. Other than for strategic geopolitical interests, one might argue that underpinning the actions of the Three Brotherhood Alliance and KIA could be an ethic of care towards IDPs from their respective ethnic groups at the China-Myanmar border. A care assemblage had emerged out of the temporary political-military alignment of the Three Brotherhood Alliance (itself a heterogeneous and contingent assemblage) with the KIA, but this care assemblage came apart when the latter found it no longer beneficial to remain part of the coalition. The discussion in this section also illuminates the accentuated role of China as a power broker in care assemblages, a point which the next section develops further.

Humanitarian politics of care and control in post-earthquake Myanmar

The 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck Myanmar in March 2025 provided China additional space to portray itself as an international leader and *Pauk-Phaw* (translated as 'kinsfolk') (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China, 2022) to the Myanmar people. China offered efficient and generous humanitarian aid delivery in the immediate aftermath of the natural disaster, surpassing that of other international actors, including the United States, which had significantly reduced its funding for international aid following the second inauguration of President Donald Trump in January 2025.[1]

China's national media outlet, *People's Daily* (April 16, 2025), described the country's humanitarian efforts thus:

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[1] The US under the second Trump administration originally pledged only $2 million in aid, but later increased the total to $9 million following international criticism (CNN, 2025, April 14).

> China is providing comprehensive emergency humanitarian assistance to support quake-stricken regions. It has decided to provide Myanmar with 100 million yuan ($13.62 million) in emergency humanitarian aid. On April 3, the second batch of emergency humanitarian aid supplies dispatched by the Chinese government arrived in Myanmar. Meanwhile, Chinese enterprises, trade associations, and volunteers in Myanmar are mobilizing additional resources for shelter, medical care, and infrastructure rehabilitation.

Given the devastating impact of the earthquake in several regions of the country, the Myanmar military announced a temporary ceasefire with EAOs from April 2 to April 22, 2025 (The Straits Times, April 3, 2025). The opposition National Unity Government (NUG), Three Brotherhood Alliance, and KIO had earlier made similar ceasefire pledges (Myanmar Peace Monitor, April 7, 2025). The Myanmar military subsequently extended its temporary ceasefire through May 2025 following a meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Bangkok, and again after a formal request was made at an ASEAN summit (The Diplomat, June 2, 2025).

On April 2, 2025, less than one week after the earthquake, the Myanmar military fired shots at a nine-vehicle Chinese convoy delivering aid to Mandalay when it passed through a village in Northern Shan State where both the Myanmar military and the TNLA had deployed armed forces (The Irrawaddy, April 2, 2025). The former claimed that the Chinese convoy had not notified authorities of its travel plans. The TNLA denounced the Myanmar military's actions and announced it would take responsibility for the safe passage of the Chinese aid workers. Despite temporary ceasefire pronouncements, the Myanmar military continued its attacks on EAOs and hampered relief efforts in key humanitarian passageways, including in Kachin State (Myanmar Now, April 3, 2025; International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

China continued to broker power formations in the border zone, where it has vested interests in maintaining trade connectivity and political security for its own national interests. Earlier in August 2024 it had warned the

TNLA against institutionalizing its administration over townships that it had captured from the Myanmar military in Northern Shan State during Operation 1027 in October 2023 (The Irrawaddy, September 2, 2024). By November 2024, the TNLA had announced it would conduct peace talks with the Myanmar military with China as mediator (Reuters, November 26, 2024). In February 2025, the ethnic army announced that an agreement could not be reached (The Irrawaddy, February 19, 2025).

Meanwhile, China also brokered the withdrawal of the MNDAA from Lashio in Northern Shan State, allowing the Myanmar military to reinstate its grip over the city, which is a key trading hub for China and Myanmar (The Irrawaddy, April 24, 2025). The Chinese government had allegedly ordered the United Wa State Army (UWSA)—another ethnic army in Myanmar which is allied with China—to block the MNDAA and TNLA from accessing electricity, water, internet, and essential supplies, and to restrict the free movement of people in the area (Shan Herald Agency for News, December 8, 2024).

The persistent tension and interplay between care and control, and the ways in which these dynamics are continually subject to transgression and recalibration, are illustrated by these additionally complex political maneuvers deepened by the earthquake. The natural disaster precipitated the formation of new care assemblages in Myanmar for humanitarian aid delivery, but they became entangled with the politics of care and control entrenched in prior existing care assemblages arising from politically induced conflicts and geopolitical struggles between the Myanmar military and EAOs at the China-Myanmar border, as well as with international players such as ASEAN and China.

Conclusion

Care assemblages provide an alternative view to state-centric geopolitics, as the discussion in this chapter has shown. First, the macrostructural forces that dominate geopolitics are instantiated through border governance, enacted not only via securitization by sovereign states and EAOs, but also through the care work of community-based organizations and individuals—such as humanitarian workers and religious leaders—embedded in townships and camps. Second, the diverse and sometimes unexpected alliances found in care assemblages highlight the agency of heterogeneous actors who operate in networked ways, shaping power formations and influencing outcomes that can be a matter of life and death for affected populations.

By integrating assemblage theory with care theories, the care assemblage perspective emphasizes the provisional, interconnected, and evolving character of social and political structures, while drawing attention to the distributed agency of a diverse range of actors operating across multiple levels. This framework moves beyond state-centric and hierarchical models, revealing how care and control are deeply entwined—not only in the actions of formal institutions and armed groups, but also in the everyday practices and alliances of borderland communities, cross-border co-ethnics, and local organizations.

The case studies of humanitarian aid delivery in Kachin State, the evolving alliances among EAOs, and domestic and international humanitarian responses to the 2025 earthquake illustrate how care assemblages continuously form and dissolve in response to crisis, conflict, and shifting geopolitical interests. These care assemblages challenge conventional binaries such as war and peace, state and non-state, or top-down and bottom-up governance. Instead, they reveal how vulnerability, solidarity, and agency are produced and negotiated through contingent alignments that extend across official borders and categories.

By adopting a care assemblage lens, we gain greater insight into the lived realities and everyday struggles that underpin Myanmar's geopolitics. This approach not only makes visible the critical role of less visible actors (such as local NGOs, co-ethnic communities, and ordinary people), but also underscores how humanitarian practices and political contestations are intimately interconnected. Ultimately, recognizing the significance of care assemblages can enrich both scholarly understandings and practical responses to humanitarian crises and geopolitical conflict, in Myanmar and beyond.

Given Myanmar's complex realities, a care assemblage approach suggests several practical pathways for positive change. Strengthening and empowering grassroots organizations, faith-based groups, and local NGOs is crucial. These actors possess deep local knowledge and are often more agile in providing aid where official channels are blocked or inefficient. Directing resources and support to these groups, including fostering cross-border cooperation among co-ethnic communities, can enhance the delivery and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

Flexible and decentralized humanitarian strategies are also needed. Rigid, top-down aid models struggle in Myanmar's volatile context, where alliances and circumstances shift rapidly. Instead, international agencies and donors should support adaptive frameworks that enable local actors to respond to changing needs on the ground. Recognizing the fluidity of alliances among EAOs, diaspora groups, and international actors can make aid efforts more relevant and effective. Robust monitoring and protection measures are also key. Transparent oversight of aid and safeguarding of local actors from potential retaliation are necessary to prevent the misuse of humanitarian resources and to ensure the safety of those engaged in care work.

International actors such as ASEAN and China have clear pragmatic reasons to support inclusive engagement and efforts to address Myanmar's structural vulnerabilities, even as their motivations may be complex. While China may derive short-term strategic advantage from instability at the Myanmar border—using conflict to reinforce its role as a key regional mediator and to safeguard its own economic projects—prolonged unrest poses significant risks that threaten both Chinese and wider regional interests. Ongoing conflict fuels refugee flows, cross-border crime, and health threats and disrupts trade and infrastructure, undermining long-term stability. For both China and ASEAN, supporting more inclusive engagement with diverse local actors and addressing Myanmar's structural vulnerabilities potentially offers greater benefits: reducing cross-border risks, promoting a more predictable environment for investment, and strengthening regional security. Thus, even for self-interested international actors, advancing inclusive engagement and structural reform in Myanmar aligns with their own broader strategic and economic goals.

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Chapter 7

Ethical Assemblages in Complex Emergencies

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Chapter summary

Since Myanmar's 2021 coup, the country has been gripped by conflict with widespread displacement and a worsening humanitarian crisis compounded by natural disasters such as the 2025 earthquake. Humanitarian assistance has become entangled in political struggles, as the ruling military junta restricts aid delivery, siphons resources for military use, and blocks assistance to opposition-controlled areas. International organizations, citing principles of neutrality and impartiality, often cooperate with the junta's ministries, unintentionally reinforcing their legitimacy. This has created tension with local civil society groups and grassroots networks, which reject collaboration with the junta and instead work to channel aid through resistance-aligned structures.

This chapter examines how humanitarian neutrality is interpreted and practiced by international donors, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, and local actors. Drawing on assemblage theory, it shows that neutrality is less a fixed principle than a contested practice shaped by coercion, pragmatism, deception, and partisan commitments. Larger international actors often defend engagement with Myanmar's military junta as necessary for access and safety, while local organizations adopt covert, creative strategies—such as informal funding networks or selective alliances—to bypass restrictions and reach communities in need. The analysis highlights how neutrality, far from universal, is manipulated by both the junta and opposition forces, raising ethical dilemmas for aid providers. In practice, neutrality may function as a shield for complicity or as a tool to conceal partisan action. The study concludes that in Myanmar's conflict, humanitarianism is inseparable from politics and that resistance-oriented aid, though partisan, may represent a more just and contextually appropriate form of humanitarian response.

Keywords: humanitarian ethics, neutrality, ethical dilemma, complex humanitarian emergencies

Introduction

Since the 2021 coup, Myanmar has been engulfed in conflict, as multiple revolutionary forces act in support of the public's resistance to the military's takeover. Conflict has displaced nearly four million people, with the earthquake in early 2025 further contributing to an already sprawling and complex humanitarian crisis. Humanitarian assistance, however, has been complicated by restrictions imposed by junta authorities on international actors (United Nations [UN]/international organizations and donors) and by the latter's insistence on continued cooperation with junta line ministries, avoiding contact with opposition groups, argued on the basis of humanitarian neutrality. This has led to a dissonance in the humanitarian discourse between the agents claiming a mandate to provide assistance and grassroots organizations who are more closely aligned with the public commitment to revolution and who now provide the majority of humanitarian assistance in conflict areas. The stance of many international actors hinges upon a particular interpretation of "humanitarian neutrality," a concept which is actively contested by local actors. This research interrogates the construction of humanitarian neutrality by both international and local actors, using assemblage theory to demonstrate its intrinsic inconsistencies, tensions, and vested interests. Analysis of case studies derived from interviews with local and international actors explores how humanitarian neutrality is constructed in practice by different actors and how this influences the provision of humanitarian aid.

The construction of humanitarian neutrality in complex emergencies

> *Humanitarian actors are an inextricable part of civil war—not only engaging directly in the frontlines of the conflict and providing emergency support, but serving to determine, to an extent, the outcomes of wars themselves.* (Abeytia, Brito Ruiz, Ojo, & Alloosh, 2023, p. 341)

The calamitous earthquake of March 28, 2025 layered additional destruction on top of the devastation of more than four years of violence since the February 2021 coup d'état. Whilst offers of international assistance were immediate, the politics of delivery were more complex. Since 2021, humanitarian assistance to and within Myanmar has cratered (Holliday, Myat, & Cook, 2025). Regional governments, such as China, India, and Thailand, all sent assistance through the ruling military junta (known at the time as the State Administration Council [SAC]) with little concern for the broader political ramifications, including prior knowledge of the junta's longstanding practice of both politicizing assistance and of siphoning aid for its own war efforts (Hein Htoo Zan, 2024). Indeed, mere days after the earthquake hit, reports emerged of aid blockades, diversions, and arrests of local aid volunteers, as well as resumed airstrikes, artillery shelling, and ground raids by junta troops in affected areas (Myanmar Now, 2025, April 3).

Despite this, larger UN and international organizations repeated calls for "impartiality" whilst remaining largely silent on the consistent actions of the junta in blocking, diverting, and controlling aid away from displaced persons and areas not under its control (The Irrawaddy, 2025). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) focused its efforts through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre), set up as an intergovernmental coordinating body. However, by coordinating only with SAC bodies and not with other de facto authorities, the AHA Centre itself breached core principles of neutrality and impartiality (Surachanee Sriyai & Moe Thuzar, 2025). Article 12.1 of the 2005 ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), the AHA Centre's reference document, stipulates that the "Requesting or Receiving Party shall exercise the overall direction, control, coordination, and supervision of the assistance within its territory" (ASEAN, 2005). Non-governmental humanitarian groups, such as the US-based Christian organization Samaritan's Purse, followed a similar line of reasoning, arguing that the humanitarian mandate (buttressed by religious beliefs) overrides broader political concerns of aid being a means to support one side in a conflict (Myanmar Now, 2025, April 10). Predictably, within days of the organization's opening of a field hospital in the junta capital Nay Pyi Taw, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing seized on the opportunity for positive media coverage (Myanmar Now, 2025, April 10), even as the junta blocked and diverted the group's ongoing aid efforts in Mandalay.

These examples highlight the fallacy of assuming any universal definition of neutrality and impartiality in a context where humanitarianism has long been politicized, as Holliday et al. (2025) note:

> Even before the coup, humanitarian aid was heavily politicized in Myanmar. It has become far more so since the SAC seized power and set itself up in opposition to most of the rest of the country. In line with its attempt to control almost every aspect of Myanmar life, the SAC seeks to bring international humanitarian assistance within the state apparatus […]. Humanitarian workers operating in areas under the control of resistance groups also report that they have moved their offices to evade harassment and arrest by the SAC. More problematic still is that many global agencies, both UN and INGO [international non-governmental organizations], seek to operate throughout Myanmar and are pulled in very different directions by demands from the SAC and the NUG [National Unity Government of Myanmar]. The major losers are of course the Myanmar people, whose desperate need for aid increasingly goes unmet. (pp. 8-9)

The "complex" element of the emergency alludes to the ways in which the broader political context, largely the result of the SAC's 2021 power grab, has served to exacerbate and complicate a "natural disaster." In a recent commentary, Lahkyen Roi (2025) writes,

> Human wrongs must also be factored in. Adding to the devastation caused by natural disasters is the relentless violence perpetrated by the military junta, which describes itself as the State Administration Council (SAC). Even during and in the days following the earthquake, aerial bombings were reported in Kachin, Karenni (Kayah) and Shan States and Sagaing, Magway and Bago Regions. This ongoing military aggression leaves the population trapped and struggling to survive in

> horrific conditions: nowhere is safe, neither on the ground nor from the air. Disaster after disaster, the Myanmar military demonstrates that its priority remains the consolidation of power. High-tech military equipment, such as drones and aircrafts, are deployed to kill—not to save civilian lives as we witness every day [...] the years following the 2021 coup have been marked [...] crisis after crisis—fuel shortages, banking emergencies, inflation, natural disasters, land grabbing, petty crimes, forced conscription and war—have struck local communities, making recovery ever more difficult [...], the latest pressure on the people has come from the National Conscription Law, enforced by the junta in February 2024, which mandates that male citizens aged 18 to 45 and female citizens aged 18 to 35 must serve a minimum of two years in the military. Consequently, the young people who were the primary drivers of local civil society are now being forced to flee their homes. (para. 3-5)

This chapter does not seek to reinterpret or reframe the more complex discussions on either neutrality or impartiality; rather, we seek to demonstrate how the practice of these concepts in the everyday reality of humanitarian activity exists as a fluid assemblage, its overall shape influenced by the arrangement of different actors, materialities, and affective flows. This approach enables us to understand neutrality and impartiality not so much as concepts that are interpreted and applied differently by different actors, but rather as living practices which themselves are given shape and form by more complex interactions. In this reading, the starting point is not the given definitions of neutrality and impartiality, along with an analysis of how these are understood and applied in practice; rather, we start with the practice itself and ask, based on this, what contributes to the emergence and sustaining of the concepts. This avoids a reification of what are admittedly slippery concepts and, more importantly, places the interpretative emphasis on the everyday practice of humanitarianism, rather than seeking to develop some form of measure of compliance with an international norm.

Tangled wires: Ethics on the frontline

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2025), the essential values of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence are at the center of all humanitarian endeavors. Through General Assembly Resolutions 46/182 and 58/114, the UN has embraced and codified these values, which are based in international humanitarian law. Their inclusion in the "Humanitarian Principles" section of the UNHCR's (2025) Emergency Handbook further highlights their importance and broad acceptance:

> Humanitarian actors distinguish themselves from other responders to crises through their commitment to impartiality. This means that humanitarian action is based solely on need, with priority given to the most urgent cases irrespective of factors such as race, nationality, gender, religious belief, political opinion, or class. The neutrality of humanitarian action is further upheld when humanitarian actors refrain from taking sides in hostilities or engaging in political, racial, religious, or ideological controversies. At the same time, independence requires humanitarian actors to be autonomous. They are not to be subject to control, subordination, or influence by political, economic, military or other non-humanitarian objectives. (UNHCR, 2025, pp. 2-3)

"Principled humanitarianism" refers to dedication to the provision of aid and the safeguarding of impacted communities in a manner that is independent of political or other factors. Humanitarian actors are urged by various statutes to familiarize themselves with and consistently implement these principles, especially during times of armed conflict (UNHCR, 2025). However, these principles have, in practice, been subject to a range of interpretations, particularly in the crucible of complex civil wars. Reflecting on humanitarian principles in the context of the Kosovo conflict, Weiss (2002) notes that

> Humanity, or the sanctity of life, is the only genuine first-order principle for intervention. The protection of the right to life, broadly

> interpreted, belongs in the category of obligations whose respect is in the interest of all states. All others—including the sacred trio of neutrality, impartiality and consent, as well as legalistic interpretations of the desirability about UN approval—are second-order principles. These operational, not moral, absolutes had provided tactical guidance to humanitarians before the civil wars of the 1990s. Applying them routinely in armed conflicts in the last decade has proved more problematic. Depending on the context, they can do more harm than good. This is especially true in cases where war criminals […] operate in regions devoid of respect for international humanitarian law; where civilians, relief personnel and journalists are targets of aggression; and where foreign assistance fuels warfare and the local war economy. (p. 125)

Heather Roth (in Acuto, 2014) points out the interpretative dilemmas involved in humanitarianism in the context of civil war:

> […] the morally correct act could be different depending upon which moral framework one adopts. For example, if one's goal is to minimize the overall suffering of a target population, then violating the rights of a portion of this population is morally permissible, if the overall population's suffering is actually minimized. Such rights violations might take the form of refusing aid to a rebel group within a country adversely affected by natural disaster for fear that providing assistance will fuel civil war or provide the rebels with a political platform on the international stage. (p. 139)

What the above statements implicitly assume is the relative benevolence of the state party and the malevolence of the "rebels." However, the opposite may be (and, in the case of Myanmar, is) the case: that the "war criminals" are more likely to be those belonging to the junta, and major beneficiaries in terms of war economy and an international political platform are also the junta. This highlights profound flaws in statute-based interpretations of neutrality and impartiality with their implicit state-centric bias which largely defers to the state as a benevolent actor. This is demonstrated by Abeytia et al. (2023):

> The emergent consideration has been that the aid and service provision of humanitarian actors has the potential to alter the strategies of warring parties, affect their positions of legitimacy and strength, and potentially serve to extend the duration of the conflict altogether […]. This is due to the fact that, in practice, humanitarian tenets have failed to address the power discrepancy between authoritarian regimes, opposition forces, and civilians [...]. As such, they often reinforce, rather than challenge, these power asymmetries. [This] demonstrates how this can affect aid provision [...] in the absence of political engagement [...] manipulation of state authorities provides the potential to pervert aid intervention to inflict harm […] As such, humanitarian aid can be weaponized by state actors to provoke, prolong or intensify conflict. (p. 343)

The control of aid by de facto authorities, sometimes under the guise of appeals to "neutrality" and "impartiality" can result in the politicization of aid (Branch, 2014, p. 486), and, in contexts of war or authoritarian regimes, create an unholy alliance between humanitarianism and violence (Branch, 2014). This has led some scholars to propose new interpretations of the humanitarian mandate, arguing that the plea for neutrality all too frequently results in the opposite: a passive subservience to forces complicit in the oppression of precisely those who are the objects of humanitarian assistance. "Humanitarian resistance," argues Hugo Slim (2022), "is the rescue, relief and protection of people suffering under an unjust enemy regime" (p. 7) and has "considerable moral value because it makes two important ethical commitments simultaneously: one in favor of political justice and another responding to the individual suffering caused by injustice." In this reading, counterarguments that this contravenes the principles of neutrality are dismissed, pointing to the innate self-deception of "neutral humanitarianism," (p. 11) which is

> morally myopic in its narrow focus on suffering alone and its blinkered abstention from engagement [...] deliberately blind to distinctions between tyranny and democracy, aggression and self-defense, just cause and unjust cause, and it refrains from any 'controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.' (Slim, 2022, p.12)

Humanitarian resistance, instead, encourages a fusion of partisan commitment to justice tempered by the pursuit of inclusiveness and equity as a shared outcome, often in the face of violent regimes which seek to preserve narrow self-interest:

> Humanitarian resistance [...] is specifically organized by individuals and groups who are politically opposed to the regime and support resistance against it because of their political commitments or personal conscience. Humanitarian resistance takes sides and is carried out without enemy consent, often covertly and at great personal risk. (Slim, 2022, p.11)

Even prior to the 2021 coup d'état, humanitarianism in Myanmar was frequently motivated by often subtle but powerful anti-regime sentiments (Griffiths, 2019; McCarthy, 2023). Since 2021, this has solidified, representing a new form of civic identity (Spring Rain & Aung Naing, 2022) and a strand of civil resistance by creating or expanding emergency welfare institutions in times of emergency and in service to the cause of victory. In Myanmar, people committed to the resistance are boycotting government institutions and have either created new associations for the rescue and relief of people suffering from the dictatorship's violence and increasing poverty, or they are strengthening existing social and religious institutions for the same purpose (Slim, 2022).

Coups, civil wars, and complexity

The People's Defensive War, also referred to as the Myanmar Civil War, is a civil conflict that has continued since 2021 as a result of long-standing insurgencies in Myanmar that greatly intensified in response to a military coup and the brutal crackdown that followed against anti-coup protesters. The 2008 Constitution was rejected by the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) and major ethnic armed groups, who have long demanded the creation of a democratic federal state. In addition to fighting this alliance, the military junta authorities also face a myriad of other smaller armed groups which control large swathes of territory in rural areas. At the time of writing, the SAC was considered to have uncontested control of less than 20 percent of the territory within Myanmar following successful offensives by the Three Brotherhood Alliance in 2023 and a steady expansion of influence by the Arakan Army in Rakhine State and a network of People's Defense Forces (PDFs) across western, central, and southern areas. The SAC response has been to rely largely on air and artillery strikes as it seeks to replenish troop numbers through the reactivation of a national conscription law. Combined with a ground raiding strategy aiming to reduce civilian support for anti-SAC forces, widespread arson, bombings, and blockades have resulted in nearly four million displaced persons, who are in turn often targets of SAC attacks in displacement camps (Al Jazeera, 2023). The most recent report from the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA, 2025) highlights the spiraling complexity of the humanitarian crisis in Myanmar:

> Even with conservative estimates, 15.2 million people are facing acute food insecurity, desperately seeking the means to feed themselves and their families. Education and health services are severely disrupted and often at the brink of collapse. Millions of people are without safe shelter or drinking water. There are widespread and systematic violations of human rights including lack of adherence and compliance to international humanitarian law. Against this backdrop, we are seeing vital development gains reversed, with poverty returning to 2015 levels. (p. 3)

Inflaming the humanitarian crisis and impeding responses, the junta authorities have used the situation to further their campaign against opposition forces. In this situation, humanitarian organizations' efforts to promote regional and international stability run counter to the SAC's desire to consolidate its own power. The SAC, assuming the mantle of legitimate state actor, seeks to apply its "four cuts" strategy (Fishbein, Lasan, & Vahpual, 2012) to the flow of aid away from people living in areas outside of its control and hence likely to be supportive of anti-SAC forces. The objective of this denial of assistance is to weaken opposition and undermine support for resistance forces. This is achieved through a mixture of coercion (requiring organizations to register in return for compliance with SAC regulations regarding where and to whom aid can be distributed) and force, with the arrest of aid workers, closure of bank accounts thought to be used to channel aid, seizure of assets, and destruction of property (Liu, 2021). Similarly, organizations such as the NUG, PDF, and ethnic armed groups pursue their own goals (Fumagalli & Kemmerling, 2024). Therefore, working with various authorities can also make it harder for NGOs to stay impartial and independent (Holliday et al., 2025). Strict neutrality can unintentionally benefit oppressive regimes, as aid is limited to government-controlled areas while areas under opposition control are ignored. Local actors feel that strict interpretations of neutrality do not consider local alliances or Myanmar's social complexity (Htet et al., 2024). International NGOs that follow strict neutrality often clash with local groups, which see moral duty to help as more important than formal neutrality (Broussard et al., 2019). Despite this, local actors—including resistance groups, grassroots organizations, and cross-border networks—have proven capable of lessening the effects of the ongoing conflict. These actors have developed ways to support conflict-affected populations outside the purview of mainstream humanitarianism through private donations, support from the diaspora, and some funding from international donors who have started to reconsider their approach to Myanmar (International Institute of Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024).

Upholding neutrality thus often leads to ethical dilemmas, especially in Myanmar's complex environment. Aid organizations may face conflicting moral obligations that force difficult choices between providing aid under restrictive policies or neglecting the most vulnerable. NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) often struggle to remain neutral because their actions can appear to favor one side. According to Van Mierop (2015), these circumstances put NGOs in a difficult moral position because they must figure out a balance between neutrality and urgent demands. This flexibility in applying neutrality, sometimes called "political humanitarianism," reflects how the concept changes in Myanmar's complex political landscape. Some NGOs and CSOs in Myanmar have adopted "contextualized neutrality" to deal with these challenges, changing their methods depending on regional contexts. This allows them to maintain some independence while meeting urgent needs. Others follow a solidarity-based model, focusing on community-led support that meets local needs and avoids SAC-controlled processes. This model encourages cooperation across borders and aligns with both local and humanitarian values (Broussard et al., 2019; Van Mierop, 2015).

Assemblage theory offers a useful way to understand how these complex interactions affect humanitarian neutrality, and in particular, how the concept itself is constructed in practice rather than described in theory. Little (2012) describes assemblage theory as a tool for examining how different actors—like the SAC, NUG, PDFs, ethnic armed organizations, NGOs, and international organizations—build and reshape neutrality in humanitarian response. Even though previous research provides us with information about neutrality in conflict zones, there is a gap in understanding how different actors in Myanmar interpret, apply, or construct humanitarian neutrality to the current crisis. Given the complexities and multiple interpretations of the principle of humanitarian neutrality and the evident contrast between theory and practice, this chapter uses assemblage theory to consider the ontology of humanitarian neutrality as it is found in practice—in other words, how humanitarian neutrality is constructed in practice, in the actual spaces of conflict and contestation.

Interviews were conducted in 2024 with three international donor representatives and staff from seven international and local NGOs operating in humanitarian projects in Shan, Kachin, Kayin (Karen), and Kayah (Karenni) States, as well as in Ayeyarwady, Sagaing, and Magway Regions. Narrative analysis was used on their observations and experiences to elicit insights into the constructed nature of humanitarian neutrality. Analysis of interview transcripts has identified three main themes, each relating to a vector of practice. The first looks at how pragmatism represents a balancing force between partisan desires on the one hand, and a sense of powerlessness on the other. The second looks at how coercion, especially by donor agencies, is counterbalanced by creativity and compromise as strategic responses, enabling local organizations to access resources whilst avoiding unwelcome compromises of ethical principles. This involves a significant degree of deception and duplicity, with deflection and diversionary tactics used to counter the constraints.

Partisanship, pragmatism, and powerlessness

> *There are people who do not like neutrality.* (NGO Staff, Northern Shan State/Rakhine State, personal communication, 2024)

Surveys of CSOs in the months following the 2021 coup d'état reveal a high degree of partisanship, with a majority embracing a position of overt opposition to—or at the least, principled non-cooperation with—the military junta (Wells & Aung Naing, 2023). As Holliday et al. (2025) note, "Most local respondents rejected the possibility of ever working with the SAC, holding that to be effectively condoning murder and, more pragmatically, simply supplying resources to the Myanmar Army. They all therefore sought other options" (p. 11). Spring Rain et al. (2022) have argued that much of the organizing capacity and momentum for post-coup resistance emerged out of the civil society movement which mushroomed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly where CSOs were located in areas controlled by military factions opposed to the SAC, humanitarian operations were explicitly aligned with one side in the conflict. In some cases, such as the area represented in the above quotation, partisanship is largely shaped by ethnic prejudices: armed groups in some cases resent what they see as an imposed "neutrality principle" which in their eyes favors one ethnic group (in this case Rohingya) over another (mainly Rakhine).

The partisanship may in some cases be more explicit—either anti-junta, or biased along ethnic or religious factional lines; or the more implicit, state-centric bias of the UN or international donor agencies, whose mandate is often tied to state actors. This can lead to a sense of powerlessness and helplessness, trapped between a mandate, on one side, and the negative public reactions to continued collaboration with the SAC on the other, which the SAC has ruthlessly exploited for its own public relations purposes:

> One notable feature of the humanitarian landscape inside Myanmar is the collapse in the reputation of the UN and its agencies among resistance groups and aid actors close to them. This is partly because the UN has not been robust in responding to and challenging the SAC at the peak of international society and on the ground inside Myanmar [...]. In consequence, UN agencies often face unpalatable requirements imposed on them by the SAC and its demand for global recognition and respect. By falling in line with the SAC, UN and other aid actors are consistently viewed negatively by the mass of the Myanmar population. (Holliday et al., 2025, p. 11)

For local CSOs based or operating in areas under SAC control, the situation is more nuanced, with SAC forces targeting anyone who appears to resist their control. However, aside from a brief five-year period of civilian rule prior to 2021, civil society actors have had to work in a constrained and dangerous space. Different actors demonstrate divergent interpretations of humanitarian neutrality, shaped more by contextual demands than by philosophical reflections:

> I don't think the space we are working in is a neutral space. It's a political space and we have to navigate that but we need to maintain really important principles around the neutrality of the assistance that we provide. (international donor representative, personal communication, 2024)

> There is a principle. We just look at the situation. We don't think much about neutrality. (local non-governmental organization [LNGO] staff, Magway Region, personal communication, 2024)

> We should follow the [ethical] principles more. There is meaning in taking a stand [on ethical principles]. There will be protection for all, not just employees. The world may recognize neutrality more. No group should interfere. If you want to help an IDP [internally displaced persons] camp, you need to be as neutral as possible. (INGO staff in Kachin State, personal communication, 2024)

Most of the humanitarian organizations surveyed were aware of the humanitarian principles of independence, humanity, neutrality, and impartiality. However, they practiced the principles differently, and to different degrees, in their specific contexts. Some organizations do not consider the principles when working on the ground but rather work according to the situation, working out how to operate depending on the influence of the armed groups, ethnicities, and religions present in the project area. This may include low-level communication with SAC or other armed groups. Some organizations maintain low profiles without coordinating or communicating with others, operating quietly within the organization's established network. Larger CSOs, UN organizations, and most INGOs find it necessary to cooperate with SAC authorities in order to meet the needs of the local community, largely through the SAC's registration requirements:

> We do not coordinate with any groups. We work with a low profile. We do not know what it [neutrality] is. (CSO staff, Northern Shan State, personal communication, 2024)

> There are inevitable collaborations with hospital staff. The main thing is to help the victims. We try to be neutral as much as possible. However, as a UN organization, if a doctor is needed, we can assign staff. Maybe that's what makes SAC's mechanism work (INGO staff, Kachin State, personal communication, 2024).

> We are not [very] aware of this principle. [Most of our] training is for on–the-ground work. But we got it [training on ethical principles] later. From now on, there are principles. Looking back, I think what we are doing is in line with the principles. (LNGO staff, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

A key reason for maintaining nuanced public positions on neutrality is to conceal or enable partisanship, whilst maintaining the safety of staff. Concerns about SAC informers (referred to as *dalan*) mean that any overt support for non-SAC groups is carefully concealed. In some cases, access to particular beneficiaries requires contact with religious groups; this may require a "tilting" of aid in favor of those groups, simply in order to enable wider aid delivery:

> We [INGO] have to cooperate with the authorities for the safety and security of beneficiaries and field staff. (INGO staff, Kachin State, personal communication, 2024)

> Some religious leaders prioritize their own communities. (CSO staff, Northern Shan State, personal communication, 2024)

> We fully understand that we have to practice neutrality when we provide assistance. However, because of our safety and that of the beneficiaries, we have found ourselves providing support to beneficiaries who have political beliefs aligned with our organization. (local CSO staff, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

> From the beginning of the selection of the target areas, we carefully selected the villages because we were afraid of informers (*dalan*). We had to choose very carefully. (LNGO staff, Sagaing Region/Kayah State, personal communication, 2024)

Whilst the response of local organizations has tended to be more creative and pragmatic, larger organizations, largely out of a sense of powerlessness, have tended to use neutrality and impartiality as excuses for maintaining status quo relations with the SAC:

> We do subscribe to humanitarian principles, international humanitarian principles, and [are] very supportive of the way that humanitarian assistance is managed. There are lots of organizations [which] are de facto authorities on the ground. Government structures have political aims and objectives in the way you work. You have to be able to work with stakeholders across the board. (international donor representative, personal communication, 2024)

For local organizations, pragmatic approaches to neutrality tend to function as a shield for more or less hidden partisanship; for larger international organizations, as a shield against criticism at complicity with a deeply unpopular regime. In either case, neutrality functions as a deflective mechanism, rather than a guiding principle.

Coercion, compromise, and creativity

Neutrality is challenged further by the coercive attempts of the SAC to control humanitarian activity through its registration requirements. This is at times abetted by international donors, who often require, either explicitly or implicitly, proof of organizational registration with SAC as a condition for funding. This then brings the organization under much greater control by the SAC, resulting in operational restrictions, scrutiny of funds, and surveillance of staff. Local organizations frequently report that donors, whilst paying lip service to the concept of non-cooperation with the SAC, in fact require local organizations to be registered under new SAC laws:

> When we operate our work in a certain country, we have to abide by its authority and regulations. Which organizations follow the new law [registration of the CSO with the SAC]? If they [CSO] do not apply for registration, the donor organizations do not cooperate with them. (INGO staff, Kachin State, personal communication, 2024)

> All the groups who get the grant must have [registration]. It is the policy of the donors that provide the grant. It's up to them [CSOs] whether they have a [registration] or a low profile, [but] the groups we directly connect with must be registered. (EU donor, personal communication, 2024)

> For groups that have SAC registration, things like travel to field sites are more convenient. (LNGO staff, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2025)

For larger INGOs and UN agencies, registration takes the form of Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with authorities. Unless operating from outside of Myanmar, this typically requires explicit collaboration with the SAC, which in turn is used by the junta to claim ongoing legitimacy (Blazevic, 2022, 2023). Interviewees stress how crucial registration is for operational legitimacy, security, and facilitating donor organization collaboration. The impact of the regulatory environment on operational meaning is highlighted by the requirement that organizations adhere to local regulations in order to receive support from donors. Employee safety is said to be enhanced by having an MOU, demonstrating the importance of formal agreements in establishing operational procedures. However, a consequence of the increased requirements and restrictions has been a withdrawal of INGOs and UN agencies from areas outside of SAC control:

> Having an MOU is safer [for] employees. (LNGO staff, Northern Shan State/Rakhine State, personal communication, 2024)

> In 2024, as the authorities increase the restrictions, the harm increases. The NGOs that were working before are now leaving. In places of war, the NGOs, CSOs left. There is a decrease in UN funding. In order to help those who need to reach the ground, they may not be able to help those who are trapped. (LNGO Staff, Northern Shan State/Rakhine State, personal communication, 2024)

For smaller CSOs, a degree of compromise, often laced with creativity, has enabled operations to continue. In order to avoid direct control by the SAC, modest informal payments to local officials are made, with the understanding that local officials will not then report activities to their superiors or block or restrict the aid:

> If we ask the government department for the permission to do the project, they ask for money. (CSO staff member, Ayeyarwady Region, personal communication, 2024)

In some cases, authorities or armed groups under the control of the SAC require that a proportion of aid be provided either directly to SAC troops, to civil servants under the SAC, or to villages which are aligned with the junta and under the control of local militia, known as *Pyusawhti* (Lamb, 2025).

> Since the staff cannot go [to the field to verify,] we cannot be sure if the assistance really gets to those who needed it. There is some overlap in beneficiaries. Then there are things that have to be paid to the SAC. Sometimes CSO staff are arrested. (CSO Staff, Magway Region, personal communication, 2024)

However, given their long experience with such restrictions, local organizations have developed a number of ways to evade, disguise, and deflect attention in order to effectively deliver aid. The movement of funds is a particular example. Using official bank transaction channels to disperse funds not only draws the scrutiny of the SAC, but also requires organizations to exchange donor funds at official exchange rates, often much lower than the market rate, with the SAC authorities pocketing the difference (MacIsaac, 2024). However, local organizations instead use a network of informal channels, usually based on social networks, to move money around:

> Like other organizations, cash transferring is difficult. There are places where money can be exchanged at officially designated rates. (INGO staff, Kachin State, personal communication, 2024)

> We communicate with young people. They can connect in all kinds of ways, even when the internet is cut off. We do not use the simple method of transferring cash, everything must be carefully checked. If there are people who are at risk and become banned [from using their bank accounts], there are other ways to transfer to them. Their advantage is that they can travel to many villages and regions, and they have connections. (LNGO staff, Magway Region, personal communication, 2024)

How does this relate to neutrality and impartiality? The interviews show how the operational context is highly polarized and politicized with both the SAC and organizations opposed to it, appealing to particular interpretations of impartiality and neutrality in order to manipulate humanitarian aid. In the case of the SAC, public statements on aid neutrality were published in its mouthpiece, the *Global New Light of Myanmar* (2025, April 20):

> Humanitarian assistance transcends national, religious, political, and cultural boundaries. Its true purpose lies in alleviating suffering, enhancing quality of life, and supporting the rehabilitation of affected communities. Upholding this spirit requires a commitment to four core principles: humanity, impartiality, non-discrimination, and independence. (p. 8)

This is in reality a scant disguise for the SAC's true objective, to divert aid away from areas outside its control and to maximize the crisis for its own survival (Hayton, 2025). As Khin Ohmar (2021) notes, "There is nothing neutral about working with Myanmar's military" (para. 1). Similarly, groups opposed to the SAC, such as the NUG, have urged international donors to prioritize either engaging with local CSOs or channeling aid through the NUG or affiliated ethnic organizations (Institute of Development Studies, 2025). In the case of the SAC, however, their interpretation of principles of neutrality and impartiality is imposed by force, through legislation backed up by control of the means of violence. This means that the practice of neutrality is not simply an ethical choice, but a careful and creative management of risk, often involving layers of deflection and deception:

> There are things to adjust culturally. Therefore, the principles must be accepted depending on the region. There are some principles that have to be reduced depending on the culture. The stronger the principle, the more meaningful it can be. The main principle should be stronger. (CSO staff member, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

Deflection, diversion, and deception

As Thu Thu Nwe Hlaing et al. (2024) note in their article "Seeing Like a Donor," the process of creativity required to resist or evade the imposed control of the SAC may well involve degrees of deflection, diversion, and deception:

> Many Myanmar CSO leaders have developed creative strategies to continue to operate. Some have renamed their organizations; others have applied for registration as other types of private entities or have set up non-traditional means of receiving funds. One local CSO leader explained how they manage a portfolio of identities so that they can continue to receive funding from international donors [...]. These CSO approaches to maintaining operations are intentionally opaque and often do not align with international donor expectations of transparent and formal registration. Rather than ceasing their activities, or seeking explicit regime permission, many Myanmar CSOs have used their accrued contextual knowledge of governance and local relationships to make pragmatic decisions—avoiding higher levels of the regime, while gaining local permissions where necessary. (pp. 370-371)

Creativity is required in order to deliver assistance in areas under threat from the SAC, especially when field visits are involved. One NGO staff from Kayin State (personal communication, 2024) describes a field visit experience which prompted a change in approach:

> I had an experience where I drove into a village in a white car [...] All of the faces were grim. Initially, we were supposed to sleep in a village, and return the next day, [but] the locals instructed us to leave the village. [They] said they couldn't do much to assist us. They told us to get back as soon as possible because something could happen. [...]. That day, bombing destroyed a [local] bamboo forest and a village. With concern, I thought, "Did our visit cause any harm? Would we be accepted by the locals?" Furthermore, the items we donated were unlabeled. The next time we visit, we must follow the local ways. Our appearance must be erased, and then, we need to rebuild trust with them. It's really scary. Even when giving to people, it must be done in a way that shows where it's from.

The principle of humanitarian neutrality, then, is rendered somewhat abstract and irrelevant in theoretical terms, but exists as a constructed practice, shaped by the extreme contextual demands and risks, and by often partisan commitments to delivering aid to those in need who are beyond the control of SAC authorities:

> There are principles, [but they are] only on paper. Since the group is not in a mature state and is still being born, it cannot practice the principles yet. (CSO staff, Magway Region, personal communication, 2024)

> There are many organizations that donors require to follow the principles. Therefore, I want to know if there is an effect on the locals. It would be better if the teams actually doing it could follow this. At the moment, we are still unable to comply. They are saying to give it [aid] to those who are really affected, but they still don't know what they are doing behind the scenes. There are criteria set to be followed. I want to be effective and provide information with certainty. However, I'm not sure if I really need it in practice. (CSO staff, Magway Region, personal communication, 2024)

This in some ways aligns more closely with Hugo Slim's (2022) articulation of humanitarian resistance and Wells and Aung Naing's (2023) description of humanitarian activism and citizenship.

Conclusion

What this study demonstrates is that humanitarian neutrality and impartiality are highly fluid, shaped by a mixture of partisanism, pragmatism, innovation, deception, learned helplessness, self-deception, and state-centrism. Key materialities include money, prisons, and bank accounts; key non-materialities include financial gatekeeping mechanisms and validation, such as donor requirements. The broader question is less philosophical and more temporal: whether or not humanitarian assistance serves to prolong Myanmar's conflict, largely through the granting of resource transfers and a semblance of legitimacy to one side (the SAC), and where the SAC is the principal perpetrator of acts of violence against civilians. In this case, are the efforts to provide short-term relief justified if they are likely to cause greater suffering in the longer term? This posits humanitarian neutrality less as an ethical principle and more of a contested reality which is exploited by different actors to validate partisan actions. The actual practice of neutrality in the context of authoritarianism and civil war highlights what Adam Branch (2014) warns of: a state of affairs where the notion of humanitarian neutrality is exploited to a point where "humanitarianism and violence can end up in relations of 'secret solidarity,'" (pp. 477-478) perpetuating one another in a cycle of mutuality. The alternative leans towards resistance, where specific acts, whether overt or covert, are required to push back against hegemonic claims by armed authorities. Such efforts are required to assert the claims of the excluded and the marginalized. This is partisan and particular in its local expression, but may in fact represent a form of humanitarianism best suited to the complexities of civil war.

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Chapter 8

Assemblage in Action: Funding Hopefulness in Conflict Zones

Lwin Lwin, Aung Naing

Chapter summary

This chapter explores how assemblage theory provides an alternative lens for understanding governance, resilience, and hope in Myanmar following the 2021 coup d'état. Assemblage theory challenges structuralist perspectives that treat states as fixed entities, instead revealing their contingent and unstable natures. By emphasizing concepts like territorialization and deterritorialization, assemblage theory highlights how governance systems, even under conditions of conflict, can shift and re-form through changing relationships between actors and institutions. A key focus of this chapter is the role of hope as an assemblage shaped by cultural embeddedness, repeated collective performances, and access to alternative pathways. Before the coup, rural communities expressed hope through rituals, education, and local welfare systems. However, the junta's systematic violence—burning villages, displacing populations, destroying schools and monasteries—has deliberately dismantled these foundations, eroding both agency and aspirations. Community-led interventions in conflict-affected villages can enable new forms of collective agency, welfare systems, and visions of the future, expressing a form of radical politics of hope in the absence of optimism. Humanitarian and development assistance are inherently political and their transformative potential lies not in material delivery, but in enabling communities to reassemble hopefulness through solidarity, agency, and shared resilience—even in the absence of optimism.

Keywords: assemblage, hope, aspiration, humanitarian aid, development, community-led, *parahita*

Introduction

> *A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.* (Massumi in Deleuze & Guattari, 2004, p. xiii)

One of the criticisms of assemblage theory has been its impracticability, often leading to elegant analysis but rarely to useful solutions. Whilst this is in some ways due to the nature of assemblage theory itself as being fluid (Buchanan, 2015), it also reflects the theory's focus on ontologies rather than processes. Indeed, the value of assemblage theory, particularly in political science, is to challenge a structuralist framing of entities like states, instead drawing attention to their contingent nature—and in particular, how particular expressions of the state emerge and are sustained. Concepts such as territorialization and deterritorialization highlight how the relationships between elements of an assemblage can be disrupted, rearranged, and result in a different assemblage. This challenge to established structures—by highlighting their contingency and thus revealing their impermanence—can be a powerful tool in addressing what seem to be immovable hegemonies. However, the criticism continues: having exposed the frail foundations—what then? How can theory help not simply to cast structuralism in a different light, but to effect alternative solutions? As bell hooks (1991) eloquently wrote:

> I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. (p. 1)

In the decades prior to the 2021 coup d'état, and in the years since, much analysis has focused on the root causes, protagonists, and probable trajectories of the conflict in Myanmar, often from a variety of structuralist perspectives which treat key powers as givens. The vast majority of political engagement has likewise been state-centric in nature, assuming that the entity called "Myanmar" is somehow an immutable reality—evidenced by continual references to "Myanmar" and "government" in communiques and, despite the high-level sanction on military leaders attending international summits, the continued participation of junta officials in a range of international meetings at Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summits and further afield. Few would argue that the voluminous political analysis has done anything to "make the hurt go away" in terms of the suffering of people in the place that used to be called "Myanmar." Facile references to Myanmar's "civil war" or depicting the conflict as "self-destruction" (United Nations, 2025) represent not only intellectual laziness, but moral vacuity in assuming some kind of moral equivalence between different actors.

What assemblage theory can do, as demonstrated in previous chapters, is to challenge the seemingly irreducible monolith of the state—and indeed of actors arraigned against the junta—and instead expose their contingency. This is useful not only in relativizing junta authority, but also for providing a means to better understand emergent forms of governance in areas now under the control of other actors. If there is no "state" as such—or if Myanmar is, as most scholars suggest, a failed state (Wells & Aung Naing, 2023), then in what sense does "statehood" exist, particularly in areas controlled by non-junta forces? This is where, as earlier chapters show, assemblage theory can be useful: not simply cataloging what elements make up the assemblage we might call "local governance" or even how they relate to each other, but how their inter-relationship is itself contingent on various factors within and without:

> Assemblages possess emergent properties and capacities irreducible to their component parts. They possess things and can do things that the elements on their own cannot, just as water can flow or has a freezing point, unlike its individual hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Thus, assemblages constrain and enable their elements, providing limits and opportunities for activity (downward causation), but at the same time assemblages would not exist without their relatively autonomous elements (upwards causation). (Atkinson, 2024, p. 81)

Analysis of assemblages of local governance in conflict-affected areas in northwest Myanmar reveals that a key element in shaping the assemblage is public trust, effected within the realm of public service. This represents a critical "site of opportunity" whereby the shape of the assemblage could be influenced in a particular direction. The need to build public trust through a performance of public service that strengthens civic space is thus a potential entry point to reshaping the assemblage towards more stable, civilian forms. So far, so good. But in practical terms, how is this done? The following sections outline the following: the contours of hopefulness in pre-coup central Myanmar; the systematic destruction of sources of hopefulness by military forces during the post-coup conflict; the development intervention, based on the initial assemblage analysis; the outcome; and a further, assemblage-based analysis seeking to understand how and why the changes took place.

Cycles of hope: Aspiration and meaning in Central Myanmar

Classical conceptions of hope or hopefulness, such as those expressed in the Hope Survey (Snyder et al., 1991) define and measure hope as "a function of aspirations, agency, and pathways" (Bloem, Boughton, Htoo, Hein, & Payongayong, 2018, p. 2081). Here, hope is not simply the will to determine a future, but has some idea of the means by which that may happen. Arjun Appadurai (2004) considers hope in terms of aspiration—"a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations" (p. 69). Others, such as Graham (2012), also identify forms of hope which have little sense of either aspiration or agency and are more of a "survivalist notion" (Bloem et al., 2018, p. 2081). Broadly speaking, there are three elements of hope and hopefulness: social and cultural embeddedness; the capacity to repeatedly perform; and, particularly in contexts where options are deeply restricted, the enabling of agency by sources outside of the local scope and horizons.

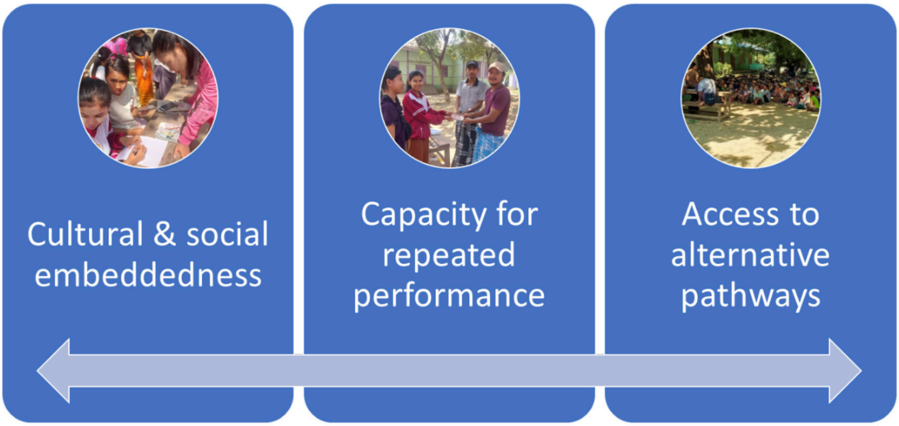
Cultural & social embeddedness
Capacity for repeated performance
Access to alternative pathways

Figure 1: *Components of aspiration/hope (adapted from Appadurai, 2004)*

Cultural and social embeddedness itself involves two aspects: first, the broader contours of hope and aspiration (what is hoped for, and how); and second, the set of relationships within which both the expression of hope and actions taken toward realizing certain aspirations take place, as described by Appadurai (2004):

> Aspirations are never simply individual [...]. They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life [...] aspirations about the good life, about health and happiness, exist in all societies. Yet a Buddhist picture of the good life lies at some distance from an Islamic one [...]. But in every case, aspirations to the good life are part of some sort of system of ideas [. . .] which locates them in a larger map of local ideas and beliefs about life and death, the nature of worldly possessions, the significance of material assets over social relations, the relative illusion of social permanence for a society, the value of peace or warfare. At the same time, aspirations to the good life tend to quickly dissolve into more densely local ideas about marriage, work, leisure, convenience, respectability, friendship, health, and virtue. (pp. 67-68).

Equally important is locating the set of relationships in which hopefulness is expressed in terms of words and actions. An individual's aspirations may themselves carry the aspirations of many—think of a village sending their brightest student to study at university; likewise, collective aspirations, for a more shared prosperity (a road for the village, a better water supply) may also cross over into non-material aspirations (a bigger and better monastery which in turn leverages greater merit for future existence, and possibly a karmic deterrent against disaster). This means that hope and aspiration are rarely distilled into pure individualist categories. Despite demonstrating the validity of the Hope Survey categories amongst rural households in Myanmar, the collective dimensions of hope and aspiration were largely missing from Bloem et al.'s (2018) analysis.

The capacity to undertake repeated performances of hope/aspiration-related actions is critical for two reasons. At a more individual level, this both reinforces agency within selected pathways and also demonstrates the "performative" nature of hope which is then used as a foil to demonstrate its success (because we did *X*, this good result happened):

> The capacity to aspire, like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation. Where the opportunities for such conjecture and refutation in regard to the future are limited […], it follows that the capacity itself remains relatively less developed. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 66)

At the corporate level, the wider performance of hope serves to validate three dimensions: the shape and object of hope (what are we hoping for, and why); the collective ownership of hope (the future benefits will be shared); and the affirmation of particular pathways for realizing hope. These in turn serve to sustain hope in the absence of tangible results—at times in logic-defying misrecognition (Bourdieu, 1990). This highlights the overlap between cultural capital and hope in the realm of communal actions: "The exercise and nurture of these capabilities verifies and authorizes the capacity to aspire and moves it away from wishful thinking to thoughtful wishing" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 80). Religious festivals, often held after harvest times, harness ritual and social elements to locate hopefulness within a particular cultural and social order. Participants' hope is thus located within a particular realm of logic, and individual hope and aspiration are tied into a wider performance of hopefulness. This sheds light on why religion plays a significant role in hopefulness during times of crisis and perhaps less so in times of plenty.

The enabling of agency and alternative pathways is perhaps more significant in contexts of restriction. As Bloem et al. (2018) note in their study of rural Mon households in Myanmar, aspirations linked to perceived opportunity

> [...] tend to expand as an individual's aspirations window expands [. . .] with increased levels of education and with the greater opportunities typically afforded to men in Myanmar comes both marginally greater aspirations for the future and also as an improved perception that these aspirations can be achieved. (p. 2086)

The converse is also true:

> If the map of aspirations [...] is seen to consist of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, relative poverty means a smaller number of aspirational nodes and a thinner, weaker sense of the pathways from concrete wants to intermediate contexts to general norms and back again. Where these pathways do exist for the poor, they are likely to be more rigid, less supple, and less strategically valuable. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 66)

The exercise of hopefulness in restricted contexts thus needs to enable the identification of pathways and simultaneously increase the capacity to aspire—the capacity to "exercise 'voice,' to debate, contest, and oppose vital directions for collective social life as they wish" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 66). This is linked to the notion of recognition—the deliberate process of affirming the other in positive ways. Conversely, "the projection of an inferior or demeaning image on another can actually distort and oppress, to the extent that the image is internalized" (Taylor, 1994, p. 26).

For rural communities in central Myanmar, the location of hope is in a sense of known belonging, the capacity for repeated and ritualized performance, and the availability of alternative pathways in the form of social and technological innovations, political movements, and expanded social networks. This is manifest in the fusing of traditions, such as the establishment of social welfare organizations (*parahita*) which draw on religious and cultural frameworks and prior cooperative practices, such as *Kalatha Kaung Saung* youth organizations, and use new technology and opportunities to enhance village welfare. Social and religious rituals are not simply a means of building either social cohesion or moral welfare; they are a visible sign that the community has a future. Likewise, the education of children and young people, through both formal and informal institutions (such as monastic schools), is a performative aspect of hopefulness, affirming both the belief that there is a future and that education is a pathway by which a (better) future can be realized.

However, for households in many parts of rural Myanmar, and in particular central Myanmar, these certainties ended abruptly after the 2021 coup d'état. This study draws on data from a longitudinal study of households in over 50 villages in three townships in Sagaing Region, in the northwestern part of Myanmar. Aside from detailed quantitative data collected at household level to analyze social and economic trends, periodic narrative interviews with village members and leaders have complemented data from sharing workshops for community volunteers participating in a village-led humanitarian assistance program, described in more detail in a later section. Due to the highly sensitive nature of these studies, little has been published openly, but data are available as sections of studies such as the Civic Monitoring Study (Yutwon, 2024) or studies published by the Institute of Development Studies (Aung Naing, 2023).

Despite being a focal point of Burmese nationalist ideology, resistance to the Burma-centric military coup of 2021 has been widespread in Sagaing Region. In response, military tactics of airstrikes, raids, artillery, arson, forced abduction, and destruction of livelihoods, monasteries, clinics, roads, schools, and other public buildings have resulted in the displacement of over 1.2 million people in the region—nearly a quarter of the entire population (United Nations Development Programme, 2025). Daily life is characterized by persistent and changing threats—road closures, paraglider bombings, and betrayal by informers, to name but three. In large swathes of rural Sagaing, local governance is administered by groups resisting the junta, and often dominated by armed opposition groups. The destruction of property, livelihoods, and supporting infrastructure, alongside the continual demands on human and financial resources for armed resistance, means that livelihoods, social activities, and wider community life are deeply constrained. Previous support networks and safety nets have all but disappeared, and the main visible "governance" function is armed defense. Whilst nascent localized, self-motivated efforts to establish health and education services are widespread, these are also under continual threat. After nearly five years of conflict, there is little reason to be hopeful.

Destroying hope: The five cuts

> *With this coup, our future and dreams have disappeared.*
> (40-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

If hope is situated between aspirations, agency, and pathways, and derived from the triad of cultural embeddedness, repeated (and to some extent, ritualized) performance, and access to realistic alternatives, then the systematic destruction of hope in the aftermath of the 2021 coup d'état has been achieved precisely by undermining each of these three elements. Targeted arson, repeated displacement, and the disruption of collective life, coupled with wider punitive actions such as the imprisonment of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, banning local organizations, restricting internet access, and the broader weaponization of education, have undermined the sense of viability of the future. By burning or seizing crops, blocking roads, restricting travel and the purchase of agricultural inputs, rural livelihoods have been severely curtailed, in turn undermining the capacity to fund future-oriented activities like education and collective welfare. The targeted bombing of schools run by National Unity Government (NUG)-affiliated village groups means that education is a risky affair. Likewise, the targeting of Buddhist monasteries by air raids has rendered previously sacred locations unsafe; this has resulted in a broader undermining of religious and moral authority in rural communities, described in chapter four of this volume.

Surveys of households in Sagaing Region, where this study was conducted, demonstrate a pattern of repeated displacement and continual threat. Of over 2,600 households enrolled in a longitudinal cohort study, 71 percent had been displaced by military raids, bombing, or arson during the two-year study period (Yutwon, 2024). Of those, two-thirds were repeatedly displaced. In total, 16 percent experienced some form of violence, such as arson, theft, or injury. For many, the pattern was displacement, a tentative or partial return, and then a repeated displacement when new raids or airstrikes came:

> As for our village, it is located in the middle of the two [army] camps [...] It is easy to change camps and send troops. In the situation where weapons and ammunition were being transported, our village was the route through which they had to pass, so our village was the most likely to be evacuated. The number of times we had to evacuate was more than 30 times in 2023 and 2024 alone. (45-year-old village leader, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

This leads to a state of almost permanent uncertainty:

> Now, when we flee because of the war, we face a lot of hardships. At night, we have to sleep under tents. If we flee to other villages, we can't sleep. In the morning, we have to get up at 4 o'clock to run. At 9 o'clock at night, we hear the sound of military lines, so we run. We also get up at 8 o'clock to run. Whenever they come, our village has to be ready. There are many difficulties. (31-year-old female social volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

The destruction of physical and social infrastructure in turn undermines the cultural and social embeddedness which is linked to a sense of place:

> It only started a little over a year after the coup, and I started running. At first, the cadres had to run to other villages, because nothing happened in my own village. Later, when I first entered my village, I started running. They [military personnel] would come once a month, sometimes once a week, sometimes every two or three days, and sometimes they would come back. Sometimes, I would be attacked. When they attacked, they would burn down houses without warning. The number of times they did so varied. Sometimes, they would tear down the walls of houses, break all the pots and pans, and scatter all the clothes. Sometimes, they would find money hidden in the women's *htamain* [wraparound skirt] folds. That's what happened the most. (27-year-old female social volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

The presence and ongoing threat of violence has made the process of "repeat performances" of collective activities and rituals hazardous:

> We can't do the [village events] as before. We should be doing the *Shin-Phyu* [novice monk ordination ceremony] for our young sons, but they are reaching 15, 16 years of age now, so we really have to do it. But if we do the ceremony, and are cooking and preparing, and they [soldiers] come and raid, we don't have time to clear everything and run away. (52-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication 2024)

The same is true for more formalized actions, such as education:

> A school in our area was bombed. When the bomb was dropped, students were [killed]. It happened a year ago, and then it became inconvenient to teach in the village. After it became inconvenient, how will we teach? When we discussed it in the village, we heard a lot. [...] one teacher had four or five people [students] in this house, the other teacher had four or five people [students] in that house, and we had to divide them up a little bit here and there and teach, and

> then we had to hide and teach. Now, from above, paramotors were flying, drones were flying. On the ground, if there was a military line, we ran. The danger from above is that we often cannot see it. When we can't see it, we have to watch from two or three people and ask where this is coming from, where it is coming from, and send the students out of school, and so on. The education system in our area is very difficult. (28-year-old female social volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

Such sustained violence engenders a sense of helplessness, reducing the sense of agency. As one male respondent describes:

> When we ran from the troops, we had to get into the boat. As we got in, my younger sister slipped, and she drowned. They just kept coming. Afterwards, I felt so useless. If I cannot even save my own sister, what kind of a person am I? (27-year-old male village social volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

The lack of a sense of alternative pathways is exacerbated by both the violence itself, by wider restrictions on travel, information, and association, and by the economic constraints engendered by junta authority policies. Road closures restrict options for sale of crops; bans on fertilizer purchase serve to increase the difficulty in undertaking agriculture; broader economic mismanagement has increased the cost of living; and the withdrawal of many formal microfinance institutions has resulted in a credit crisis, whereby 25 percent report being unable to borrow at a critical point sometime in the past two years, and over 80 percent report that lack of access to finance is the key barrier to continuing or resuming their livelihood (Yutwon, 2024). The sense of being trapped both physically and in terms of severely reduced pathways for survival, let alone aspirations of a better future, have resulted in significant levels of anxiety and depression. The combination of social and cultural dislocation, the inability to undertake repeated collective performative actions, and the closing off of possible pathways result in a broader destruction of hope. In assemblage terms, the impact of sustained violence, economic restrictions, and constraining of mobility and networks can be considered as forces of deterritorialization serving to disrupt the prior assemblage, resulting in a new, unstable form of community.

Reassembling hopefulness

If we further consider hope in assemblage terms, organized around a triad of cultural and social embeddedness, the capacity for related collective performance, and the availability of alternative pathways, the key elements required include actions to restore or establish alternative means of locational embeddedness, adaptations to enable alternative repeated performances, and resources and skills to enable the identification and use of alternative pathways.

To a significant extent, many of these capacities are clearly evidenced in the resilience of rural communities themselves. Despite repeated dislocation and the disruption of normal modes of society (such as the centrality of the village monastery), villages in conflict zones have adapted to the continued threat. This includes changes to community activities, such as festivals and funerals:

> We can't gather together any more for funerals. But we can still prepare the food, and the volunteers take the food to each household. Sometimes, instead of giving food, we make a donation of a plate for each household, as many have lost plates when the soldiers raided. We have to change the way we do our donation and festivals according to the situation. (52-year-old woman, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

An external donor-funded project commenced a pilot project in 2024 in 50 villages in two conflict-affected areas of Sagaing Region. The premise was simple: provide a well-structured training course on development, social protection, disaster management, and communication skills, and facilitate a process of applying for small grants to undertake community projects by the graduates. Villages were asked to nominate two volunteers who would then take on responsibilities in community social organizations. Criteria included a proviso that volunteers not be members of an armed group and would be willing to apply the learning as a volunteer—meaning that they would receive no remuneration from project funds. Training was supported by a small group of locally based mentors and conducted in batches of 50 participants (25 villages at a time).

On completion, a process of consultation with their village, including various governance actors, led to the development of a proposal, which, after careful scrutiny, was funded. Typical grant amounts were small—around US$3,000 per community. The emphasis in implementation was to establish sustainable systems, not simply to implement one-off activities. Despite considerable ongoing and urgent needs, the majority of the proposals had longer-term outlooks. More than half were structured as revolving funds, with explicit processes to generate income for village welfare, development, and public service provision. Nearly 10 percent were oriented towards local public service provision either as health, education, water supply, or more innovatively as collaborative disaster response and management systems with other neighboring villages. Despite the relatively small size of the grants, much larger gains were leveraged: less than a year after starting the project, over two-thirds of the villages had functioning self-funded welfare systems, redistributing locally generated income towards community welfare and development activities.

Nearly three dozen village volunteers from the above program took part in a workshop to enable them to share their experiences with others. One element of this was an exercise asking a simple question: “What kind of future do you want for your village?”. Participants were asked to discuss this and express their responses through pictures and diagrams on large flip charts. For many, this was the first time they had been asked to consider this. Even the assumption behind the question —that their village actually has a future— was new to many. The expressions of a future vision had three significant themes. Firstly, education, represented by both schools and by safe spaces for children, was typically central to participants’ diagrams:

> In the future, the main thing I want to change is education [...]. We will prioritize education and guide the youth to the right path. (33-year-old female volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

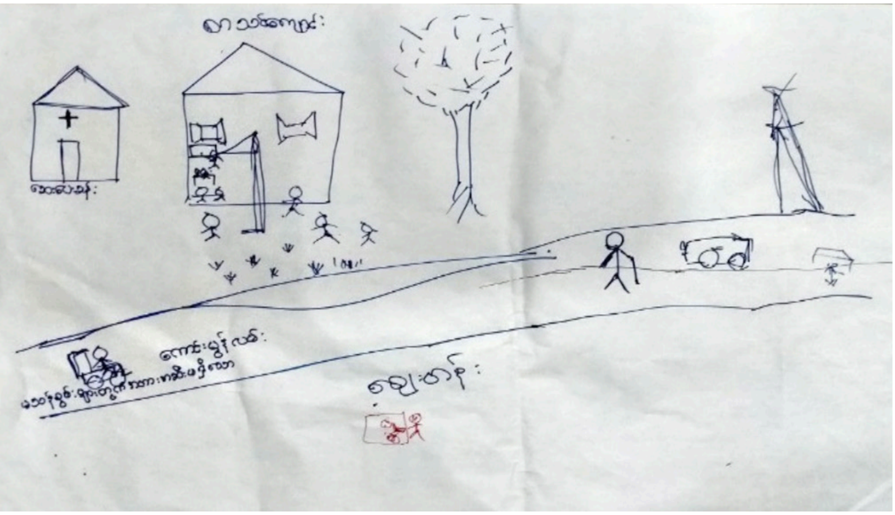

Figure 2: *Flipchart drawing of "Our Future" by village social volunteers (2024)*

The second was that many of the ideas and proposals expressed had relatively long development trajectories. Whilst issues of safety, security, and disaster management were featured as immediate concerns, much of the emphasis on participants' future visions was oriented around social and economic infrastructure. Thirdly, there was a recognition of the need for broader social mobilization and for public administration and political organizing skills to enable a stronger sense of collective agency:

> When we started working in the village, we formed organizations in the village, such as administration and defense. When we formed them, we worked on the administration, youth, and defense departments, but the administration structure was not yet ready. The reason why it was not ready was because the youth wanted to do what the youth wanted to do. The elders also wanted to do what the elders wanted to do, so it was a difficult time to negotiate. The youth also did what they wanted to do, but they did it because they wanted to do village affairs.

> The elders were adults, so the administration structure was scary in that era. They also couldn't speak openly. Those who were supposed to listen didn't know what to listen to, so there were some differences in the village administration. (31-year-old female social volunteer, Sagaing Region, personal communication, 2024)

Examining the impact of these interventions, a recent case-control study (Aung Naing, 2025) found significant differences in the outcomes of similar interventions in the same areas, when the interventions were implemented by the village organizations themselves, in the manner described above, or by an external agency. Compared to households in control villages, households in villages where community-based projects were being implemented were six times more likely to have a net improvement in vulnerability, food security, and mental health. A key factor appears to be the emphasis of the community-led processes on empowerment, inclusion, and communication. Households in community-led villages were more likely to perceive positive changes related to finances, work, crime, drug problems, and women's participation compared to control households. Overall, these findings support the assumptions of the project that mobilizing community resources is not simply a necessity in an increasingly restricted humanitarian space, but is itself a critical move to restore hopefulness. Furthermore, surveys of opinions on village governance, unity, and cooperation found that respondents in villages where the project had been undertaken were more than twice as likely to report improvements compared with respondents in nearby areas where the project had not been implemented.

Conclusion: Hope without optimism

In assemblage terms, we can view the project interventions as enabling a reterritorialization: the reestablishment of a sense of community, in which some of the key elements of hopefulness can be reestablished, albeit in altered forms and expressions. What this further illustrates is the potential role that external actors can have in such contexts. Rather than the delivery of humanitarian assistance per se, the crucial element is the enabling of agency. However, this depends on the mode of assistance. Where aid is simply delivered by an external actor, immediate ameliorative effects may be achieved, but there is little sense of agency. In fact, such an approach may even exacerbate a sense of helplessness. Likewise, attempts to undertake humanitarian assistance or development through the formation of special project committees also fall short of the mark. These lack any sense of social and cultural embeddedness, and thus, the potential to be a site of the reproduction of repeated, collective performances involving the whole community.

In the abovementioned project, a key element is the training itself. Providing new tools, skills, and technical resources is a critical component in enabling the financial resources of the grant itself to be a mobilizer of wider community resources. In particular, training components on communication skills, systems development, accountability, transparency, and collective learning have been repeatedly cited by community volunteers and leaders as the most significant elements in enabling them to develop and maintain the shared vision with their communities. If humanitarian assistance is simply about delivering material goods, then the efficiency of externally managed programs make United Nations- and international non-governmental organization-led processes more attractive. But such approaches do little to contribute to the key component of resilience: hope. If resilience is linked to a sense of belonging (Griffiths, 2023), hope and hopefulness in such contexts are rooted in solidarities: not so much shared optimism of better futures, but a commitment to the present in ways which deny the power of violence to annihilate life together.

What is significant is a form of hope which can thrive in the absence of optimism. This does not mean that there is no sense of a possible, better future; rather, that the primary driver for behavior in relation to the future is a commitment to the present, in new modes of cooperation and solidarity with others. Volunteers drawing pictures of villages with schools and playgrounds in the absence of the agency, resources, and skills to enact meaningful performances can be construed as mere wishful thinking. However, the enabling of alternative visions, pathways, and renewed agency begins to organize hopefulness around new expressions of solidarity. Part of this is the solidarity between an external agent (providing training and funding) and the community; the greater part is the reorganization of solidarities at the community level, where these have been disrupted by violence. Of note, the role of women has been perceived to have become more significant, as well as that of young people and traditional elders, at the expense of previous power structures oriented around religion (village abbots) and designated authority (government-appointed administrators). This kind of hope is built not on

> multiplied and fractured orientations to the future [but] on an understanding of mutual contingency, and a desire to be present in the present, to connect, without optimism or hope for something elsewhere. Radical politics can be found in the expression of hope for the absence of optimism. (Raynor, 2021, p. 568)

Whilst many development practitioners and humanitarian actors would shy away from anything which carries a whiff of "radical politics," this chapter concludes by arguing that development and humanitarian assistance are themselves inherently political. The choice of method, of process, is itself inherently political. Development and humanitarian assistance which positions an external provider as the deliverer and the recipient community as the powerless recipient reinforce power inequalities and perpetuate deterritorialization due to violence. Conversely, development and humanitarian assistance that takes the longer road of enabling agency, voice, and supporting repeated performances of mutuality embraces a more radical politics of generating hopefulness, where spaces for innovation enable a reterritorialization permitting new, future possibilities even in the face of sustained violence and uncertainty.

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Reflections from the 4th International Burma/Myanmar Studies Conference (ICBMS4)

‘Our Cause’ (*do ayei*) Cries Out for a Declaration: Assemblage, Intellectual Witness, Charting New Inclusive Futures

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Summary

Since the 2021 military coup, unprecedented cross-ethnic alliances have transformed Myanmar’s political landscape. As of late 2025, resistance forces control over half the country’s territory. Myanmar’s intellectual community faces the urgent task of documenting inclusive governance principles emerging from this anti-regime struggle. The “our” (*do*) rally cry has passed repeatedly between liberation and oppression. The *Dobama* (“Our Burma”) movement of the 1930s became 1988’s *do ayei* (“our cause”), which the military appropriated into *do tawun ayei thon ba* (“Our Three Main National Causes”). This calculated intervention transformed chants of liberation into structures of tyranny. Myanmar’s current struggle has reclaimed *do ayei* as a performative act, yet the morpheme *ayei* carries deeper duality: it denotes both “significant affairs” and “writing/documentation.” This linguistic fusion reveals a historical pattern: causes (*ayei*) achieve legitimacy through documentation (*ayei)*, as campaign chronicles (*ayeidawbon*) demonstrated. The 1988 uprising performed the claim but produced no systematic documentation, leaving a void the military regime filled. Without systematic articulation, this cycle risks repetition. Myanmar’s intellectual community has the opportunity

to issue formal *sadan* (moral witness) declarations documenting inclusive governance principles from resistance practices, providing the reclaimed *do ayei* with stable principles distinguishing liberation from coercion. Myanmar Studies conferences provide opportunities to forge this framework before power consolidates.

Introduction

This chapter, serving as the epilogue to this volume arising from the theme of the 2024 International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies ("Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities After the State"), argues for an evidence-based transformative intervention: formal declarations serving as collective intellectual witness.[1] The assemblage concept used throughout this volume to analyze Myanmar's polycentric political formations now informs the proposed intervention itself.

The preceding chapters in this volume have analyzed Myanmar as emergent, polycentric assemblages. However, these emergent formations remain vulnerable to fragmentation. Formal declarations conceived as *sadan* (moral witness) offer one path toward reterritorialization. They propose shared codes that allow these diverse "sites of possibility" to cohere into a durable political formation, potentially offering an alternative to the rigid hierarchy of the previous unitary state.

Myanmar's vernacular traditions offer terms for understanding political claims. During the anti-footwear campaign of 1916 to 1919, Buddhist leaders issued *sadan*, moral witness succeeding through persuasion rather than force. *Dobama Asiayone* (DBA; Our Burma Association) declarations of the 1930s derived power from collective recognition rather than sovereign command. *Sagyok* denotes binding agreements between co-equals requiring continuous interpretation. These vernacular terms clarify what such declarations attempt: documenting principles through intellectual witness (*sadan*-like) while requiring mutual recognition (*sagyok*-like) to prevent any single actor from claiming final authority, addressing the vulnerabilities of past declarations.

The intellectual community, though fragmented across exile, resistance, and diaspora, is well-positioned to issue formal declarations documenting inclusive governance principles, functioning as *sadan* and providing ethical reference points for a movement that has transformed former enemies into allies, peripheries into centers, and petition into mobilization.

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[1] Based on the keynote "Beyond Assemblage: Reframing Burma's Revolution" (Plenary 1: "Unpacking Assemblage," International Conference of Burma/Myanmar Studies, Chiang Mai, Thailand, August 1, 2024). This chapter expands on that call for declarations, serving as this volume's conclusion.

Myanmar's unprecedented struggle

Since the 2021 coup, former enemies have become allies across ethnic lines. In Kayin State, Karen fighters who have battled the Bamar-dominated military for 70 years are now training non-Karen freedom fighters. Ethnic administrative systems shelter fleeing activists of other ethnicities, breaking decades of ethnic division. The Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar's (2024) monitoring indicates the junta's effective governance has shrunk substantially since October 2023's Operation 1027 offensive. Resistance groups have established governance mechanisms with shared authority and civilian oversight principles. Local resistance administrations in Sagaing Region operate *Pyithu Okchokyei a Pweh* committees incorporating former civil servants, CDM supporters, and elected officials (Jordt et al., 2022, pp. 27-29). The Karenni State Interim Executive Council includes representatives of the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)/Karenni Army (KA), post-coup armed groups, elected MPs, political parties, and civil society organizations, emphasizing civilian oversight and ensuring armed group accountability.

These innovations demonstrate emerging principles of inclusive governance. When resistance groups include civilian oversight, former enemies share authority, and communities coordinate across ethnic boundaries, they demonstrate principles that Myanmar's traditional vocabularies struggle to express. The National Unity Government (NUG) operates schools and clinics in liberated zones, while People's Defense Forces (PDFs), many led by Generation Z activists, conduct coordinated operations with ethnic armies. The Federal Democracy Charter (FDC) (Committee Representing *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* [CRPH], 2021), endorsed by historically disparate groups, promises citizenship rights for Rohingya and self-determination for all ethnic nationalities.

Myanmar's intellectuals possess systematic knowledge of this transformation, having documented governance mechanisms, observed coordinations, and analyzed emerging protection protocols. Yet intellectual communities remain fragmented. Insights are largely confined to newspapers, journals, and conference papers. Without documented principles, international actors default to simplistic narratives, resistance gains risk reversal, and innovations remain invisible. This creates an assemblage problem: disparate knowledge exists but lacks organizing principles required to cohere into transformative force.

Assemblage theory excels at revealing the contingency of reified structures, identifying "sites of possibility" for intervention. Formal declarations conceived as *sadan* would deliberately introduce coherent principles into Myanmar's fluid political assemblage to guide reterritorialization toward a more inclusive, just, stable form. This chapter grounds principles in observed practices, examining Myanmar's vernacular declaration traditions, contrasting *sadan* (moral witness) with *kyei nya gyet* (sovereign command), analyzing declaration vulnerabilities contributing to the failure of the Panglong Agreement (1947), and the military's appropriation of *do ayei*. Drawing on speech act theory (Austin, 1962) and historical precedents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 1948), I propose design principles for contemporary *sadan* declarations.

This argument does not prescribe Myanmar's political future. Whether resistance and political actors find such documentation useful remains their determination. Yet documenting these principles requires understanding how Myanmar's declarative traditions have been weaponized.

The military's appropriation and why declarations matter now

Central to Myanmar's transformation is the reclamation of *do ayei* (ဒို့အရေး).[2] This potent chant carries dual historical continuity: "*do*" (our) echoes the anti-colonial assertion of the *Dobama* movement, while "*ayei*" (matter/cause) links it to historic struggles through the morpheme's appearance in *ayeidawbon* (အရေးတော်ပုံ, campaign chronicles). The related term "*tawhlanyei*" (တော်လှန်ရေး, revolution) uses the suffix "*yei*" (ရေး) as nominalizer, transforming *taw-lan* (to overturn) into a noun. The critical distinction: *ayei* (အရေး) is a complete noun with the prefix "*a*" (အ), while *yei* (ရေး) functions as nominalizing suffix. This grammatical difference carries political weight.[3]

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[2] Romanization of ဒို့အရေး is inconsistent (e.g., "*Doh A Yay*," "*do ayei*," etc.). No documented political use exists before 1988, though earlier nationalist movements used similar possessive constructions.

The etymology of *ayei* (အရေး) reveals why this complete nominal form matters. Stewart and Dunn's *A Burmese-English Dictionary* (1940) shows *ayei*'s root meanings include both "matter, affair, crisis, or cause" and simultaneously "line, outlining, writing, or written works," representing semantic fusion within a single morpheme. The first meaning encompasses "course of events, affairs, things, matter, subject, fact, care; important, serious, pressing, matter, crisis," while the second designates "line, streak; outlining, writing" and "writing and noting, taking down notes" (pp. 317-319).

This conceptual fusion suggests political logic embedded in Myanmar's documentary traditions. A "cause" (*ayei*) achieves historical legitimacy when documented through the act of *ayei* (writing). Campaign chronicles operationalized this: *ayeidawbon* (အရေးတော်ပုံ) combines *ayei* (affairs/writing) with *taw* (royal) and *bon* (form/chronicle), signifying both royal campaigns and their written documentation. Stewart and Dunn (1940) confirm this: *ayeidawbon* appears among examples of *ayei* meaning both "affair of Prince M[indon]'s rebellion" and "written account, one of the Five *Ayeidawbon*" (p. 319). The king's authority determined which struggles merited documentation, and documentation validated struggles as historically significant. The morpheme *bon* (ပုံ) indicates the giving of written form to royal affairs, completing the circle: significant affairs demand documentation, and documentation confirms significance.

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[3] The morpheme *ayei* (အရေး), a complete noun (prefix "a" [အ]), has dual meanings: (1) "affair, crisis" and (2) "writing, documentation" (Stewart and Dunn, 1940, pp. 317-319). This fusion appears in *ayeidawbon* (အရေးတော်ပုံ) (campaign chronicles) and *do ayei* (ဒို့အရေး) (asserting "our affairs" merit documentation). Conversely, *yei* (ရေး) is a nominalizing suffix, as in *tawhlanyei* (တော်လှန်ရေး, revolution) (from *taw-lan*, to overturn). Politically, the *ayei*/*yei* distinction matters: invoking အရေး signals both significance and official record, appropriating royal authority. တော်လှန်ရေး resonates culturally: in Burmese Buddhist thought, revolution is conceived as primarily realized in the person, not the collective, through uprooting mental defilements (Houtman, 1999, pp. 231-233). Adding ဒို့ (our) collectivizes what is inherently personal.

This embedded relationship distinguishes terms using *ayei* from those using the simpler suffix *yei*. While *tawhlanyei* (တော်လှန်ရေး) grammatically transforms "overturning" into a noun, it lacks *ayei*'s explicit dual claim to both significance and documentation. Stewart and Dunn's dictionary (1940) lists *ayei*'s meanings as both "revolution" as a significant affair and "written account" as a documentary act (p. 319). This matters politically. Invoking *ayei* performs double assertion: these affairs demand attention as historically significant and warrant inscription into permanent record. The slogan "*do ayei*" claims more than revolutionary transformation (which *tawhlanyei* would denote). It asserts that "our affairs" merit both recognition and documentation, appropriating the morpheme's dual power traditionally requiring sovereign authorization.[4]

The slogan's power derives from multiple sources. Its deep linguistic resonance connects contemporary struggle to Myanmar's documentary traditions through the *ayei* morpheme's fusion of significance and inscription. The possessive *do* performs collective ownership, echoing *Dobama*'s anti-colonial assertions. But the slogan's primary force operates through its performance as voiced collective chant, an affirmative act declaring the revolution "ours," forged in sonic, affirmative mobilization context rather than fixed philosophical texts. This aligns with theories suggesting protest slogans function primarily internally, expressing participants' inherent moral worth (Moran, 2011, pp. 89-92).

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[4] Taylor (1986) documented *ayeidawbon* and *tawhlanyei* as a political binary (socialism vs. revolution), settled categories from post-independence elite contest. This chapter examines *ayei*'s duality (cause/documentation) not retrospectively but during an open constituent moment. Taylor analyzed terms after the struggle; this chapter addresses their meaning during the making.

This marks significant evolution from petition in 1988 to comprehensive cross-ethnic mobilization in 2021. Although claims of earlier origins of *do ayei* exist (see MacLachlan, 2023), supporting evidence is lacking. The phrase emerged during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. A temporary newspaper launched with the same name ceased after publishing only a few issues, never articulating systematic content. This highlighted the slogan's primary force as illocutionary, the act of claiming rather than detailing content. Substantive meaning appeared later in resistance songs like "*Doh Ayay*" (Ko Pyae TTW, 2021) demanding "down with the dictatorship" and "power to the people." The slogan has remained powerful but conceptually open, acting as a "significant symbol" crystallizing collective aspirations during crisis. This openness, its strength as a unifying chant, also constitutes its primary vulnerability. The slogan invokes *ayei*'s dual claim (significance plus documentation) but leaves the documentary form undefined and unrealized.

The military's appropriation of *do ayei* after 1988 demonstrates the stakes. The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) capitalized on the crucial difference between spontaneous sounding of the popular slogan (functioning as an internal mobilizing frame) and institutional writing of doctrine. In September 1988, after killing an estimated 3,000 *do ayei*-chanting protesters, the military announced its ideological foundation, filling the conceptual void. Minye Kaungbon (1994) provided explicit content to SLORC's appropriation by transforming the popular cry into rigid written doctrine: "Our Three Main National Causes [Duties]" (*do tawun ayei thon ba*), transforming the slogan from oral protest to state ideology.

The military strategically co-opted the language: emphasizing "Our" causes appropriated collective spirit, claiming priorities as "Main" principles asserted dominance, and linking them to the state as "National Causes" framed them as existential imperatives (Crouch, 2021). Adding "duty" (*tawun*) shifted focus from rights claimed by people to obligations imposed by the state. The three principles (non-disintegration of the Union, non-disintegration of national solidarity, and perpetuation of sovereignty) were rigorously enforced as written artifacts, appearing nine times in the 2008 Constitution (Republic of the Union of Myanmar [RUM], 2008), required to appear on book covers, listed in defense policy, and included in oaths (Crouch, 2021).

In Austin's (1962) terms, the military's declaration achieved "uptake" through institutional compulsion and coercion (*ana*) rather than the moral persuasion (*awza*) required for felicitous speech acts—an "abuse" of declarative convention, functioning as sovereign command (*kyei nya gyet*)

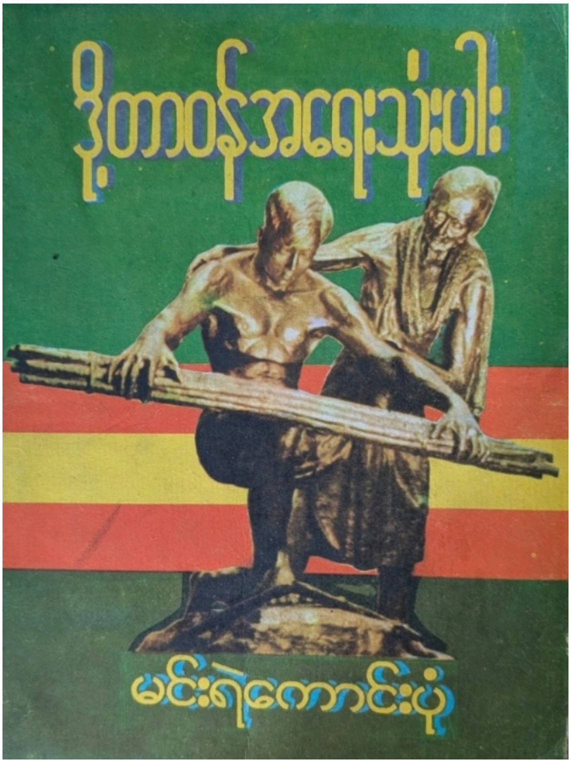

Figure 1. *Cover of Minye Kaungbon's (1994)* Do Tawun Ayei Thon Ba *(Our Three Main National Causes) featuring a regime-commissioned sculpture visualizing the military's unity doctrine. A muscular youth tests bound bamboo stalks while an elderly figure looks on, representing Burma's ethnic groups as individually breakable but collectively resilient. This engineered iconography accompanied the post-1988 sloganeering campaign that appropriated pro-democracy protesters'* do ayei *chant into state ideology.*

powered by the gun, and contrasting with voluntary acceptance required for moral witness (*sadan*). SLORC Declaration 1/90 (SLORC, 1990) nullifying the National League for Democracy's (NLD) 1990 landslide victory explicitly invoked this ideology, arguing legitimacy required a constitution aligned with "Our Three Main National Causes." From 1990 until 2021, the people's liberation chant largely served as constitutional architecture of oppression.[5]

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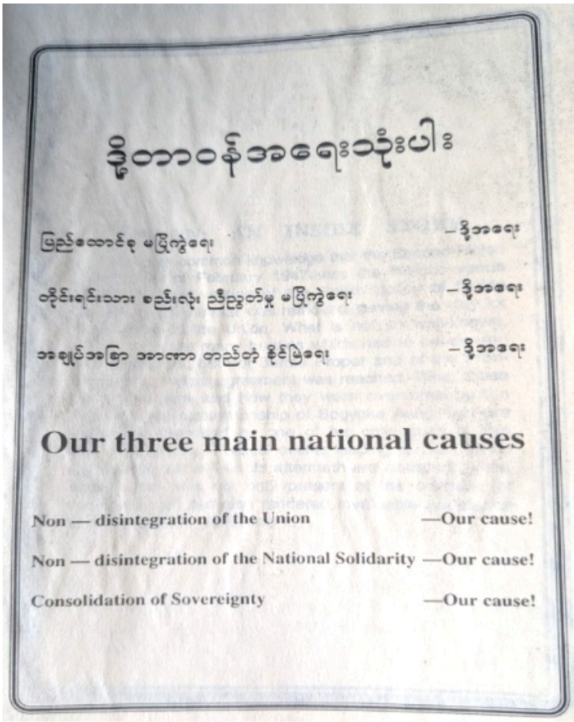
[5] The three causes are pervasive in the 2008 Constitution (RUM, 2008), appearing strategically in the Preamble, Basic Principles (Ch. I, § 6(a)–(c)), required oaths (president, vice presidents, legislators), Duties of Citizens (§ 383), and mandated objectives for Political Parties (§ 404(a), Sch. 4).



ဒို့တာဝန်အရေးသုံးပါး

ပြည်ထောင်စု မပြိုကွဲရေး — ဒို့အရေး

တိုင်းရင်းသား စည်းလုံး ညီညွတ်မှု မပြိုကွဲရေး — ဒို့အရေး

အချုပ်အခြာ အာဏာ တည်တံ့ ခိုင်မြဲရေး — ဒို့အရေး

Our three main national causes

Non — disintegration of the Union —Our cause!

Non — disintegration of the National Solidarity —Our cause!

Consolidation of Sovereignty —Our cause!

Figure 2. *The "Our Three Main National Causes" (*do tawun ayei thon ba*) as compulsorily printed in publications and displayed on signboards since 1990. The three principles appear nine times in the 2008 Constitution (RUM, 2008) and function as the ideological architecture through which the military appropriated the 1988 pro-democracy movement's collective rallying cry.*

Today's resistance actors consciously reclaim and transform *do ayei*, demonstrating how movements perform new meanings into existence. Its modern reclamation fosters "diagonal solidarity," where "Our" begins detaching from ethnicity, attaching to shared ethical purpose. Yet without systematic intellectual documentation, this reclaimed slogan risks repeating its post-1988 fate: appropriation by whoever articulates principles first. Declarations lacking clear codified content become vessels for whoever fills them. This reveals a crucial "vernacular gap": while the people's *do ayei* thrives through vibrant cultural expressions (protest songs, digital art, satire) resonating organically, the military state relies on rigid written propaganda lacking genuine cultural capital. This fluid vernacular expression remains vulnerable because it operates through oral performance rather than documented principles.

Formal declarations could bridge this gap through grassroots acts of *ayei*, documentation arising from the people rather than imposed by sovereign authority, transitioning the fluid chanted "cause" into durable written account, providing historical and political weight to the slogan's etymological demands. Stewart and Dunn's (1940) definition makes this explicit: *ayei* denotes both the struggle and "the act of writing, writing" (p. 317) giving it historical form. Such documentation would function as *sadan*: systematic articulation of principles observed in resistance practice, deriving authority from collective expertise rather than sovereign command.

To avoid the fate of past declarations, appropriated through unilateral reinterpretation, the proposed *sadan* must operate structurally like *sagyok* (a binding contract or treaty), a living document requiring continuous recognition by multiple parties, none claiming final interpretive authority. This dual character addresses vulnerability present in both the Panglong Agreement (1947) and 1988's *do ayei*. Panglong failed because regimes refused ethnic nationalities' interpretive standing, reducing *sagyok* to the nebulous "Panglong Spirit" subject to unilateral state definition. The 1988 *do ayei* failed because protesters performed the claim but produced no documented principles, allowing the military to fill the void. Declarations combining *sadan*'s documentary rigor with *sagyok*'s requirement for mutual recognition would provide inclusive principles with a durable form while preventing centralized control enabling appropriation, performing the grassroots act of *ayei* Myanmar's struggle has demanded but not yet achieved.

Why declarations now?

Three conditions converge to make contemporary, post-2021 declarations necessary and timely. First, the regime's deterritorialization as a state: it destroys rather than governs, displacing millions, shattering systems, and producing daily casualties. Resistance forces establish alternative governance. Second, new governance patterns require systematic articulation and codification. Liberated territories demonstrate coordination, protection protocols, and federal arrangements challenging centralized rule. The Arakan Army (AA) exercises sovereign functions. The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) operates departments and schools. The Chin National Front (CNF) has ratified a constitution. These functioning innovations require documentation in order to become transferable principles.

Third, political fluidity creates opportunity and urgency. Resistance remains open to new frameworks. Coordination dilemmas demand immediate resolution. No common command exists despite coordination mechanisms. Multiple actors claim overlapping authority. Joint administrations lack agreed-upon legal frameworks. Without shared standards distinguishing legitimate from arbitrary authority, coordination breaks down. Declarations provide reference points while actors remain receptive, but this window closes as control consolidates and positions calcify (Ye Myo Hein, 2024).

Myanmar's vernacular terms offer analytical resources for such witness, showing distinction between *sadan* (moral witness) and *kyei nya gyet* (sovereign command). Working within this tradition potentially allows intellectual witness to achieve uptake without imposition.

Myanmar's vernacular declarative traditions

Myanmar's declarative history shows patterns distinguishing moral witness from below and sovereign command from above. In other words, *sadan* contrasts with *kyei nya gyet*. Austin's (1962) illocutionary act taxonomy clarifies their political effects. The military's *kyei nya gyet* operates as "exercitives": speech acts exercising powers, giving decisions committing speaker and hearers (Austin 1962, p. 155). Exercitives require sovereign authority. From colonial proclamations to State Administration Council (SAC) decrees, these declarations assume power to enforce submission, commanding rather than persuading.

A distinction separates *kyei nya gyet* from *sagyok*. The Panglong Agreement (1947) was formally a *sagyok* (စာချုပ်), the term for international treaties requiring continuous interpretation by co-equals. When ethnic nationalities invoke Panglong as *sagyok*, they assert equal standing. The military's reduction of the Panglong Agreement to "Panglong Spirit" stripped this standing, killing the document's evolution. The military's *kyei nya gyet* functions as a top-down "exercitive," performing centralized coercive authority (*ana*) through decrees relying on force rather than consent. Conversely, framing agreements like Panglong as *sagyok* implies bilateral negotiation between co-equals, asserting rights based on mutual recognition (*awza*). Both *sagyok* and *sadan* require continuous recognition that parties remain bound by principles subject to good-faith interpretation (Austin, 1962, pp. 116-117). Unilateral interpretation by force transforms living documents into dead letters.

Declarations operating like *sadan* differ, working through Austin's (1962) "behabitives" (expressing attitudes) combined with "expositives" (clarifying arguments) (pp. 160-163). *Sadan* derives force from moral authority requiring voluntary acceptance rather than command. The anti-footwear campaign of the early 20th century succeeded because Buddhist communities granted uptake based on religious authority. *Dobama* declarations succeeded because people recognized their grievances articulated accessibly and enacted principles through resistance. *Sadan* operates through pedagogical persuasion and collective uptake.

The "shoe question" (1916 to 1919) demonstrates this pattern's power. When European colonialists refused to remove their shoes upon entering pagodas, Burmese Buddhists responded with moral declarations. Ledi Sayadaw (1919) published *Sāsanavisodhanī*, a 95-page treatise establishing religious authority against wearing shoes on pagoda platforms, providing systematic intellectual witness. The All Burma Conference of Buddhists sent memorials demanding legal recognition. U Thein Maung deleted "except to Europeans and Americans" from signs, asserting sovereignty linguistically. This demonstrated an instance of moral witness defeating state power when grounded in collective Buddhist authority (Turner, 2014). *Dobama*'s later adoption of the honorific "*Thakin*" (discussed further below) followed this logic: asserting sovereignty linguistically rather than awaiting formal power transfer. When the colonial government conceded to Burmese anti-footwear demands in October 1919, nationalists called it "the beginning of the end" (Khin Maung Nyunt, 1970), showing *sadan* defeating colonial power when grounded in collective authority.

The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA; founded 1906), the first organized body formed in response to British rule, established this declarative tradition. Its four-pillar declaration included *Amyo* (Nation/Lineage), *Batha* (Language), *Thathana* (Buddha's Dispensation), and *Pyinnyar* (Education).[6] This rejected colonial secular/religious separation, cultivating collective Burman identity grounded in indigenous primacy. Here, "our" implied stewardship, a collective preservation ethic. The *Wunthanu* movement (1910s to 1920s), meaning "preserving the lineage/kind," politically signified patriotism prioritizing tradition against foreign influence via grassroots *wunthanu athins*. The emotional register shifted from the safeguarding of faith to defending blood/kind, marking the first narrowing of "our" from moral community to bounded lineage.

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[6] Burmese concepts often have broader semantic ranges than English. *Lumyo* (လူမျိုး) encompasses race, ethnicity, nationality, and religious community (concepts English separates). Conversely, English conflates Burmese distinctions: "Buddhism" covers *bokdabatha* (ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ, religion), *bokdathathana* (ဗုဒ္ဓသာသနာ, dispensation), and *buddha dhamma* (ဗုဒ္ဓဓမ္မ, the original teachings underlying truth). These are not interchangeable; lineage emphasis guards the teachings' independent authority. Our analytical use of *sadan* and *sagyok* faces this bidirectional translation challenge: extracting specific meanings from flexible vernacular terms risks overlooking distinctions Myanmar speakers recognize.

The *Dobama Asiayone* (DBA) of the 1930s perfected declarations as radical resistance tools. Their foundational pamphlet "Reform Series No. 1" exemplified *sadan*: "short, simple, easy to understand" (Khin Yi, 1988, p. 34), providing explicit political identity with mottos like "Burma is our country."

The DBA's name and declaration *Dobama* ("Our Burma/Us Burmans") established "Our" (ဒို) as radical assertion against colonial power, performing linguistic seizure by claiming ownership and defining the authentic nation against collaborators (*Thudo-Bama*) (Nemoto, 2000), establishing powerful precedent of using the collective "*do*" in resistance. This collective "Our" tradition became genealogy subsequent movements inherited, later combining powerfully with "*yei*" (matter/cause) in the chant "*do ayei*," weaving together assertion of collective identity and framing of struggle within Myanmar's established linguistic tradition of resistance, marking an inflection point where "Our" becomes performative sovereignty, both uniting and excluding.

DBA's brilliant stroke was its adoption of "*Thakin*" (Master), the honorific title for British colonial administrators, for its own members (Khin Yi, 1988, p. 27), asserting sovereignty linguistically. Inspired by DBA founder *Thakin* Ba Thaung, members argued Burmese were the only true *Thakins*. Though initially ridiculed, each use of "*Thakin* Aung San" became Austin's "declara tive": asserting mastery without requiring or requesting permission (Austin, 1962, p. 155). This succeeded performatively only because the DBA stood ready to enact the claim through coordinated resistance (i.e., nationwide student strikes in 1936 and 1938), providing uptake, transforming gesture into reality, and generating post-war leadership.

This linguistic strategy contained its own paradox regarding inclusion. The DBA attempted to redefine the colloquial "*Bama*" inclusively, encompassing all indigenous peoples to forge progressive anti-colonial identity while rejecting the literary "*Myanma*" as too narrow. This inclusive vision was contested within the DBA by a strong ethno-religious faction. Decades later, SLORC inverted this logic. By imposing the literary "*Myanmar*" in 1989, they falsely claimed it was the inclusive term while branding "*Bama*" as exclusive to the ethnic majority. In reality, this "Myanmafication" was Burmanization, asserting central control (*ana*) and realizing the ethnonationalist ideology that Aung San's DBA faction had rejected.

The *do ayei* slogan emerged in 1988 as the pro-democracy uprising's main chant, meaning "our rights" or "our cause." Hundreds of thousands transformed it into a unifying cry sanctified by bloodshed. Yet *do ayei* functioned primarily as a petition, seeking state acknowledgment, building on DBA's "Our" tradition. The demand was directed upward. This illustrates a pattern: when the energy of "our cause" outpaces principled articulation, coercive actors seize its vocabulary.

Declarations operating as *kyei nya gyet* differ, working through sovereign command. From colonial proclamations to military edicts, these declarations compel compliance. The British Resolution of October 29, 1919 (British Library, 1919) showed this mode, reserving the right to send forces into pagodas without removing shoes "when necessary." The military's 60-year rule is one long *kyei nya gyet*. This clarifies why effective grassroots declarations must be *sadan*. Like leaders of the anti-footwear campaign, intellectuals possess moral witness rather than sovereign power. Myanmar's history reveals patterns: popular movements declare "Our" from below, but the vacuum is often captured by military authoritarianism using resistance vocabulary. This pendulum between moral witness and sovereign command awaits equilibrium where "our" signifies inclusion without appropriation.

When declarations fail and succeed

Declarations fail when they lack precision or when parties refuse uptake. The Panglong Agreement's (1947) difficulties trace partly to the ambiguity of Clause 5: "Full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle." "Accepted in principle" created latitude for indefinite deferral (Walton, 2008, p. 894). Ethnic nationalities understood the Panglong Agreement as *sagyok* (binding treaty), establishing them as co-founders with rights. Chin scholar Lian Hmung Sakhong (2010) confirmed ethnic groups did "not surrender their rights […] to the Burman" (p. 126). Aung San promised economic equality: "If Burma receives one *kyat*, you will also get one *kyat*." By demoting the Panglong Agreement to the vague, ill-defined "Panglong Spirit," successive states stripped its legal force while performatively honoring it.

Aung San showed strategic declaration-reading could catalyze transformation. He interpreted the Atlantic Charter's (Roosevelt & Churchill, 1941) self-determination promise for Burma, contradicting Churchill (Aung San, 1971, pp. 76-78).[7] Declaring universal principles as universally applicable exposed a contradiction: the Allies fought fascism but maintained colonialism. The military's *do ayei* appropriation shows three vulnerabilities: ambiguity enabling redefinition, discursive capture via state doctrines, and elite disconnection. Each transforms liberation language into tools of oppression. This clarifies why such declarations as those proposed by this chapter would need to operate as *sadan* aligned with treaty logic. Living documents (*sagyok* or *sadan*) require parties to retain equal standing to interpret terms (Glendon, 1998, p. 19; Hohmann & Weller, 2019, p. 12). Panglong failed because regimes refused ethnic interpretive standing. Myanmar's intellectual community can issue *sadan* precisely because it claims no sovereign authority, allowing diverse communities equal standing to invoke, interpret, and contest principles.

This responds to Myanmar's specific history. Myanmar's military has censored intellectuals since 1962, systematically weakening universities and educational infrastructure throughout the country. The 1988 *do ayei* appropriation into "Our Three Main National Causes" shows this pattern: co-opting legitimacy while marginalizing intellectuals. Myanmar's intellectual community (academics, ethnic knowledge keepers, monastery thinkers, diaspora researchers) can now reclaim voice after decades of exclusion. Intellectuals serve as moral witnesses, deriving authority from collective expertise rather than sovereign power. Articulating observed principles transforms aspirations into reference points. Such declarations add the intellectual community's collective voice, complementing the movement rather than governing it.

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[7] In Aung San's "Problems for Burma's Freedom" speech (1971), he used the Atlantic Charter to show how colonized peoples could strategically interpret universal declarations to advance liberation. This pattern repeats in Myanmar's contemporary invocation of international human rights norms (see Houtman, 1999, p. 298; Silverstein, 1993, pp. 40-66; Aung San, 1971, p. 28).

What declarations do

Intellectual witness through declaration hinges on achieving uptake. Austin's (1962) speech act theory reveals design principles for doing so.[8] Such declarations offer ethical reference points, complementing processes like the drafting of the FDC (CRPH, 2021). Success depends entirely on whether actors recognize documented principles as authoritative witness.

This argument extends beyond speech act theory. It draws on memory studies by analyzing documentation as resistance practice (Trouillot, 1995; Stoler, 2009), showing failure to archive resistance allows states to write official records. It addresses subaltern studies' representation dilemmas (Spivak, 1988) by distinguishing *sadan* (documenting without sovereign authority) from *sagyok* (requiring mutual recognition), enabling intellectuals to witness without commanding. It identifies intellectuals as ideational entrepreneurs operating during critical junctures when new institutional paths become possible (Blyth, 2002; Collier & Collier, 1991). Such declarations would function as coordinating mechanisms for legal pluralism (Santos, 2002), acknowledging multiple interpretive authorities in Myanmar's fragmented governance landscape. The etymological analysis demonstrates how morphological structure indexes political authority (Irvine & Gal, 2000), revealing the distinction between *ayei* and *yei* carries political weight beyond semantics.

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[8] The theoretical framework for declarations as performative acts draws on Morsink's UDHR research (1999, 2009), Moran's analysis of declarations as nonviolent resistance tools (2011), and Austin's speech act theory (1962). These collectively show non-binding declarations achieving normative influence via moral authority, not legal force.

Declarations are performative utterances, reshaping reality through articulation. When someone says "I promise," they perform promising rather than describing a pre-existing state. Austin (1962, pp. 6-7) identifies three dimensions: the utterance (locutionary act), what it accomplishes (illocutionary act), and its effects (perlocutionary act). For declarations, illocutionary force—doing through saying—is paramount. A declaration's power lies in its ability to constitute new realities via authoritative utterance, context, and recognized authority.

When DBA members declared "Burma is our country," they enacted linguistic seizure. When the UDHR (UNGA, 1948) declared rights "inherent," it created conceptual infrastructure that movements have appropriated. Declaration success depends on Austin's (1962, pp. 14-15) "felicity conditions": appropriate context, authorized speakers, and proper execution of recognized procedures. When met, declarations achieve "uptake": audience acceptance and enactment (Austin, 1962, pp. 116-117). Without uptake, declarations remain empty utterances. The UDHR shows successful uptake via its "declarative cascade" generating over 200 binding instruments (Morsink, 1999, pp. 36-38). Though non-binding, the UDHR has gained normative force because global actors granted uptake by incorporating its principles into treaties, constitutions, and laws. Conversely, the Panglong Agreement's (1947) failure shows violated felicity conditions. Properly executed in 1947, subsequent regimes refused uptake. Their reinterpretation of *sagyok* into "Panglong Spirit" was "infelicity," misfiring because essential parties refused its illocutionary force (Austin, 1962, pp. 14-15).

Searle's (1979) refinement clarifies successful declarations. Searle identified declarations' "double direction of fit" (pp. 16-20). Declarations fit words to the world by documenting existing conditions, and fit the world to words by constituting new realities through articulation. This explains how such declarations can both document emerging principles and establish them as normative reference points, documenting functioning arrangements while establishing them as legitimate standards, distinguishing declarations from descriptions (which only document) or commands (which only attempt to change reality without documenting it).

Three design principles for effective declarations

History shows three essential design principles determining declaration influence:

Precision without rigidity

Myanmar's proposed post-coup declarations would need to balance fatal vagueness against excessive prescriptiveness, requiring language precise enough to distinguish inclusion from oppression yet capacious enough for diverse communities to recognize aspirations without erasing difference. The UDHR (UNGA, 1948) achieved this through "bargain about God and nature," eschewing contestable metaphysics while using terms like "inherent," qualifying socio-economic rights acknowledging diverse systems while maintaining universal aspirations (Morsink, 1999, pp. 284-290). Drafters avoided imposing narrow Western frameworks while preserving core principles, allowing the UDHR to function as a stabilizing force that "reterritorializes," introducing new principles without stifling adaptation. Myanmar's declarations would similarly need to articulate coexistence principles to unite diverse communities without requiring theological consensus, needing specificity for action yet flexibility for diversity. As mentioned previously, the Panglong Agreement's inclusion of the fatally flawed wording "accepted in principle" enabled its deferral (Walton, 2008, p. 894). Vagueness invites appropriation.

Designed for vernacular uptake

Such declarations need to be appropriate for, and allow uptake by, multiple constituencies. UDHR drafters insisted on text "readily understood by the ordinary man and woman," rather than just "philosophers and jurists" (Morsink, 1999, p. 37). Accessibility was strategic. It succeeded because diverse communities translated principles into their own contexts. DBA declarations succeeded similarly: "short, simple, easy to understand" language resonated with grassroots grievances (Khin Yi, 1988, p. 34). Such contemporary declarations need accessible language, principles grounded in observed practices, and concepts resonating with diverse traditions. They need to provide fresh vocabulary, traveling from conference halls to checkpoints, policy documents to village meetings. Searle's (1979) observation on declarations bringing "correspondence between propositional content and reality" (pp. 16-17) through performance clarifies why vernacular uptake matters. Declarations achieve correspondence only when diverse constituencies recognize that documented principles accurately capture commitments. Recognition transforms such declarations into operational frameworks. Success occurs when communities enact them, translating principles into practices and thereby validating their authority.

Institutional embedding

Declarations achieve enduring influence when they become reference points for decision-making. The UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples' Rights (UNGA, 2007) requires contextual interpretation, acknowledging regional variation. Flexibility has enabled diverse adoption. For Myanmar, embedding means such declarations become a durable component within other formations, influencing functions over time. In practical terms, this might include ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) being invited for formal response, humanitarian bodies considering them as assessment frameworks, and declarations informing constitutional negotiations, serving as coordination infrastructure rather than obstacle. Donors can reference protection principles. EAOs can invoke governance standards. International actors witness emerging practices. Embedding ensures utility shapes practice. Actors adopt declarations because they help coordinate rather than because they are commanded. Institutionally embedded declarations function as living documents whose meanings evolve (Morsink, 2009, p. 281; Schabas, 2013, p. xxviii). Military edicts (*kyei nya gyet*) impose fixed meanings. Declarations achieve influence through "dynamic interpretation" (Diller, 2011, p. 459). The US Declaration of Independence exemplifies this: "unintended audiences" appropriated principles for unanticipated claims (Tsesis, 2012, pp. 147-152), aligning declarations with treaties requiring continuous negotiation.

Learning from historical precedents

History shows timing matters. The US Declaration of Independence came 15 months after the battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. The French Declaration came only weeks after the events of summer 1789. Elite drafting followed grassroots sentiment. These declarations mobilized internal commitment and secured external legitimacy.

The UDHR (UNGA, 1948) drafting process is most instructive for handling Myanmar's philosophical diversity. Drafted over nearly two years (1946-48), involving 56 countries and more than 150 meetings, the process included non-Western architects such as P.C. Chang of China and Charles Malik of Lebanon. Chang insisted the UDHR be "eclectic," advocating for the inclusion of "conscience" alongside "reason" in Article 1 to reflect Confucianism (Schabas, 2013).[9] Consensus came from shared moral revulsion to the "barbarous acts" of World War II, not abstract philosophy (Morsink, 1999, p. 37). Timing allowed for educating governments and informing public opinion while maintaining moral momentum (Morsink, 2009). This window was finite. Cold War divisions soon made consensus impossible. The UDHR succeeded, emerging when political fluidity allowed common ground before positions calcified. For Myanmar, this suggests declarations might unite diverse communities by articulating shared moral responses to oppression rather than seeking theological consensus. The next Myanmar Studies conference offers an opportunity for presenting declarations developed through broad consultation. Myanmar's Spring Revolution, approaching five years post-coup, is within the historical window when declarations gain legitimacy through validation of resistance rather than direction of it.

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[9] P.C. Chang's "two-man-mindedness" reflected Confucian emphasis on conscience (*xin*) and reason harmonized, contrasting with perceived Western overemphasis on rationality. His success adding "conscience" to "reason" in Article 1 ("All human beings […] are endowed with reason and conscience") shows non-Western traditions shaped the language of the UDHR, proving universal declarations need not impose narrow Western frameworks when drafting includes diverse voices (Schabas, 2013).

The Atlantic Charter's declarative cascade in Myanmar's history

The journey of the Atlantic Charter (Roosevelt & Churchill, 1941) shows how the influence of declarations can cascade across generations. Roosevelt's (1941) "Four Freedoms" speech, Aung San's (1971) appropriation, the UDHR (UNGA, 1948), and Aung San Suu Kyi's (1991) "Freedom from Fear" essay. Each interpretation adds layers while maintaining core principles. Roosevelt's 1941 speech proclaimed four freedoms: speech and expression, worship, want, and fear. The Atlantic Charter incorporated these, promising peace where all "may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want." Though Churchill insisted self-determination applied only to Nazi-occupied Europe, use of universal language created openings (Mazower, 2009). Aung San seized this, interpreting self-determination for Burma in a challenge to Churchill. This appropriation catalyzed the realignment of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) to fight alongside the Allies in March 1945. In his January 1946 AFPFL address, Aung San (1971) emphasized freedom from fear, encouraging Burma's *Sangha* (Buddhist monastic community) to propagate it, associating it with "higher religious freedom" (p. 28), blending democratic principles with Buddhist concepts and demonstrating that universal declarations gain force via vernacular translation (Houtman, 1999, pp. 297-98).[10]

The UDHR (UNGA, 1948) codified this cascade. Eleanor Roosevelt chaired the drafting process. Its preamble references "fundamental freedoms," including from want/fear (Morsink, 1999). Latin American delegates insisted on explicitly incorporating all four freedoms (Glendon, 2001). The preamble stating protection of rights prevents rebellion acknowledges freedom from fear as a prerequisite for stability and a justification for resistance. Aung San Suu Kyi elevated freedom from fear to a central pillar of Myanmar's democracy movement, making it the title of her famous 1991 essay, pairing it with freedom from want as "the two basic human rights necessary for a dignified, meaningful life" (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1991). For her, freedom from fear operates as both means and end: "For a people to build a nation guaranteed against state-induced power with strong democratic institutions, they must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear" (1991). She characterizes fear as the worst of Buddhism's Four Corruptions stifling moral judgment and enabling corruption (Aung San Suu Kyi, 1995), framing the struggle as a "transformation of the spirit," linking fearlessness to her father's example and to Buddhist mental practices like *metta* (lovingkindness) and *karuna* (compassion). This interpretation "Asianizes" the concept while maintaining its universal core, illustrating how declarations achieve uptake through cultural translation rather than literal adoption.

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[10] Aung San's blending of Atlantic Charter freedoms with Buddhist concepts of liberation (from ignorance, superstition, etc.) shows how universal declarations gain uptake via vernacular translation. His interpretation made Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" accessible to Burmese Buddhists, linking freedom from fear to Buddhist mental cultivation practices.

This cascade demonstrates principles for such declarations. First, universal language enables flexible local appropriation, avoiding narrow framings. Aung San leveraged the Charter despite Churchill's aims, proving the power of declarations has the potential to exceed the intent of drafters. Second, vernacular translation strengthens uptake. Third, declarations accumulate force across generations. Each iteration has reinforced freedom from fear's authority. When such declarations document emerging principles, they join this cascade: translating practice into concepts future generations can invoke, interpret, and transform.

The need for new vocabulary

Myanmar faces a conceptual problem paralleling that of the French Revolution. Rousseau's (1762) *Social Contract* had articulated popular sovereignty, but before 1789, French language still lacked vocabulary for "society" autonomous from church/state. Thinkers coined new terms such as "*société*" and "*la science sociale*," creating linguistic infrastructure for communities organized by voluntary association (Heilbron, 1995; Baker, 1994). Comte's doctrine "*voir pour prévoir*" and "*prévoir pour pouvoir*" captured how new vocabulary enabled action (Karsenti, 2006; Wagner, 1998). This window proved finite. Napoleon dissolved the Institut National, showing upheaval creates brief innovation opportunities before power consolidates.

Myanmar's revolution similarly requires articulation of what *do* ("our") means in *do ayei*. Just as the Institut National provided platforms for forging new vocabularies, Chiang Mai University's Regional Center for Sustainable Development and Social Science (RCSD) can facilitate this by creating spaces where scattered intellectual voices converge into coherent documentation, completing *ayei*'s dual requirement of cause and inscription without centralizing interpretive authority. Resistance practice has outpaced available vocabulary. The state's weaponization of "*taingyintha*" (national "races") illustrates the danger. When Rohingya advocates must argue for inclusion, they validate ethnic purity as determining citizenship (Cheesman, 2017, p. 470). The concept constrains imagined futures, offering no vocabulary for cross-ethnic solidarity, citizenship divorced from blood, or pluralistic governance.

New vocabulary is emerging. The AA's "Way of Rakhita" expresses self-determination within voluntary federation (Rhee Rakha, 2025). The FDC (CRPH, 2021) creates possibilities, promising rights for Rohingya and self-determination, arrangements with which traditional vocabularies struggle. Declarations can systematically document these innovations, providing innovative vocabulary to make alternatives conceivable. Like French revolutionaries requiring new terms, Myanmar's struggle requires language distinguishing voluntary federation from imposed unity, shared governance from ethnic domination, and citizenship from blood descent. Such declarations' essential work is conceptual: articulating inclusion principles transcending the logic of *taingyintha* yet grounded in observed practices.

The politics of representation

The most serious objection to such declarations as those proposed here concerns authority: who grants Myanmar studies intellectuals the right to articulate principles? This question deserves direct address. The intellectual role is service rather than leadership, applying skills to support the movement rather than direct it. Questions remain. Whose practices are documented? Whose voices shape articulation? Who decides "emerging principles"? Such declarations cannot capture every language, perspective, and experience. Limitations are real.

The *sadan* (moral witness) vs. *kyei nya gyet* (sovereign command) conception directly addresses representation. *Sadan* claims authority only to document principles emerging from observed practices. Success depends on diverse actors recognizing commitments reflected accurately and granting uptake via adoption. If communities reject documented principles, such declarations fail. This accountability distinguishes *sadan* from sovereign declarations imposing authority. The inclusive drafting process operationalizes this *sadan* logic when ethnic intellectuals co-author, feedback incorporates diverse perspectives, indigenous models inform architecture, and it becomes collective witness rather than imposition.

The National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC, an advisory body of the NUG established in 2021) and regional platforms demonstrate capacity for such consultation. Such declarations would extend rather than replace these processes. Their contribution would lie in systematic articulation accessible to multiple audiences. Myanmar actors possess intimate knowledge but may lack resources for systematic documentation. International actors need accessible frameworks but often default to simplistic narratives without intellectual documentation. Such declarations bridge this gap, making patterns visible.

Using the distinction between *sadan* and *sagyok* helps address what political theorists identify as the paradox of constituent power. Foundational declarations face structural circularity: the people cannot authorize their founding act until they already exist as "the people" with authority to authorize (Honig, 1991, pp. 97-98). Derrida (1986) identified this problem in the US Declaration of Independence, where signers claimed to act for people who did not yet exist: "The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him- or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end of his or her own signature, in a sort of fabulous retroactivity" (p. 10). Traditional solutions ground authority in nature, divinity, or self-evidence (precisely the absolutes unavailable or contested in Myanmar's fragmented landscape). This approach resolves the paradox differently. Positioning the declaration as *sadan* (moral witness to observed practices) rather than *kyei nya gyet* (sovereign command from above), intellectuals avoid claiming constituent authority.

Legitimacy derives from documenting principles the people have already enacted through coordinated resistance, not from creating "the people" *ex nihilo* (from or out of nothing). The *sagyok* structure prevents any single party from claiming final interpretive authority, ensuring such declarations remain open to contestation rather than hardening into sovereign command. This addresses what Frost (2021) calls the "unauthorized speaker" problem: Myanmar's intellectuals witness rather than constitute, document rather than decree.

Such declarations would coordinate existing revolutionary practice rather than authorize it retroactively. They would complement political processes like the FDC (CRPH, 2021) through expert witness. Where actors establish procedures, we (intellectuals) document underlying principles. Where forces develop protection protocols, we articulate standards. Where constitutional transformation unfolds, we witness ethical commitments. Such declarations add the intellectual community's collective voice, functioning as witness to the achievements of communities in Myanmar rather than as command.

The path forward

Myanmar's window for such *sadan* declarations as those discussed here is open but finite. The most serious objection concerns external frameworks imposed on declarations. This concern is legitimate but does not invalidate the proposal. Three responses exist. First, such declarations ground principles in observed practices by Myanmar communities rather than abstract philosophy. Documenting inclusive governance in liberated territories shows it reflects Myanmar aspirations. Second, drafting would need to center ethnic nationality intellectuals from inception. The UDHR's legitimacy derived partly from its inclusive drafting process incorporating non-Western co-architects. Such declarations would need to replicate this by allowing diverse ethnic perspectives to inform its architecture (Sadan, 2013, pp. 242-253; Tambiah, 1976, p. 112). Precedent exists: the NUCC includes diverse actors, and regional platforms show capacity for inclusive consultation. Third, the UDHR's success models an inclusive process achieving broad consensus by gathering diverse perspectives rather than imposing narrow frameworks.

The UDHR benefited from timing that allowed for education while maintaining moral momentum (Humphrey, 1984). Effective declarations follow transformation rather than lead it. Myanmar's intellectual community would determine how such declarations emerge. Ethnic scholars especially would inform the architecture through their traditions.

The process requires legitimate consultation, deliberation, and feedback. What matters is the principle: collective witness to observed practices rather than external prescription. For instance, a working group prioritizing draft text by ethnic scholars for wide circulation, subject to iterative feedback before the next Myanmar Studies conference, and ensuring collective witness. Academic conferences offer one space for collective articulation as social science historically provides tools for transformative moments (Nisbet, 1943; Wagner, 1998). Whether Myanmar's intellectuals undertake this work remains an open question posed by this chapter.

Conclusion

Myanmar has evolved from protecting collective identity grounded in indigenous Buddhist principles (YMBA), to preserving lineage/kind (*wunthanu*), to asserting ownership (DBA), to petitioning (*do ayei*). With *do ayei*, the historical assertion of the collective (*do*) merged with the long-standing linguistic mechanism for defining struggle (*yei*), creating a uniquely potent chant. Then came military co-option (*do tawun ayei thonba*). Now it is reclaiming "our" cause through interethnic collaboration. Each iteration has reconfigured the affective core of belonging: cultural guardianship, moral lineage, linguistic seizure, and coerced solidarity. "Ours" has thus oscillated between bottom-up and top-down declarations without finding equilibrium.

Myanmar's Spring Revolution has redefined cross-ethnic solidarity, transforming *do ayei* from petition into performative collective will. History warns, however. This "Our" tradition visibly passed from liberation to oppression when the military appropriated the chant of 1988. The contrast with earlier revolutionary vocabularies is instructive. Terms like *ayeidawbon* and *tawhlanyei* had their meanings stabilized through decades of post-independence contest, representing competing visions of state power. But unlike those retrospectively analyzed categories, *do ayei* remains open. This openness is simultaneously its power and its vulnerability. This cycle shows how popular energy without intellectual content creates a vacuum that authoritarianism fills. This pattern reveals the constituent power paradox: collectives must express themselves before their institutions exist, yet without systematic articulation, founding moments remain vulnerable to retrospective appropriation. The morpheme *ayei* itself encodes this conundrum: significant affairs (*ayei*) demand documentation (*ayei*), and documentation confirms historical standing.

The pattern is political and linguistic: the 1988 *do ayei* remained incomplete in its own etymological terms. Protesters performed the claim (*ayei* as significant cause) without producing the documentation (*ayei* as writing) that would validate and secure it. The military exploited precisely this gap, filling the void with written doctrine appropriating both the slogan and its historical authority. Today's actors face a choice: fill the reclaimed *do ayei* with principles, or risk repeating this cycle. Principles must distinguish liberation from coercion. This is essential for reterritorializing Myanmar's assemblage around inclusion. *Sadan* declarations could document emerging principles, opposing the military's *kyei nya gyet* tradition and its historical theft of resistance vocabulary.

Myanmar's intellectuals have the opportunity to define *do ayei* while its meaning is still being constructed, to document principles before coercive actors fill the vernacular gap. Where scholars spent decades interpreting what revolutionary terms came to mean after political contests were resolved, this moment allows definition during the making. The window for such intellectual intervention is narrowing. As territorial control consolidates and political positions harden, the space for principled *sadan* declarations narrows. Moments of upheaval create brief opportunities for conceptual innovation before power calcifies into new hierarchies. The "Our" tradition has been reclaimed through tremendous sacrifice. Without clear articulation of the principles it embodies, this tradition remains vulnerable to future appropriation by whoever articulates definitions first, as the military did after 1988. The difference between such declarations and silence is not merely academic. It marks the difference between providing systematic principles distinguishing liberation from coercion and leaving conceptual void for the next authoritarian seizure. After the military appropriated *do ayei*, they had three decades to fill it with doctrine before this generation met the opportunity to reclaim it. Myanmar's intellectual community can either shorten that cycle, or watch it repeat.

The chapters in this volume have analyzed Myanmar as emergent assemblages requiring deliberate intervention to guide reterritorialization toward inclusive forms. Declarations offer one such intervention, grounded in observed practices and developed inclusively with ethnic intellectuals. They would operate as moral witness requiring uptake. Whether Myanmar's intellectual community undertakes this work, how they do so, and with what content remain questions answerable only collectively. The moment demands articulation, precedents demonstrate effectiveness, and Myanmar's transformation has created practices to document.

Stewart and Dunn's (1940) definition of *ayei* makes this necessity explicit: the morpheme denotes both "important, serious, pressing, matter, crisis" and "the act of writing, writing" (p. 317). To leave *do ayei* as only a chanted claim is to leave it half-formed, incomplete in its own linguistic terms. Myanmar's intellectual community can now provide what 1988's protesters did not: the systematic documentation necessary for transforming voiced aspiration into written principle, completing the *ayei* that resistance has performed but not yet secured. This is etymological fulfillment, not external imposition, performing the grassroots act of writing that the morpheme itself demands, that campaign chronicles appropriated for sovereign power, and that Myanmar's struggle now requires to distinguish its inclusive principles from authoritarian appropriation.

Bearing witness begins when the intellectual community is ready. History shows this window closes quickly.

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ASSEMBLAGES and MYANMAR

How Realities Are Made Up

Edited by **Aung Naing**

foreword by **Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**

The post-2021 coup crisis in Myanmar has proved to be perplexing and intractable, resistant to conventional analysis and approaches. By using assemblage theory to challenge dominant narratives, this volume offers a fresh perspective, both unmasking the illusory nature of much that is taken for granted, and pointing to new potential trajectories and sites of possibility for meaningful intervention.

Rather than advocating a re-assembling or restoration of “Myanmar” based on previous historical forms, this volume argues instead for an acceptance that many of the “given” realities are inherently contingent, complex, and unstable. Whilst initially unsettling and uncomfortable, by enabling a more grounded explication of reality, this perspective opens up pathways to alternative future arrangements, including a range of “post-state” possibilities.

This volume is essential reading for policy advisors and policymakers, humanitarians, activists and academics, not only in relation to Myanmar, but as an insightful analytical approach in contexts of failed and failing states, complex humanitarian emergencies, and seemingly intractable authoritarian rule.

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