# Reimagining Community

## Emergent Local Governance in Post-Coup Myanmar

HTANAUNG COLLECTIVE

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

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## *Emergent Local Governance in Post-Coup Myanmar*

**HTANAUNG COLLECTIVE**

edited by Aung Naing

foreword by Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

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**Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)**
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University
239 Huay Kaew Road, Suthep Subdistrict, Muang District
Chiang Mai, Thailand 50200
Telephone: 66 (0) 5394 3595-6
Fax: 66 (0) 5389 3279
Email: rcsd@cmu.ac.th
Website: www.rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th

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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all who have taken part in its creation, especially those from villages in the *Anyar* region who risked much to share their stories.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of IDRC or its Board of Governors.

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# ACRONYMS

| | |
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| 3Ps | three core post-coup administrative and defense bodies formed by the NUG: the People's Administration Team (*Pa Ah Pha*), the People's Defense Force (*Pa Kh Pha*), and the People's Security Team (*Pa Lh Pha*) |
| AA | Arakan Army |
| ASEAN | Association of Southeast Asian Nations |
| BNRA | Burma National Revolutionary Army |
| CBO(s) | community-based organization(s) |
| CDM | Civil Disobedience Movement |
| CDZ | central dry zone (refers to Myanmar's *Anyar* region) |
| CSO(s) | civil society organization(s) |
| EAO(s) | ethnic armed group(s) |
| GAD | General Administration Department |
| H3 | humanitarian health hubs |
| IDP(s) | internally displaced person(s) |
| KIA/O | Kachin Independence Army/Organization |
| KNU | Karen National Union |
| LDF(s) | Local Defence Force(s) |
| MNDAA | Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army |
| NGO(s) | non-governmental organization(s) |
| NLD | National League for Democracy |
| NUG | National Unity Government of Myanmar |
| PAO(s) | People's Administration Organization(s) |
| PDF(s) | People's Defense Force(s) |
| PMSL | People's Military Service Law |
| SAC | State Administration Council |
| SLORC | State Law and Order Restoration Council |
| TNLA | Ta'ang National Liberation Army |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| USDP | Union Solidarity and Development Party |
| UWSA | United Wa State Army |
| UWSP | United Wa State Party |
| VTA(s) | village tract administrator(s) |

# 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.

**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 and its offshoots is contested by the NUG. The SAC was officially renamed in July 2025 to the State Security and Peace Commission (SSPP) and transitioned into a nominally "civilian" government following elections held in late 2025 and early 2026 that have been widely condemed as a "sham" orchestrated to deceive the global community and secure international legitimacy.

# GLOSSARY OF BURMESE TERMS

| | |
|---|---|
| *Anyar* | Myanmar's central dry region |
| *dalan* | (military) informant; spy |
| *Kalatha Kaung Saung* | 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)* | Myanmar currency; 1USD=2,100 *kyats* as of July 2026 |
| *Ma Ba Tha* | ultranationalist Buddhist organization |
| *Na Ma Kha* | Northwest Command (Myanmar military) |
| *Pa Ah Pha* | People's Administration Team |
| *Pa Ka Pha* | People's Defense Force (PDF) |
| *Pa La Pha* | People's Security Team |
| *parahita* | social welfare; concern for others; charity |
| *Phyu Saw Htee* | military junta-aligned militia |
| *Sangha* | Buddhist monastic community |
| *Tatmadaw* | Myanmar's military, administered by the Ministry of Defense and composed of the Myanmar Army, the Myanmar Navy, and the Myanmar Air Force |

# NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

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

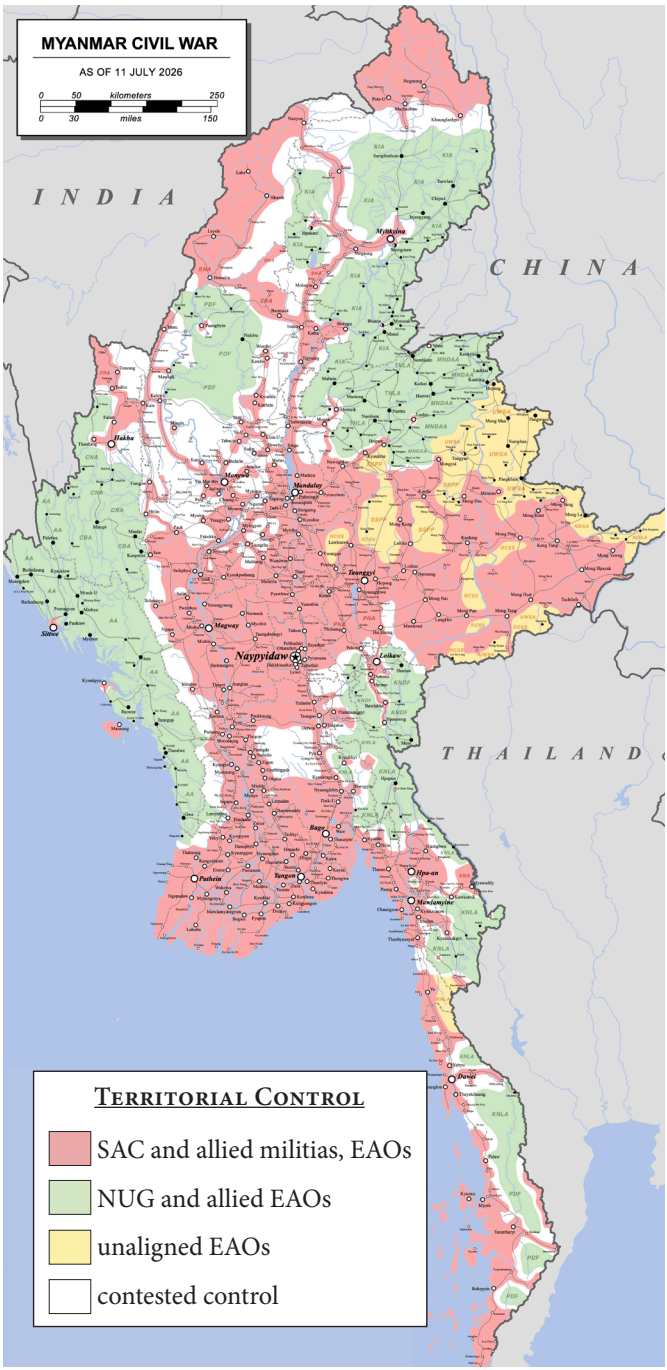
Prior to 1989, the largest country in mainland Southeast Asia was officially and exclusively known internationally as "Burma," the name that colonial British rulers used after consolidating the central plains and previously autonomous mountainous regions in the mid-1800s in reference to the country's 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 occasionally 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 participants, and in many instances the names are used interchangeably with no intended political implications.

# CONFLICT MAP OF MYANMAR

*Territorial Control in Myanmar as of July 11, 2026*




**Source**: Wikipedia Commons, Myanmar conflict (accessed July 23, 2026) *https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/63/Myanmar_civil_war_simplified.svg*

# BACKGROUND

## *Htanaung Collective: How This Book Came About*

This book is the culmination of a five-year (2022-2026) team research process.[1] As the post-coup resistance continued to expand and evolve, it became clear that Burma/Myanmar's ensuing years—if not decades—would be deeply shaped by violence. We recognized a deep need to document this, not in terms of raw numbers of incidents, fatalities, or destroyed property, but in terms of the human experience. In particular, we wanted to focus on how communities have adapted to the fluid and changing conditions, particularly where pre-coup governance and administration had collapsed. How do people go about organizing themselves, creating "governable space" in the midst of civil war? This reimagining of community and citizenship is best captured through qualitative narratives, and so in 2022, we embarked on a process of careful listening, collaborating with a local humanitarian organization operating in conflict-affected areas of Sagaing Region.

The main methodology of our work is described in more detail in the next section and at the end of Chapter 2, but here we draw attention to the broader research process itself. A largely self-funded research fellow scheme enabled a dozen young Myanmar researchers to step into the process of interviewing, coding, and analyzing as part of their continued academic journey. Over the ensuing years, they have had opportunities to present their findings at several international academic conferences, primarily those focused on Burma/Myanmar issues. The final product of our team's collaboration is this book, where each section and each chapter has been jointly written by these scholars, often working under conditions of extreme risk.

1 Brief biographical notes for each of the research team members are included on pages 318-319.

Our ultimate aim has been to give voice to those from communities profoundly affected by post-coup conflict who participated in the research project. For security reasons, we cannot provide details of specific village names, but instead use codes, which are listed in Table 5 at the end of Chapter 2, enabling the reader to learn something of the context of each village concerned.

Rather than listing the names of all the individual researchers-authors, we have instead chosen the name "Htanaung Collective" in an attempt to convey the sense of a collective voice. This refers not only to those who conducted the analysis and composed the chapters, but also recognizes the voices of those who participated in interviews as essential co-creators of knowledge. The *htanaung* is a tree of particular significance in the central dry zone of Myanmar. Able to thrive in arid, difficult conditions, the tree provides a shady, nurturing environment for smaller plants and shrubs to grow. Its bark is used for various traditional medicines, and its sap is a crucial ingredient for the distinctive lacquerware of central Myanmar. It is thus a symbol of survival and resilience, of solidarity and shelter, and of creativity and healing. Our hope is that the combined voices in this book will convey this spirit of htanaung as a source of hopefulness to others in challenging times.

*For more information about the Htanaung Collective and its work supporting emerging researchers from Myanmar, please visit* **www.htanaungcollective.org**.

# METHODOLOGY

The analysis presented in this book is mainly derived from primary data collected by members of the Htanaung Collective research team themselves. This consists of four main sources:

- narrative interviews conducted between 2022 and 2026 with residents, community volunteers, and local governance actors in villages in Myanmar's *Anyar* region;
- quantitative data collected as part of a larger, longitudinal research project called the Civic Monitoring Study, which included data from communities featured in this study;
- case studies and photoethnographic figures collected from communities who were part of a humanitarian assistance project run by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) in the study area; and
- field notes from interviews with the staff and volunteers of the local NGO in the study area

Whilst data from the Civic Monitoring Study, which started in 2021 and continued through 2024, has been used for other research papers and reports, the authors of this book were able to utilize it for fresh analysis, as they were also lead researchers for the study. In this book, findings which have been presented in previous Civic Monitoring reports are cited, whereas findings based on fresh analysis of the Civic Monitoring data are described with reference to the data collection period. The methodology for the Civic Monitoring Study is described in more detail in Yut Won (2024). The main methodology for this book—narrative research—is described in more detail in Chapter 2.

The authors were also embedded researchers within the local NGO that oversaw and facilitated the village-level humanitarian assistance project, which is described in more detail in Chapter 7. This not only enabled team members access to conflict-affected communities, but ensured that research could be conducted as part of a wider process where specific support was able to be provided in cases of severe psychological distress. For the local NGO, embedded researchers enabled the integration of an action research approach, where fresh analysis could be immediately applied to modify forms of humanitarian support offered to villages.

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Foreword

# Reimagining Community in Anyar

*Chayan Vaddhanaphuti*

The title *Reimagining Community* invites us to reconsider what "community" means under conditions of political violence, displacement, and profound uncertainty. A community is often considered as something that already exists—a village, a locality, an ethnic group, or a population sharing common interests and traditions. The research presented in this publication raises a different and more difficult question: What happens when people whose familiar social and political world has been shattered begin to protect, reorganize, and imagine collective life from below?

This question is particularly important in the *Anyar* (central dry zone) region of Myanmar. Military violence, political repression, displacement, economic disruption, and the weakening or withdrawal of state institutions have transformed everyday life. Villagers, People's Defense Forces (PDFs), local administrators, religious figures, teachers, health workers, women, young people, and humanitarian actors have become involved in protecting communities and sustaining social life. They are connected—at least to some extent—by their rejection of military domination, arbitrary violence, and injustice. Yet it cannot be assumed that people from different social, religious, generational, economic, and political backgrounds share the same understanding of community or the same vision for Myanmar's future.

One of the central contributions of this book is that it does not treat community as a harmonious or unified entity waiting to be recovered after the destruction of war. Instead, it examines community as an emergent and contested formation. Community is reified through relations among people, organizations, material resources, institutions, memories, emotions, and aspirations. Guns, shelters, schools, clinics, roads, food, welfare funds, local customs, revolutionary commitments, fear, trust, and hope all enter into the practical construction of collective life. In the language employed by the editor, these communities can be understood as assemblages: heterogeneous elements are continually brought together, tested, and reshaped through violence, survival, governance, imagination, and solidarity.

The idea of an "imagined community" is commonly associated with Benedict Anderson's (1983) analysis of nationalism. Anderson argued that the nation is imagined because its members, although they will never know most of one another personally, nevertheless understand themselves as belonging to a shared political community. Imagination is therefore not a departure from political reality. It is one of the means through which political belonging becomes possible.

Shigeharu Tanabe (2008) drew upon the idea of imagination but shifted attention away from the nation-state. In his treatment of community, small-scale farmers and marginalized people were not merely members of communities inherited from the past. They were also capable of imagining communities different from the unequal and restrictive relations in which they lived. Community, in this sense, was neither simply geographical nor administrative. It was an alternative social space constructed through collective practices, new relationships, and shared aspirations.

Tanabe's conception is especially relevant to Anyar because the communities included in the research that provides the foundation of

this book are both material and imagined. They are material because they are grounded in everyday practices of protection, food provision, education, health care, justice, administration, and mutual assistance. They are imagined because these practices may embody a desire for forms of authority and association that do not yet fully exist. The people of Anyar may therefore be doing more than defending villages or restoring the various forms of social order that existed prior to the 2021 coup. Through their everyday actions they are striving to create the social foundations of a different political order.

But what kind of political order is being imagined, and is the imagination genuinely shared? This question takes us beyond the existence of separate local initiatives. It asks whether people from different backgrounds are developing what might be called a collective moral and political imagination: a shared sense of the injustices they reject, the principles they value, the relationships they consider legitimate, and the kind of society they hope to build.

The distinction between moral and political imagination is important. A moral imagination may arise from shared experiences of violence, suffering, courage, sacrifice, care, and mutual responsibility. It identifies what is intolerable and what people owe to one another. A political imagination goes further. It concerns how authority should be constituted, how leaders should be selected, how civilians should relate to armed organizations, how resources should be distributed, and how justice, equality, participation, accountability, and federalism should be institutionalized. People may share a moral rejection of military violence without yet agreeing on a political architecture for the future.
Assemblage theory, however, cannot reveal on its own whether proximity, cooperation, or practical interdependence among heterogeneous actors has produced a shared political subject. Different actors may be assembled within the same field of conflict and governance without interpreting their experiences in the same way or imagining the same

future. The concept helps us understand how emergent communities are composed and sustained; it does not necessarily explain whether their diverse demands have been politically articulated into a common project. This foreword therefore raises a question that goes beyond assemblage as it was used in the editor's previous volume *Assemblages and Myanmar: How Realities Are Made Up* (Aung Naing, 2025) and is used in this publication's introduction.

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of a "chain of equivalence" offers a possible way of formulating this question. A chain of equivalence does not mean that different groups become identical or that their demands are the same. Rather, such a chain may arise when different grievances and aspirations become linked through recognition of a common structure of domination and a partially shared political horizon. Villagers seeking physical security, teachers sustaining education, health workers providing care, women maintaining households and support networks, young people demanding political change, and PDFs resisting military rule act from different social positions and pursue different immediate objectives. Their struggles may be connected by opposition to military domination, but we do not yet know whether or not the actors themselves understand these different struggles as constituent parts of a common moral and political project.

The chain of equivalence should therefore be treated as an open empirical question rather than a conclusion following the information provided in this book. Nor should it be assumed that the authors employ this concept themselves. The foreword introduces it as a question with which readers may approach the empirical material contained in this book's chapters: does opposition to a common enemy create only a temporary or negative unity, or is it becoming connected to a more positive political horizon? Should security, education, health care, humanitarian assistance, local justice, women's participation, civilian authority, and federal aspirations be understood as interconnected elements of the

same democratic struggle? Or are they separate activities held together primarily through the pressures and necessities of war?

This is where Gramsci's (1971) concept of the "interregnum" becomes relevant. An interregnum is a period in which an old order has lost legitimacy and effectiveness but a new order has not yet been securely established. Across much of Anyar, the military state no longer commands political legitimacy and largely lacks the capacity to administer everyday life. Yet it retains formidable coercive power and continues to inflict violence from the air and through armed operations. At the same time, resistance organizations and local communities have established alternative arrangements for security, administration, education, health care, welfare, and justice. These arrangements demonstrate that the military state is not the only possible source of political order as its authority remains vulnerable, uneven, and contested.

The people of Anyar have therefore not escaped the interregnum. They live between an authoritarian order that lacks the capacity to restore legitimate rule and a democratic order that has not yet acquired a coherent and durable form. This condition can generate political creativity and experimentation, but also fragmentation, coercion, fear, and competition over authority. The outcome is not predetermined.

Asef Bayat's (2017) discussion of "revolution without revolutionaries" helps us recognize that political transformation is not produced by revolutionary organizations alone. Anyar is clearly not a case in which revolutionaries are absent: PDFs and their political networks are organized and self-conscious revolutionary actors. Bayat is nevertheless useful in drawing attention to the dispersed practices of ordinary people. Teachers, health workers, local welfare groups, women's networks, religious figures, and villagers may transform political relations through activities that appear to be concerned primarily with survival and everyday life. The central issue is therefore not the absence of

revolutionaries, but the relationship between organized resistance and the wider society from which a new political community must emerge.

Community must consequently be approached critically. A community resisting authoritarianism externally may still reproduce inequality or coercion internally. Differences of class, gender, generation, religion, political experience, and access to resources do not disappear in wartime. New inequalities may develop between civilians and armed actors, between those who remain and those who are displaced, and between those who control weapons, aid, information, or administrative authority and those who do not. Community is not the absence of conflict; it is the contested process through which people decide who belongs, who speaks, who provides protection, who bears sacrifice, who controls resources, and who can be held accountable.

The comparison between Anyar region and Wa-administered territories in Shan State (Chapter 8) is instructive. It shows that the weakening of the previous state does not necessarily produce community governance from below. Order may instead be imposed from above through centralized armed authority, ethnic homogenization, and control over economic and political life. Such an order may reduce some forms of insecurity while restricting freedom, plurality, cultural identity, and civilian participation. The Wa case therefore illuminates, by contrast, the distinctive possibility emerging in Anyar: communities attempting to construct governance through locally-grounded practices, negotiated relationships, and civilian institutions. It also serves as a warning that military victory or territorial control alone cannot guarantee a democratic political community.

The concept of prefiguration is helpful here. A prefigurative community attempts to practice in the present some of the values and relationships it hopes will characterize a future society. If local actors seek democracy, justice, equality, inclusion, and federalism, the important question is

whether these principles are already expressed in the institutions they are building. Federal democracy cannot be postponed entirely until after military victory has been achieved. Its social foundations must be cultivated through participation, civilian authority, dialogue, accountability, recognition of difference, and cooperation among communities.

Humanitarian assistance may become part of this political process. The issue is not only what assistance is delivered, but how it is organized and whose agency and authority it strengthens. Aid can remain external and technocratic, treating communities as recipients, or it can support locally managed welfare, civilian leadership, cooperation, transparency, and accountability. The radical solidarity proposed in this book entails humanitarian actors standing with communities while enabling them to shape their own institutions and futures. Whether humanitarian practices help connect diverse and otherwise separate local demands into a broader moral and political project is another question that the empirical material invites us to consider.

One should not expect the people of Anyar, living under extraordinary pressures, to have produced a comprehensive and complete blueprint for a future Myanmar. Their collective moral and political imagination may be incomplete, uneven, and contradictory. It may be expressed more clearly through practices than through formal declarations. They may know more clearly what they reject—military domination, arbitrary violence, injustice, and the denial of human dignity—than how power should be distributed in a future federal democracy. The central challenge is therefore to move from a community of resistance towards a political community capable of constructing a new social order. This requires more than armed opposition. It requires different struggles and aspirations to become connected without erasing their differences. It requires dialogue among civilians and armed actors,

collective interpretation of experience, mechanisms of accountability, and the articulation of shared moral and political principles.

*Reimagining Community* does not describe a completed achievement. It illustrates an unfinished and contested process. The communities of Anyar are being defended, reorganized, governed, and imagined from below amid continuing violence. The chapters in this volume help us see both the possibilities created through these practices and the contradictions that remain unresolved. The decisive question is whether the emerging relationships among Anyar's diverse actors can develop into a sufficiently inclusive chain of equivalence—and whether that chain can sustain the collective moral and political imagination required to move beyond the interregnum towards a democratic, just, and federal Myanmar.

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Introduction

# Reimagining Community: Emergent Local Governance in Post-Coup Myanmar

*At the start of the revolution, we were so afraid—afraid of the guns, of those who had guns. We got pressure from all sides. Which god has the power to protect us? We didn't know. But eventually, we found a way.*
—43-year-old female, Myaung Township, 2024

*Resistance emerges at the first sign of oppression, and is most powerfully coded in re-creating culture and identity against the vicissitudes of violence and oppression. It is in creativity, in the fashioning of self and world, that people find their most potent weapon against war.*
—Carolyn Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story* (1997, p. 4)

The violence that erupted in the aftermath of the 2021 coup d'etat in Myanmar has transformed many previously peaceful areas of the long-beleaguered nation into war zones. For others, particularly those along the country's borders with China, India, and Thailand, the post-coup violence has brought about a resumption of old conflicts and a repudiation of the false hope of meaningful change where the Myanmar military is concerned. Outrage over the military's latest coup birthed protest; protest birthed resistance; resistance led to war. More than five years later (as of mid-2026), thousands have been arrested or killed, tens

of thousands of homes have been burned or bombed, and millions have been displaced. Futures and entire communities have been obliterated, and the map of what was once Myanmar is today at best a patchwork of contested claims.

Large swathes of Myanmar's population live in areas adjacent to international boundaries where the Myanmar authorities, in the form of a military junta, do not exercise territorial control. In place of the state in these areas is a patchwork of territories controlled by different armed groups, one of which may happen to be the Myanmar military. From the perspective of those who live in such spaces, the arguments of whether or not Myanmar is a "failed state" are largely irrelevant (Wells & Aung Naing, 2023). In the day-to-day reality of populations living in areas not controlled by the Myanmar military, the state is either absent, hostile, or irrelevant—or composed of something different entirely. But if the state does not exist in these territories, what does?

In the place of the larger, unitary political community commonly referred to as "the state" are multiple, smaller communities, some more clearly defined than others. Some, such as those in areas controlled by Myanmar's many active ethnic armed organizations, have long-standing, well-established identities and boundaries. In the majority, however, new and diverse forms of community and governance have emerged—particularly in the central (dry zone, or Anyar) region of Myanmar where post-coup resistance has brought violence to previously peaceful areas. Each community represents an "assemblage"—a dynamic arrangement of human, material, and non-material elements amalgamating into a particular entity where powerful influences, such as hope, fear, and revolutionary fervor, give shape to the emergent forms (see Wells & Aung Naing, 2023). Soldiers, farmers, youth, elders, laws, guns, bomb shelters, rivers, flags, roadblocks, customs, culture, hopes, and fears all collide, compete, or collaborate, from which emerge new expressions and forms of community. In the absence of a central state in post-coup

Myanmar, community, statehood, and citizenship are being remade, albeit on a smaller scale. Acts of resistance, survival, adaptation, and innovation shape, change, and maintain the assemblages of daily life, including those of emergent governance.

If, as Benedict Anderson (1983) proposed decades ago, states are "imagined communities," surely the same applies to smaller political communities such as villages, particularly where the imagined community which was/is your state has become a nightmarish hellscape. What becomes of community and citizenship when the state turns rogue and, through stubborn resistance from the ordinary public, is evicted from your territory? In the absence of a state, how are political communities formed? How is the everyday business of governance accomplished? How do communities remake order from chaos to permit the conditions necessary for the resumption of activities of daily life? How is this done under the significant and often traumatizing duress of continual threats of violence? Finally, what forms of solidarity on the part of those living outside the warscapes are possible and productive?

## A different kind of war story

Much has been written of Myanmar's post-coup conflict—political analysis, military strategy appraisals, news accounts of the latest atrocities perpetrated by the military, propaganda pieces from different sides in the conflict, and dispassionate data-based reports of displacement, destruction, and death, as well as narratives of courage, resilience, and reinvention in the face of threat and violence. In this publication we intend to tell, in the words of Carolyn Nordstrom (1997), a different kind of war story. This type of war story neither narrates battles nor predicts political trajectories. It does not focus on the perpetrators or means of violence, nor does it portray those caught up in the violence as either helpless victims or courageous heroes. Rather, the kind of story the team of authors seeks to relate in this publication locates the interface between disruption and invention, between violence and

creativity. It focuses on the agency and resiliency of those experiencing the destruction of their homes, communities, livelihoods, and futures, and how they navigate, rebuild, and restore meaningful lives. It is about "the remarkable creativity average people bring to the fore in surviving violence and rebuilding humane worlds" (Nordstrom, 1997, p. 4).

But this story is not simply one of the rebuilding of individual worlds or lives, but of communities, of communal life: ordinary people remaking life, citizenship, and possibility while surviving in chaotic warscapes. At the heart of this story are three things: violence (daily threats and the deeper destruction of homelands, futures, and moral certitudes), imagination (the capacity and courage to refuse to allow violence to have the final word, and also to think and act in ways which presume other, different futures are possible), and solidarity (the means by which imagination manifests an alternative reality, as people live and act as a community, and as those outside the immediate zone of violence seek to stand together with those living in the line of fire). In the face of violence, the creativity engendered by such imagination and solidarity represents a powerful practice of resistance. This is the "different kind of war story" that the subsequent chapters attempt to tell.

## Overview

This book has three primary objectives beyond telling a different type of story about post-coup conflict in Myanmar. The first is to document and present firsthand narratives of survival and courage from individuals persevering in conflict-affected communities in Myanmar. Whilst human rights reports and media pieces often provide moving accounts, the research conducted for this book seeks to yield an analysis of survival and transformation informed by our teams' ability to interview members of the same communities multiple times over a period of three years. We sought to learn from participants not simply what has happened in their villages, or why, but how survivors have navigated, adapted, resisted, and regrouped to sustain life, community,

and hope. This speaks to one of the questions regarding the post-state in Myanmar—the reason that new forms emerge and exist. It is a description of the powerful forces which, while seeking to extinguish life, have actually led to new iterations of solidarity and survival.

The second objective is to give an account of how communities in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar have, in the aftermath of the 2021 coup d'etat, established their own systems of governance, often in the face of unremitting violence and intimidation. Whilst the topic of emergent local governance in post-coup Myanmar has been the subject of numerous studies and recent "capacity-building" initiatives, few have sought to derive insights directly from the messy lived experience of grassroots villagers, often preferring to postulate what ought to be rather than what is. This objective seeks to answer the *what* question regarding the post-state—what exists after the state has collapsed, been evicted, rejected, or repudiated.

Finally, the third objective of this book is to interrogate the processes by which local governance emerges and how they are sustained and adapted, and, in particular, to examine the influence of external agents, such as humanitarian aid, on emergent governance. Where humanitarian aid explicitly commits to processes which strengthen local agency, it can be a critical means to "funding imagination" and contributing to stronger, inclusive, accountable, transparent, and effective local governance systems. In other words, humanitarian aid is less about what is distributed, and more about how. This perspective challenges external donors to move beyond superficial, technocratic modes of humanitarian assistance and instead embrace more radical solidarities.

**Chapter 1: Mapping the Territory** provides an introductory backdrop to local governance in pre-coup Myanmar and the immediate effects of the 2021 coup. Local governance is defined not simply in terms of

established order, but also as the lived experience of how communities access public goods and services. The historical evolution of Myanmar's forms of local governance spans pre-colonial village leadership, colonial centralization, direct military rule, limited decentralization, and the post-coup proliferation of hybrid forms of governance involving ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the National Unity Government (NUG), local resistance administrations, and community-based institutions. The chapter argues that trust, legitimacy, and the capacity to provide security and essential services are the foundations of effective local governance in conflict settings and introduces the book's focus on how grassroots people in Myanmar experience and perform governance amid ongoing violence and political fragmentation.

**Chapter 2: Perspectives on Governance: The People's Desire** examines how ordinary community members in post-coup Myanmar perceive and experience local governance, arguing that governance is shaped not only by formal institutions but also by community participation, trust, security, and everyday problem solving in conflict-affected areas. Drawing on longitudinal survey data and narrative interviews, it shows that people in areas governed by groups affiliated with the NUG and EAOs generally report more positive perceptions of governance than those in junta-controlled areas. The chapter focuses on Sagaing Region in Myanmar's central dry zone (CDZ, or Anyar region) as the main study area to explain how conflict, displacement, and the rise of new resistance-led administrative structures have transformed local governance into a hybrid, community-driven system that reflects both the challenges and aspirations of people living in the midst of protracted war.

**Chapter 3: Warscapes: Spatialized Dynamics of Violence and Displacement** argues that conflict in post-coup Myanmar has produced distinct "warscapes"—spaces where geography, violence, environmental hazards, and political control all interact to shape different patterns

of risk, displacement, and everyday life. Utilizing quantitative survey and qualitative interview data from four townships in Sagaing Region, it explicates how villages experience varying forms of militarization and vulnerability depending on their proximity to military camps, rivers, and transport routes, resulting in chronic displacement, blocked recovery, and long-term insecurity. Finally, the chapter demonstrates that communities adapt through new survival strategies, changing social roles, and new solidarities, while their narratives of violence typically evolve from ones of fear and shock to variations on determined resistance and efforts to rebuild amid ongoing conflict.

**Chapter 4: Actors and Scripts: Reimagining Communities in Myanmar's Post-Coup Warscapes** explores the main actors, issues, and methods involved in creating new forms of post-coup local governance. In the absence of the state, what forms do political and civilian life take? With regard to everyday issues of justice, administration, and development, what people, systems, and structures are relevant? How do actors assert their authority and exert control? The discussion in this chapter begins to move away from the experience of violence at the hands of external forces, instead focusing on how the experience of violence has in turn shaped responses to it—not just protection from violence from external actors, but the challenge of legitimacy and the more localized control of the means of violence by local militia.

**Chapter 5: Performing Governance: Everyday Justice, Public Service, and Contested Legitimacy** argues that local governance in post-coup Myanmar is performed through the everyday delivery of security, justice, education, healthcare, and other public services. How do local governance actors secure legitimacy in local communities? What are the foundations of different types of legitimacy? In the analysis presented in this chapter, critical to legitimacy is the visible public performance of governance actors, whereby something (in this case the state in microform) is produced through a credible performance of

service- and resource-delivery. This chapter concludes by asking what might constitute an adequately credible performance for emergent local governance actors to attain legitimacy sufficient to successfully challenge the hegemony of local armed actors. Emergent local governance represents a people-orientated movement shaped by the human experience of violence, displacement, survival, and resilience. In contrast to bureaucratic and rules-orientated systems, the emergent people-orientated systems synthesize traditional and non-formal approaches with new technologies and democratic practices. None are perfect and all are deeply contingent on highly fluid and volatile flows of affect and sentiment. What is striking, however, is that in the near absence of any meaningful external support, these systems have emerged and are continuing to thrive.

**Chapter 6: Affective Flows: Fear, Hope, and Imagination**. Having considered the different components and forms of emergent local governance in Myanmar, as well as different sources of public legitimacy, this chapter turns to assemblage theory in order to explore the factors which give shape to different forms of governance. These are termed "affective flows" in the parlance of assemblage theory—currents and dynamics that bring different elements together into a structure. Affective flows—often primal shared emotions and values such as fear, revolutionary fervor, loyalty, hatred, and local survival instincts—can be the glue which holds certain arrangements together, but they are also subject to change. This chapter asks, if there is a shift away from one flow (revolutionary fervor) towards another (reactionary self-preservation), what impact would this have on Myanmar's emergent governance structures and systems? Understanding the affective flows in conflict-affected communities is critical in identifying pathways by which certain trajectories can be influenced—for example, the imposition of political hegemony or the introduction of community-led humanitarian assistance.

**Chapter 7: Future Trajectories: Humanitarianism and Local Governance** examines the possible trajectories of communities in Myanmar's CDZ, arguing that the future of post-coup local governance depends on strengthening community-led, civilian institutions that can effectively deliver humanitarian assistance, public services, and accountable governance despite ongoing conflict and state fragmentation. It demonstrates that locally managed humanitarian initiatives such as community welfare funds, humanitarian hubs, and volunteer-led organizations not only improve livelihoods and local resilience, but also build trust, encourage participation, strengthen civilian leadership, and positively influence local governance by modeling transparency, accountability, and inclusion. The chapter concludes with an appeal to international humanitarian actors to move beyond narrowly technical or neutral approaches to aid provision and instead support locally-driven processes that empower communities to shape their own forms of local governance and futures.

**Chapter 8: A Different Path: Local Governance in New Wa-Administered Territories** contrasts the emergent forms of local governance seen in Myanmar's Anyar region with those recently introduced by ethnic Wa authorities in two townships in Shan State. Instead of grassroots, bottom-up processes, governance in the townships of Hopang and Panlong is imposed from above, emphasizing centralized authority, security, and ethnic Wa identity. Whilst the political arrangements have enabled these territories to escape much of the violence experienced in other parts of Myanmar, this has come at a cost to personal freedom, economic well-being, and traditional cultural identity. The imposition of Wa identity on a diverse population exists alongside a rapid colonization by Chinese economic and cultural interests with previously state-owned buildings and utilities now privatized, placing the delivery of public goods firmly in private hands. The cost of living for locals has thus increased significantly and previously modest democratic freedoms have been further restricted, including the availability of humanitarian assistance.

This reveals a different trajectory of local governance where legitimacy is derived solely from the control of the means of violence. The situation documented in Wa-administered areas of Shan State provides a warning to other territories in Myanmar, including the Anyar region, of the importance of strong civilian institutions in countering the hegemony of armed groups.

**Epilogue**: In summary, this book describes a significant change in governance dynamics occurring in post-coup Myanmar. Previously, local governance was a movement largely emanating from the central (typically Bamar-centric) authorities and imposed on the peripheries. Post-coup, the innovations and adaptations are taking place in the peripheries. Future models for Myanmar's governance are likely to derive from these sources rather than from the political and military elite. Likewise, previous experiments with local governance have tended to be framed in terms of decentralization, where central authorities grant a degree of local autonomy to periurban and rural communities. Presently, local governance is emergent, shaped and energized from the grassroots, and informed by external agents, such as the NUG and humanitarian actors. These are most successful when working in close collaboration with communities, rather than via either direct imposition or provision. The epilogue explicates the argument that the focus of humanitarian assistance to Myanmar should be on establishing localized networks of cooperation with the potential to serve as adaptive vehicles to interface between local communities and an emergent central authority. This is the type of radical solidarity with traumatized communities that can help nurture and sustain imagination and creativity into more lasting expressions of community and citizenship.

We speak of imagination in ephemeral or cognitive terms as an exercise within the mind which may or may not manifest into material reality. But without imagination, nothing exists; with it, there remains a small hope of something, however frail. In that sense, imagination is neither

a luxury nor a pastime. Rather, it is a practice, a position, a proud defiance. In times when the known world becomes shattered, when old certainties have failed, when the new, promised future has failed to emerge, and when the mere fact of surviving is both startling and subversive, imagining is the ultimate act of resistance: daring to imagine, and daring to imagine that the terror will not last, that destruction does not annihilate, and that violence is not the ultimate power. And daring to imagine, not just in daydreams, but in acts of daring reciprocity, of planting and reaping, of lending and borrowing, of caring for the weakest and most vulnerable, of building schools and roads under the threat of bombs. Of imagining society, community, order, and justice.

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Chapter 1

# Mapping the Territory

*Local governance in our village is good. I mean, whatever happens in our village, they [village elders] are transparent, and they try to find out what the people's will is.*
—33-year-old female, Myaung Township, 2025

A remarkable feature of Myanmar's struggle following the 2021 military coup has been the absence of widespread anarchy, despite the brutality of junta-allied forces. Deployment of the *Tatmadaw*'s[1] notorious "four cuts" strategy,[2] supplemented by a recently introduced "fifth cut" aimed at undermining religious capital (Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, & Thida, 2025), has thus far failed to extinguish unity amongst anti-coup resisters and civic self-organization actors in grassroots communities. Instead, in the absence of a functioning central state, local governance has persevered, albeit in a myriad of forms. As the subject of this book, setting out a working definition of local governance is both crucial and challenging.

1 The Myanmar military is often referred to as the *Tatmadaw*. However, scholars such as Desmond (2022) have challenged this, arguing that post-coup atrocities render the Myanmar Armed Forces as simply an armed terrorist organization, not a national army.
2 Using the "four cuts" strategy, the Myanmar military aims to cut off non-state armed groups from access to food, finances, intelligence, and recruits.

Governance can be defined as "any organised method of delivering public or collective services and goods according to specific logics and norms, and to specific forms of authority" (Olivier de Sardan, 2011, p. 22). When applied to a local context, governance refers to those functions and structures as applied to a subpopulation, rather than an entire (state) population. At a basic and benign level, local governance can refer to the form of government which "manages the housework" so that local residents can live comfortably and affordably in their respective areas. It achieves this through the construction of residential housing, the education of children, the maintenance of roads, and other initiatives (Stones, 1968, cited in Ndreu, 2016, p. 7). It refers to the systems, structures, and processes by which local authorities, civil society organizations, and citizens collaborate to manage public affairs and provide services within a specific area. Governance is more than simply government action; rather, it includes the participation of different stakeholders in decision-making and service delivery (Shah & Shah, 2006; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2016).

Local governance may, however, simply be viewed as the "long arm" of a central state. So-called decentralization can range from a genuine delegation of responsibilities and redistribution of power (Faguet, 2023, p. 25) to a deconcentration of administrative work from central to peripheral offices, with little transfer of actual decision-making responsibility (Rondinelli, Nellis, & Cheema, 1983, cited in Cheema, 2011, p. 3). Often, the specific form of local governance and the extent of power redistribution are derived from the broader objectives of local governance. Where the goal is essentially to extend central state control into local populations, the central state institution remains the dominant actor, with little space for other actors in a governance network (Chung, 2016). In such cases, there may be a deconcentration of administration, but one with little actual transfer of power and minimal representation of stakeholders.

Yi (2025) distinguishes between local governance and local government, observing that local government diminishes as local governance strengthens (Imrie, 1999). This applies to local governance more in terms of a plurality of actors' "institutional and individual, private and voluntary and public sector, which are involved in regulating a local economy and society" (Johnston & Pattie, 1996, p. 672). What this allows is an ontological differentiation between local governance as a structural phenomenon framed in state-centric terms on one hand, and local governance as something which happens and which is experienced by populations on the other. This is significant, because even in cases where the actual performance of local governance closely resembles the "old modes" (Imrie, 1999, p. 46), governance may take place in the absence of any central state authority—in other words, "governance without government" (Raeymaekers, 2008, p. 7). Studies from conflict-affected areas in Africa (Raeymaekers, 2008), for example, demonstrate that state failure

> does not necessarily have to result in the end of 'governance'—i.e., the inability of local communities to administer basic public goods, deliver services and determine rights. On the contrary [...] evidence illustrates a high level of creativity and mobility on the part of African populations to cope with the problems of weak government and political violence, especially in zones of so-called 'limited' statehood. (p. 8)

The distinction between local government and local governance allows us to understand that local governance can emerge both deliberately and unintentionally depending on specific contexts and periods. In a central state-led manner, local governance is deliberately designed and implemented through structural institutions and policies intended to manage public affairs. In contrast, local governance can also emerge unintentionally when the influence of central institutions weakens. In such circumstances, alternative forms of local governance may develop

outside formal institutional frameworks through the response of local actors to changing political and social conditions.

This book seeks to describe local governance in terms of lived experience rather than presumed structures. Thus, in defining local governance, our starting point is not what *should* be there, but the forms of public ordering which *are* experienced on a daily basis by people living in the researched areas. This is important, because what is described by respondents in the hundreds of interviews conducted for this research does not always include the constituent parts normally required to constitute a "governance system," and yet what is experienced is nonetheless a form of governance. Crucially, most definitions describe local governance with reference to a central authority; in the cases described throughout this book, the role of the central state authority is as an antagonist against which local governance systems emerge and function as a form of resistance.

## Conflict and governance

Emergent local governance and conflict are deeply connected, either where conflict weakens the capacity of formal governance, or where ineffective, corrupt, or exploitative local governance exacerbates or ignites conflict. When local governance is viewed through the lens of assemblage theory, violence—and the control of the means of violence—is a critical element that shapes the form and experience of governance, as explained by Patricia Justino (2018):

> Many forms of governance have been shaped by violence. Throughout history, governance structures and violence have been intertwined. Violence has often been used in strategic ways by political actors to access power and resources. […] As violence shapes governance, so governance shapes violence. The Weberian monopoly of violence in the hands of the state that characterizes Western societies today is a product of attempts

> by different rulers to manage the use of violence as a form of exercising political and territorial control and of consolidating power. The systems of governance we observe today are effectively "the child of yesterday's violence." In places where this monopoly has been shattered, violence in its various forms is "politics by other means," used to shape the distribution of economic, social, and political power among social groups and to define the norms of behaviour, values, and attitudes that underlie it. (p. 5)

Weberian framings of the state describe "a political organization able to mobilize the means of violence to sustain its rule" (Hoffman, 1995, p. 53). Again, the relationship is iterative: a key purpose of state governance is to maintain control over the means of violence, but this in turn requires the use of force, or the threat of the use of force, which may in turn undermine its legitimacy (Hoffman, 1995). This contradiction between "force and legitimacy lies at the heart of the state's problematic character [...] when the state employs force, it undermines legitimacy in general—for the victim, but also for the administrator and indeed for the society as a whole" (Hoffman, 1995, pp. 86-92). Particularly in contexts such as Myanmar, control of the means of violence is the exclusive domain of the military. When this control over violence becomes fragmented, non-state actors or local groups exercise force independently, which further destabilizes social and political order.

State fragmentation is a process by which a central government loses control over parts of its territory, leading to the emergence of semi-autonomous regions or competing power structures within a state (Sempijja, Chegraoui, & Kiros, 2024, p. 3). The fragmentation of the control of the means of violence often leads to complex governance arrangements and hybrid political orders in fragile or failed states (Boege et al., 2009). Furthermore, the nexus between violence and the economy is deeply shaped by the arms trade and illicit markets, further

intertwined with governance structures. Weak or poor governance frequently creates conditions for illicit economies and violence to thrive when the state lacks the capacity to enforce laws, regulate markets, or provide security. Here, both state and non-state actors can use economic resources and violence to consolidate authority, creating a perpetuation loop. Conflict economies, wars, and insurgencies often rely on illicit economies (for example, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, human trafficking, and resource exploitation). These markets finance armed groups, sustain violence, and reshape political power structures (MacBeath, 2025, p. 2). The concept of the "violence-economy nexus" (Duffield, 2001) posits that violence can be both a byproduct and a driver of economic activity, particularly in contexts where formal governance is weak and illicit markets flourish.

Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004) have highlighted the role of economic incentives in fueling civil conflict. Their "greed versus grievance" framework posits that economic motivations such as control over valuable resources and access to arms often outweigh ideological grievances in explaining the onset and persistence of violence. Similarly, the concept of the "conflict trap" (Collier et al., 2003) suggests that countries mired in conflict are prone to cycles of violence, partly due to the economic interests of actors involved in the arms trade and illicit economies. Le Billon (2001) highlights the emergence of conflict economies, in which armed groups finance their operations through control of lucrative trades, including arms. Such economies perpetuate cycles of violence by making conflict economically viable for both state and non-state actors in the absence of formal governance structures.

Beyond the convergence of violence and economic exploitation, crime is both a result and a shaping factor of poor governance. Weak governance can create conditions conducive to criminal activity through corruption, lack of enforcement, and social disorganization (Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Studies on failed or fragile states highlight how the absence

of robust governance mechanisms often leads to the proliferation of organized crime and violence (Rotberg, 2004). In Myanmar, ongoing conflict and the recently implemented conscription law are driving an increase in human trafficking. The State Administration Council's (SAC)[3] decision in February 2024 to bring the long-dormant 2010 People's Military Service Law into force has compounded the problem, leading to thousands of people fleeing to areas outside the control of the SAC or to neighboring countries to avoid conscription, which increases their vulnerability to human trafficking (MacBeath, 2025, p.14).

In conflict-affected contexts, local governance often operates as hybrid authority structures where formal administrative systems coexist with customary village leadership and religious actors. Such is the context of Myanmar's central Sagaing Region, where ongoing conflict and the weakening of central state authority have created significant governance gaps. Under such conditions, local governance actors have emerged to fill these gaps by providing basic services, coordinating community support, and fostering local participation (see Chapter 4). According to Susanne Kempel and Aung Thu Nyien (2014), local governance in conflict-affected settings highlights the continued importance of hybrid authority structures. Village elders and religious leaders often derive legitimacy from social respect and moral authority rather than formal institutions, and in some cases, they have played a role in reducing violence by fostering informal "zones of peace," thereby shaping local trust and governance dynamics (Kempel & Aung Thu Nyien, 2014, pp. 17-18). Similar to other post-conflict contexts discussed in the relevant literature, these localized efforts contribute not only to immediate stabilization, but also to the gradual reconstruction of social trust and

3 The State Administrative Council (SAC) was the governing authority formed by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing following the military coup of February 2021. It was dissolved in July 2025 to be replaced with the State Security and Peace Commission, and by the Union government in 2026, although the key personnel and modus operandi of governing have remained the same throughout the post-coup period.

legitimacy. However, unlike more stable post-conflict environments, governance in conflict-affected areas of Myanmar remains highly contested and operates under conditions of insecurity, which limits its capacity and sustainability.

## Trust and legitimacy: Local governance in conflict-affected and fragile contexts

Trust plays a crucial role in encouraging citizens' participation in decentralized governance, as it strengthens the relationship between local communities and governing institutions. In conflict-affected contexts, trust between communities and governance actors, particularly those assigned by the central state, is often weakened due to prolonged exposure to violence and abuse of power. This not only undermines trust in formal governance actors, but may in turn empower alternative modes and actors, as community members hesitate to engage with local authorities, turning instead to informal and traditional structures such as family networks, regional ties, and ethnic or religious affiliations for protection and support (Khalaf, 2015, p. 46; Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2013) This shift highlights the adaptive strategies of communities in fragile contexts, where non-state actors and social institutions often fill governance and security gaps left by weakened, absent, or even hostile state systems (Bexell, 2014). In fragile and conflict-affected contexts, the effective performance of public service is critical for building trust—and hence, whoever is able to do so sufficiently stands to gain the trust of the public (Mon, 2024, p. 33). This links to claims to legitimacy, which are often contested. In effect, a "rebel" organization can be said to be engaging in effective governance when it "exercises a violent monopoly over an area and is able to [police] the population living in that area," when it has developed systems and mechanisms for dispute resolution, and when it "displays [the] capacity to provide other public goods beyond security" (Florea, 2020, p. 1007).

In settings less volatile than Myanmar's, legitimacy may be derived from more conventional sources, such as the "efficiency, legality, democracy, morality, and charismatic leadership" model of Scholte (2001). In contexts where formal state actors are absent, weak, or hostile, claims to legitimacy are largely derived from four sources: *external authority* (conferred by an external actor); *local identity* (often ethnic affiliation, but also framed around place identity for a particular population); *control of the means of violence* (i.e., "We have the guns; we are in charge"); and the *effective delivery of public services* (Aung Naing, 2025; Kim, 2024), including security, healthcare and education. According to McCullough (2015), legitimacy emerges "through the perceptions and acts of consent by both the governed and the authorities in a given society" (p. 3). This often results in the de facto legitimization of armed groups as governance actors.

As Justino (2022) points out, "not all armed groups behave in solely destructive ways, nor do the more violent groups exercise violence at all times." By assuming the governance functions of the state, "including local security provision, building infrastructure, setting up systems of administration, mediating access to, and in some cases providing public goods, imposing revenue-extracting systems, and regulating markets," such groups become the "de facto ruling authority in the territories they control" (p. 2). The type, degree, and character of governance performance required to generate and sustain a local actor's legitimacy is influenced by what previously existed and occurred, where the performance of previous (often state) actors represents a kind of benchmark expectation

> where states have a strong record of providing public services to citizens, rebel groups also need to provide strong services to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the populations under their control. However, when the state has been historically weak and predatory, armed actors can gain relative legitimacy with only

> minimal provisions of security and protection. (McCullough 2015, p.18)

The resulting "wartime governance" describes a context in which "different armed political actors control, protect, and rule over a given territory during a civil war, regulate markets and communities, establish alliances or compete over power and resources, and manage civilian relations across different social groups" (Justino, 2022, p. 9). Such governance is often complex, overlapping, and fluid. Control may be exercised by one group alone, through a range of agreements and alliances, or remain contested. In many cases, the state may be completely absent, with institutions either replaced or taken over by opposing groups (Arjona, 2016). The civilian aspects of governance are undertaken alongside, and at times in direct support of, military objectives. This dynamic highlights the interdependent relationship between governance, legitimacy, and military control. Armed non-state actors in conflict with either state actors or other armed groups cannot rely on coercion alone for long-term public support, and thus need to seek legitimacy through performance. The repertoire is likely to include physical protection, but cannot ignore socioeconomic concerns, as again, long-term armed resistance is reliant on a steady flow of funds and recruits, which in turn requires a functioning economy and a healthy population.

Violence and conflict often result in conditions that are transformative for local governance, for better or worse. Such conditions may be the consequence of weak and ineffective governance, and are often a key element of local governance in the performative requirement to control the means of violence in favor of a local population. This final point is critical, and is a sharp counterpoint to proponents of peaceful revolutions. For any governing authority to maintain legitimacy, it must demonstrate its ability to control the means of violence. This may mean protection against other armed actors, including state-sponsored

belligerents, as well as to regulate violence within the communities it protects in the form of justice. This is the unavoidable "contradiction" described in the earlier passage from Hoffman (1995): force is inevitable in establishing and maintaining legitimacy. One of the key interests of this study is how local communities, operating in conditions of ongoing violence and conflict, have navigated this contradiction, operating against a long and tragic history of coercive, exploitative military rule.

## Semantics and signboards: Locating local governance in Myanmar

One of the challenges of recent efforts to promote "good governance" in conflict-affected regions of Myanmar has been the absence of clear, practical definitions (Bovaird & Löffler, 2002, p. 16) sufficient to capture the nuances of the actual experience of local governance. Even more challenging are terms to analyze the complexity of overlapping, often semi-legible networks which function as local governance in the absence of a stable, central state. Tamas Wells (2025) has drawn attention to the role of terminology in shaping narrative arcs in relation to political movements. Words may be used quite dissimilarly to describe different things: "the word 'democracy' is woven into conversations in differing ways and filled with diverse meanings" (Wells, 2025, p. 20). This, and subsequent work on vernacularization in Cambodia (Wells, MacDonald, Marshall, & Bottomley, 2026), highlights the iterative nature of language: that particular words may be used in relation to a narrative, but those words themselves are shaped by a wider narrative. Hence, the particular meaning of a word is itself derived from, and shaped by, a wider historical narrative. This is not only true of vernacularized words such as "democracy," but also of terms like "government" and "governance."

In Myanmar, the semantics of these words are largely shaped by the experience of governance and administration as a means of hierarchical, central control. Notions of social contracts that establish an element of reciprocity between ruler and subject are largely missing from the

narratives of governance in Myanmar, perhaps with the exception of the relationship between Buddhist monks and rulers, and between Buddhist monks and people. These shape the expectations local people have of governance, providing the symbolic grid by which actions, institutions, actors, and experiences come to be labeled as "governance" and categorized in positive or negative terms.

At the heart of post-coup resistance has been the struggle not simply against a particular actor (the military) but against a wider culture and system of governance (military authoritarianism). During the country's era of direct military rule (1962-2010), all published documents, including newspapers, textbooks, general books, and even films, were required to display the text of the "Three National Causes": (1) non-disintegration of the Union; (2) non-disintegration of national solidarity; and (3) perpetuation of national sovereignty (Kyaw, 2020, p. 172). Whilst continually framed as the "people's desire," historical evidence clearly reveals the Three National Causes as a "paternalistic ideology based on national defence and security primarily derived from the primary duty of the Tatmadaw" (Kyaw, 2020, p. 174). The infamous billboards prominently displayed outside military compounds in larger cities offered a cruder version. There, the "people's desire" was expressed in purely negative terms, as opposition to all who were perceived as enemies of the state.

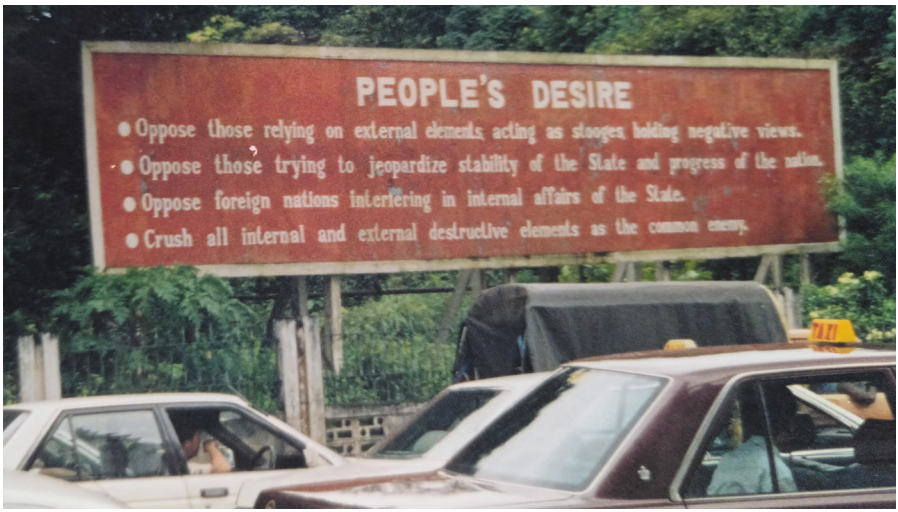


**Fig. 1** *The "People's Desire" (photo by Aung Naing, 1999)*

The tone softened during the brief period of democratic government under the National League for Democracy (NLD) (2016-2021), but post-coup, both the three national causes and crude representations such as the "people's desire" have reappeared, albeit less ubiquitously than before. Unsurprisingly, given the relentless prescription of the state's hegemony, the terminology used to describe government and governance is deeply rooted in notions of hierarchical power. As Gustaaf Houtman (2026) examines in a recent paper, in Myanmar, words commonly used in relation to governance are rooted in vertical, hierarchical notions of control. Thus, "hierarchy is not one feature of Burmese political language but the entry requirement for producing it" (Houtman, 2026, p. 2). Words commonly rendered as "governance" in English derive from words meaning "to cover, to rule" and "to sew, bind, confine, imprison, control" (Houtman, 2026, p. 134). Whilst the term "အုပ်ချုပ်ရေး" (*Okchok*) is commonly used to refer to administration, both in relation to government (e.g., the General Administration Department) and civilian affairs (e.g., a school or hospital administrator), the etymological roots remain rooted in notions of hierarchy and control. Terms for "government" (အစိုးရ, *Ah-So-Ya*) similarly refer to power and

control. Whilst the same issues are also found in relation to the root meanings of terminology used for local governance in English-language contexts, arguably the understanding of these terms has been modified by the experience of more responsive democratic norms. Both structure and the vocabulary used to articulate them are derived from Burman-centric norms, themselves rooted in notions of absolute monarchical rule. This leads to three subtexts on the relationship between subjects and rulers: **သက်ဦးဆံပိုင်** (*Thet-Oo-Paing*, the notion that the subject is in some sense the property of the ruler), **အထက်အောက်ပုံစံ** (*Ah-Tet-Auk-San*, the vertical nature of governance, from the top to the bottom, by way of various layers of authority all derived from a single source of authority), and **ဖစေသေ သားမင်းဖြစ်** (*Pa-Say-Thay*, *Tha-Min-Pyit*, the hereditary nature of power, either transmitted from kings to princes, or in some cases, seized by force if an individual assassinates the ruler and takes his place) (Min The, 2023, pp. 23-26). In reexamining borderland governance since the coup, McConnachie, Ho, and Kyed (2022) point to the way in which the

> institutional pluralism of border governance is shaped by deep-seated and historically embedded mistrust in the central Myanmar state. This mistrust—and the associated illegitimacy of the central state and its military—has given rise to and contributed to the continued salience of alternative sources of authority, power, patronage, and protection. (p. 488)

Why have we laboured these sociolinguistic points here? Our focus in this book is local governance, for which a particular term (**ဒေသန္တရအုပ်ချုပ်ရေး** *Day-Than-Tha-Yar-Okchokyay*) is used. However, we need to pay careful attention to what local people mean when they use the word, understand when they hear the word, and hope for—or fear—in relation to its implications.

## Local governance in Myanmar: A brief historical overview

Crucial to understanding what is emerging in Myanmar's current context is a clearer picture of what was there before. Despite spending most of the previous century under direct military or colonial rule, local governance in Myanmar has historically been characterized by an ongoing and often violent tension between central and local forces. This is not simply limited to the center/periphery conflicts involving ethnic minorities evading central control (see the Zomia framework of James C. Scott, 2009), but a long and colorful resistance of local communities to fully submit to central authority (South, 2018).

The historical transitions of Myanmar have been linked to precolonial village headship, colonial bureaucracy codification, post-independence centralization of the military, and the partial reforms heralded by the 2008 Constitution. Precolonial practices, as well as colonial and post-independence practices, were superimposed in a way that created a very centralized, but locally variegated administrative order (Huard, 2020). Rural governance in the precolonial period was built upon village headship and the influence of traditional local authorities. Although power remained at the center, local figures arbitrated disputes, levied contributions, and mediated between local populations and central kingship. These early practices established governance in Myanmar as a relational, social activity based on local legitimacy and personal authority.

During Myanmar's period of British colonial rule (1824-1948), local governance was administered through a centralized system under the 1874 Burma Municipal Act. The colonial government delegated powers to municipal committees for local administration in major townships under the 1884 Burma Municipal Act and the 1884 Upper Burma Municipal Law (Minn Myoh Minn Oo, 2025, p. 7; UNDP, 2015). These structures were redefined as bureaucratic, institutionalizing the role of village headmen and formalizing village and tract boundaries such

that indigenous authority was internalized in a state administrative structure (Huard, 2025). The administrative machinery that evolved gradually under British rule was a pyramidal, hierarchical territorial administration comprising commissioners, deputy commissioners, subdivisional officers, and township officers in charge respectively of divisions, districts, subdivisions, and townships. Each of these officials was responsible for general administration within the area of his jurisdiction and served as the local representative of the central government (UNDP Myanmar, 2015, p. 10). Thus, administrative actors served primarily as representatives of the central state rather than as figures accountable to local communities. This situation entrenched central control over local affairs not only on formal rules, but also on informal arrangements or negotiations with local actors, which led to early challenges of coordination (UNDP Myanmar, 2015, pp. 10-11).

Following independence in 1948, the new government inherited both the institutional structures and the coordination challenges of the colonial system. As J.S. Furnivall (1958, cited in UNDP Myanmar, 2015, p. 13) describes it, the "steel frame of centralised territorial administration" built up under British rule played a major role in holding the country together against the forces of disruption in the early years of independence. During this time, Myanmar sought to implement the parliamentary system of democracy. The 1947 Constitutional provision (Article 91) envisioned some degree of delegating administration to representative local bodies, allowing certain administrative, cultural, and economic powers. The parliament of Burma further adopted a Democratic Local Government Act in 1953 (No. 28), which was designed to change the manner of representation at township and district levels, while the arrangements for urban areas were reformed by the 1951, 1953, and 1954 Municipal Acts. Municipal reforms similarly aimed to enhance greater public participation. Yet these initiatives were constrained by the structural legacies of colonial administration, institutional weakness, and conflicts of political interest. Local governance remained heavily

influenced by central directives. Therefore, even during the period of post-independence, governance in Myanmar was shaped by the central-periphery dynamic, with local actors negotiating authority within the limits imposed by the central state.

The 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win marked a decisive turn toward centralization that continued under the period of direct military rule post-1988. Following the 1962 coup, the 1953 Democratic Local Governance Act was abolished. However, earlier colonial-era laws, including the 1898 Municipal Act and the 1921 Rural Self-Government Act, continued to serve as the primary legal frameworks guiding urban and rural administration (Arnold et al., 2015, p. 2). The Myanmar military dismantled earlier reforms aimed at decentralization and placed local administration under the Ministry of Home and Religious Affairs, particularly under the General Administration Department (GAD). The GAD became the major mechanism by which the Union state demonstrated power over districts, townships, wards, and village tracts (Ninh, 2016). The administrative jurisdiction as well as the role of the GAD in staffing and managing personnel and coordination were powerful because they formed the backbone of subnational governance—it was the administrative body that delivered routine services to the populace, coordinated development plans, and served as the first point of state presence in local areas. GAD represented a state-building initiative by the Tatmadaw: militarized, centralized, and unable to be decentralized to a significant extent. This made subnational governance institutionally weak and largely reliant on central directives (The Asia Foundation, 2014). Here, local administrators functioned as implementers of central directives rather than as independent decision-makers, establishing a system where loyalty to the central state and hierarchical authority mediated governance. This structure strengthened a form of governance that combined formal control with individualized negotiation as local actors navigated scarce resources, central expectations, and local demands. This relationship can be

understood as having a patron-client dynamic in which the military, holding a central power positioned as patron, provides some sort of protection and opportunities to local actors positioned as client. In turn, the client was required to offer loyalty, support, or services to the patron.

This centralized structure was entrenched further in Myanmar's 2008 Constitution. Despite a period hailed by some as the "reform era" (2011-2021), the experimentations with parliaments and subnational administrations did not significantly shift power away from the center. Scholars and policy analysts highlight that the reforms created new legal frameworks for municipal governance, state/region offices, and some limited devolution of powers (Batcheler, 2018; World Bank, 2019). However, most of the strategic functions, such as the important powers of appointment, security apparatus, and tax collection, were retained at the Union level or in institutions (and ministries) subject to military influence. In areas where both state and regional legislative authorities were vested with legislative power, their free hand was checked by financial dependence and central control. According to Nixon et al. (2015), the reforms created a devolved administration that was not decentralized—institutional innovations were permitted, but power was not transferred.

At the lowest administrative levels, ward and village-tract administrators represent the most visible form of everyday governance for local communities. Under the legal amendments of the 2010s, local administrators (most of them being GAD cadres) were selected through local consultation processes. Administrators were responsible for dispute resolution, small-scale infrastructure projects, and community planning and served as the mediators between local communities and state authorities. However, despite their role in managing local affairs, their power was constrained by a lack of funding resources, hierarchical administrative, and legal limitations (Batcheler, 2018; Nixon et al.,

2015). Local politics and public service provisions were influenced by personal networks, patronage systems, and traditional bases of power as much as by administrative policies. This institutional feebleness characterized by informal practices led to great spatial heterogeneity: in certain areas localities were characterized by more responsive governance, while in other areas there was reliance on non-state actors for services and dispute resolution (Batcheler, 2018). The brief period of democratic government under the NLD (2016-2021) did not bring about a significant change to the inherent nature of local governance in Myanmar—a highly bureaucratic, centralized structure animated by informal patronage networks and often rendered irrelevant by parallel justice systems fuelled by alternative avenues to power, such as local warlords, powerful religious leaders, or senior military figures.

## Local governance and the role of ethnic armed organizations

This alternative rendering of local governance is most pronounced in the border areas of Myanmar, which under colonial rule were already treated somewhat differently (Leach, 1954). Reflecting the Bamar-centric tendencies established in precolonial years, post-independence Burma was also characterized by protracted conflicts between central authorities and organizations fighting for greater autonomy, particularly in Karen, Shan, and Kachin States. In these areas of what Ashley South (2018, p. 9) terms "limited statehood," alternative governance is operated through non-state actors—groups or organizations that operate outside of central state authority. Such actors include civil society organizations, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), and other non-state armed actors (The Asia Foundation, 2024).

The emergence of ethnonationalist insurgencies in Myanmar can be understood within broader debates on state fragility, contested sovereignty, and ethnic self-determination. Since the failure of a post-independence settlement between the country's ethnic minorities and its ethnic majority, several dozen armed ethnonationalist insurgencies

have been persevering for more autonomy or outright secession from Myanmar's central government (Brenner, 2015, p. 2). Following the 1962 military coup, the state's agenda aimed to impose a unifying national identity derived from the culture, language, and values of the dominant Bamar population. This led the country's many ethnic communities to perceive the Bamar-dominated central state as both predatory and violent (South, 2018, p. 50). The pattern of coercive state-building contributed to the emergence of long-established EAOs with substantial troop numbers, often sufficient to control relatively large amounts of territory, as well as a wide variety of other, smaller non-state armed groups (South, 2018, p. 51). In these borderlands, governance is exercised by multiple layers of authority, at times overlapping with formal state institutions that exert a degree of control over some aspects of community life. Terms such as "hybrid governance" reflect the ground realities of multiple actors involved in governance, with power diffused and mediated through a complex web of formal and informal channels—conditions in which liberal and illiberal norms, institutions, and actors coexist, interact, and at times clash (Jarstad & Belloni, 2012, p. 1).

EAO governance derives legitimacy not only from administrative capacity, but also from the mobilization of ethnic and religious identity. Civil wars in Myanmar have frequently been rooted in intercommunal tensions, historical grievances, and fears of cultural assimilation—dynamics that align with Rotberg's (2004, pp. 5-6) emphasis on communal disharmonies as drivers of state failure. However, identity alone does not guarantee durable authority. A useful way to conceptualize the relationship between EAOs and local communities is through the notion of an informal social contract, relationships based on both coercion and consent. As Mampilly (2017, p. 67) rightly notes, "civilians are never passive or invisible actors, and can manipulate the tenor of rebel governance efforts through explicit demands." In this framework, armed groups are expected to provide security, order, and

basic services, while communities offer obedience, sources of taxation, and support for the insurgency. Where EAOs protect civilians and deliver governance, they reinforce their legitimacy; where they fail to meet these expectations, they can lose legitimacy and therefore power.

A myriad of EAOs deliver social services to conflict-affected communities in Myanmar, despite a chronic lack of human and financial resources. Some long-established and larger EAOs, such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), have developed extensive administrative systems, including departments of education, health, agriculture, and justice, and related service delivery systems (South & Lall, 2016). These departments are more likely to feature a network of overlapping agents, which in turn link legitimacy to a wider range of legitimizing effects. For example, in areas controlled by the KIO, in order to gain local support for the Kachin insurgency, the KIO has formed strategic alliances with the Kachin Baptist Convention and the local Roman Catholic Church. Since Christian missionaries arrived in the late 19th century, Christianity—especially the Baptist Church—has strongly shaped modern Kachin identity. Although the KIO was not founded as a religious movement, its interests have often overlapped with those of the Kachin churches, allowing it to embed its political project within existing religious and social networks (Brenner, 2015, p. 16). This highlights the complexity of local governance in the absence of state hegemony, where legitimacy is a critical currency, derived from multiple sources, including identity politics, territorial aspirations, and affiliations, but crucially in the ongoing performance of competency in key areas of civilian life.

## Post-2021 and the new fragmentation of Myanmar

Issues of competency and more equitable federal arrangements for ethnic minority groups featured significantly in the pre-election discourse of 2020. Whilst there were considerable rumblings of discontent around the mediocre pace of reforms over the past 10 years and excessive

centralization of power in the government's COVID-19 response, the 2020 general election produced a resounding victory for the NLD, which won more than 80 percent of the available parliamentary seats and threatened the established political and economic position of the military (Win, 2023). Fearing the loss of entrenched power, the Myanmar military seized power in February 2021, overturning democratic achievements in order to safeguard its institutional dominance. Although the military leaders attempted to justify the coup by alleging widespread electoral fraud despite providing scant evidence (Kipgen, 2021), this assertion has been widely debunked by legal scholars (Australia-Myanmar Constitutional Democracy Project, 2021). Therefore, the continued electoral success of the NLD in the 2015 and 2020 elections was perceived by the military establishment as an existential threat to the power structure entrenched by its own 2008 Constitution. Thus, in the early hours of February 1, 2021, the military seized power by overthrowing the elected President U Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, other top leaders of the NLD, and prominent civil society leaders. The vice president nominated by the military in the previous term, former General Myint Swe, was named as Acting President and announced a state of emergency, effectively transferring all legislative, judicial, and executive powers to the military's commander-in-chief, who soon after assumed control of all branches of government and military (Mon, 2024, p. 4).

The coup immediately triggered widespread and geographically dispersed resistance across the country. What began as nonviolent protests quickly evolved into broader armed resistance movements in response to escalations in brutality by the military junta. One of the earliest responses was the formation of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), organized by health workers and later joined by civil servants, teachers, and other professionals (Dunford, 2023). Through the enactment of strikes, widespread resignations, and boycotts, the CDM significantly disrupted state bureaucratic apparatus

and brought the governance of the newly-formed, military-controlled SAC to a halt. In parallel, elected politicians and pro-democracy actors established the National Unity Government (NUG), which seeks to function as an alternative administrative authority both domestically and internationally. At the same time, local civil society organizations quickly adjusted their priorities and shifted towards the delivery of humanitarian aid rather than advocacy and were forced to act in a highly hostile and risky environment (Matelski, 2023).

The coup also generated unprecedented political alliances across previously divided social groups. Ethnic minorities, women, and the LGBTQ+ community became more politically pronounced and took an active part in the resistance movement. This was a breakthrough that has facilitated rising political consciousness among the younger generation of inclusive federalism, leading many members of the cohort to disavow centralized, military-dominated states. As the SAC responded to peaceful demonstrations with violent suppression, the countermeasures gave rise to a plethora of self-organized militias collectively called People's Defense Forces (PDFs). These militias rose to prominence in the Bamar heartland and, in some cases, formed alliances with long-standing EAOs functioning in border areas. This convergence has expanded the arena of confrontation and transformed local dynamics of the conflict, with the Myanmar military increasingly depending on airstrikes, heavy artillery, and scorched-earth tactics against decentralized resilient insurgencies (Crisis Group, 2024).

Digital technologies have also played an important role during this period. They have been a two-fold factor, both a means of organizing resistance and a realm of repression. Activists have used social media (especially Facebook), encrypted messages, and financial technology to organize, raise funds, and share information, and they managed to execute a digital insurgency by going around state-level information blockages (Skidmore et al., 2023). At the same time, the SAC has used

internet shutdowns and surveillance technologies as instruments of repression. It caused a wreckage of the country's humanitarian system in terms of the breakdown of health and education systems and the growing number of arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, and widespread displacement, particularly among young people who have either fled the country or joined resistance movements.

Meanwhile, international responses to Myanmar's post-coup crisis have largely been characterized by apathy, passive virtue-signaling, or self-interested opportunism (Aung Naing, 2025). Whilst some Western governments, including the United States and the European Union, imposed targeted sanctions on military leaders and military-linked economic entities, regional powers such as China and Russia have continued—and in Russia's case, stepped up—diplomatic, economic, and military assistance to the junta. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) attempted to respond with their "Five-Point Consensus," demanding an end to violence, political dialogue, and humanitarian access (Plunkett, 2022). However, to date, the junta has not only ignored these demands, but escalated violence against civilians. As of 2026, more than five years since the coup, over 30,000 political prisoners have been incarcerated, including former government officials such as Daw Auun San Suu Kyi (Assistance Association for Political Prisoners-Burma, 2026). Many have died in custody, adding to the country's nearly 100,000 casualties from conflict events recorded from the start of the coup until June 2026 (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, 2026). During the same period, over 3.7 million have been displaced (Relief Web, 2026). Attempts to conduct a national census in 2024 and subsequent elections in 2025-2026 were widely dismissed as farcical by all but the junta's most committed supporters, with the junta claiming effective control of only around one-third of the territory within Myanmar's borders (Council on Foreign Relations, 2026).

## Governing in the gaps

More than five years of sustained conflict since the 2021 coup has rendered Myanmar's previously patchy governance landscape even more fractured. Whilst the junta retains control over many of the levers of political and economic infrastructure such as airports and banking, control of both physical territory and elements of non-physical territory (for example, digital economies) are presently contested by hundreds of actors. Reports vary of actual strength, but the NUG claims to have 250 battalions under its command, and there are more than 20 distinct EAOs with significant military capacity (Lovett, 2026). Although territorial control is fluid, with some areas repeatedly changing hands, the broader picture of overall control has remained relatively unchanged since mid-2023. A loose alliance between three large militias seized significant amounts of territory in northern Shan State in 2022, Karenni militia still control much of the rural territory of Karenni (Kayah) State, Karen and allied PDFs have taken and retained swathes of territory bordering Thailand, frequently interdicting trade routes, the Kachin Independence Army has consolidated and expanded its control in Kachin State and some areas of northern Shan State, various Chin militia have taken and retained control of most rural areas in Chin State, and the Arakan Army currently retains control over the majority of Rakhine State, excluding the large population centers. In the central Burmese heartlands of Magway, Sagaing, and Mandalay Regions, PDFs contest territorial control with both junta troops and junta-supplied militia known as *Phyu Saw Htee*.

A consequence of this fractured and contested landscape is that a sizable minority of Myanmar's population—estimated to amount to nearly one-third—live in areas not controlled by the junta. Some of these remained contested, whilst in others, such as the areas controlled by the United Wa State Army in Shan State, ethnic armed group rule has been consolidated and is tolerated by the junta. This results in a colorful

patchwork of alliances and innovations, as Ardeth Thawnhmung and Ashley South (2025) point out:

> Since the 2021 coup, new and creative forms of governance have emerged in several parts of the country, bringing together "traditional" EAOs with dynamic new elements from the Spring Revolution including elected members of parliament along with youth, women's, and civil society groups. Experimenting with new forms of governance, they have experienced varying degrees of success in the context of rapid territorial expansion by anti-junta forces. (p. 2)

Thawnhmung and South (2025, p.10) identify five primary models of post-coup governance in areas outside of junta control:

1. Direct EAO governance—generally a one-party state under a specific ethnic group or EAO (for example, the Arakan Army or United Wa State Army);
2. Emergent (post-coup) state or area-based governance with more inclusion of civilians and local minorities in a specific area (for example, the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State);
3. Transitional governance arrangements combining aspects of models 1 and 2 (for example, the KNU or transnational scam compounds);
4. Local resistance administrations in non-EAO areas often aligned with the NUG;
5. Indigenous local governance at the organic village/community-level, but sometimes based around specific initiatives such as the Salween Peace Park, a notorious scam center hub located in northern Karen State.

A key governance actor in areas outside of both state and EAO control is the NUG. Establishing a parallel structure of ministries, including defense, foreign affairs, and social welfare, the NUG undertakes "state"

functions in cooperation with local PDFs, welfare organizations, and volunteer groups to deliver public services, as well as wage a "defensive war" against the junta (Tun & Thawnghmung, 2025).

In the central areas of Myanmar, where PDFs constitute the most significant anti-junta armed actor, governance remains complex and fluid. Under the influence of the NUG, attempts to establish a parallel system of governance have been patchy at best, hampered by relentless military pressure from the junta, as well as restrictions on economic and communications infrastructure. However, despite the pressures, considerable success has been achieved in opening schools and clinics, many staffed by former government staff who have joined the CDM. Alongside this, local governance has emerged, both with and without NUG influence. According to Thawnghmung and South (2025),

> A type of local governing practice is the NUG-linked "3Ps" administration structure, consisting of the *Pa Ka Pha* [People's Defense Force, PDF], *Pa Ah Pha* [People's Administration Team], and Pa La Pha [People's Security Team]. [...] these bodies [...] have collected taxes, settled disputes, provided education and healthcare services, as well as engaged in law enforcement activities including interrogating and/or detaining individuals suspected of killing or violating NUG policies. (p. 21)

The "3Ps" represent a hybrid of both local and external, formal and informal actors, and whilst in many cases, claim reasonable legitimacy, they are not without problems:

> While local administrations have earned recognition in most cases for their application of good governance practices as well as for strong grassroots community support, there are nevertheless numerous alarming cases of armed local bodies [...] abusing their power. These incidents have included serious

> cases of rape, murder and miscarriage of justice [...] tensions between local communities and *Pa Ka Pha* in Sagaing Region have emerged. In addition, overlapping territorial control and administration often result in tension between groups that operate independently and those that are aligned with the NUG. (Thawnghmung & South, 2025, pp. 20-21)

The complexity and fluidity of local governance in contemporary Myanmar highlight what scholars such as David Steinberg (2001) have claimed for many years: that Myanmar has never truly been a cohesive "state," and that the latest coup has served to reveal the true nature of Myanmar's "assemblage" (Aung Naing, 2025) with multiple entities, actors, aspirations, and hidden lines of power continuing to exert control over peoples and territories. At the same time, viewing governance as an assemblage enables us to move beyond rigid notions of "statehood" based on preconceived ideas of what should be there, and instead seek to ascertain what is actually there. This leads us back to the main throughline of this book: the exploration of how people caught up in the post-coup conflict are experiencing and performing governance, often under conditions of extreme danger and scarcity.

The next chapter considers some of the big "demands" of local governance: what people need, expect, request, and in some cases deliver with their own resources. Before moving into the specifics of local governance in Sagaing Region, the following chapter first looks at the broader landscape of public perceptions of local governance in post-coup Myanmar.

Chapter 2

# Perspectives on Governance: The People's Desire

*I think if we make fair decisions and act impartially, we will have a governance system that the public can trust.*
—42-year-old male, Budalin Township, 2025

The previous chapter looked at the broader theory of governance, as well as the history of local governance in Myanmar, providing a view-from-above account of what has been commonly described in official records, reports, and scholarly analysis. These types of documentation and analyses tend to capture legible systems, structures, and processes—in a sense, what ought to be there. However, the research conducted for this study is intended to explore what is actually there—that which is experienced as local governance by the population of Myanmar. This may or may not be legible, and may not be captured by standard metrics of governance. A more grassroots perspective requires a challenge to the basic ontology of governance that does not limit governance to a particular given form or structure, or even to a set of responsibilities and functions. Instead, governance must be understood as a lived experience which is recognized by its participants as something called "governance." By perceiving governance in such a way, a common weakness of the discourse on local governance—in which local populations are treated

as somewhat passive recipients of services rather than as participants or even co-creators of systems and services—is addressed. The starting point of this alternative analysis is to consider what people actually want from local governance, which in turn influences how they perceive it in terms of the disparity between their expectations and realities.

## The people's desire: What people want from governments and governance

Previous attempts to analyze public perceptions of local governance in Myanmar have faced three challenges. The first, highlighted above, is the complexity of historically weighted terminology (where expectations were largely prescribed to the people by the ruling authorities), and, given the largely opaque nature of Myanmar until the previous two decades, a lack of exposure to other possibilities. In the past, government and governance thus largely represented a body to be avoided where possible, and cooperated with only where necessary (McCarthy, 2023). The second challenge is polling and surveying itself. Even in more democratic periods, the central government sought to control data collection and research due to fears of misrepresentation. Thirdly, decades of surveillance by the state have also made respondents fearful of providing data to unfamiliar people or organizations (Hung, 2021).

Research tends to show that citizens' expectations for government and governance in Myanmar are relatively low. Based on fieldwork conducted in Kachin and Kayah (Karenni) States prior to the 2021 coup, Anderson et al. (2023) found that "governance problems were generally accepted as being a part of life, with little expectation of problems being able to be addressed. Respondents expected just to 'tolerate' problems, and saw little point in reaching out to formal authorities" (p. 6). These low expectations have often been linked to a reticence conditioned by culture, religion, and everyday experience to speak out. This dynamic has led to respondents coming to view speaking out as problematic for others,

and instead tend to emphasize self-reliance and non-formal solutions to their problems. In the areas surveyed, where Burmese was often not the primary language of respondents, some spoke of "mistreatment by authorities because of their difficulty in speaking Burmese, and their ethnic identities" (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 6). In these contexts, non-state actors are often seen as more legitimate authorities. This, and the high costs of engaging with state actors has also acted as a deterrent to attempting to express their concerns to a higher authority.

Local governance mapping exercises undertaken by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 2015 across all states and regions of Myanmar highlighted several issues. Firstly, despite some incremental reforms starting in 2012 under the Thein Sein administration, the majority of those interviewed did not feel free to respond honestly and openly regarding their opinions of the government. Road infrastructure, water, and job opportunities were cited as the most important issues, and the local village or ward head was frequently considered the main person responsible for the management of these issues, followed by either the national or regional government. However, most also felt that the government was unaware of their problems, or had done nothing to address them. In 2012, changes were made to move from directly appointed to elected local officials such as village tract administrators (VTAs). However, three years later, less than 30 percent of respondents felt that their newly elected officials had become more responsive to their concerns. In terms of what people expected from VTAs, nearly half cited conflict mediation between villages, 45 percent cited peace and security, and 39 percent wanted their VTA to liaise with higher authorities, such as those at the township level, to address village issues. Only one in five mentioned consultation with villagers in decision-making (UNDP, 2015).

Of the few surveys conducted since 2010, most have focused on the central government and issues of trust. A survey carried out by the

People's Alliance for Credible Elections Myanmar (2016) in the early days of the NLD-led government showed that the public had more confidence in religious leaders (80 percent) than in parliamentarians (62 percent). Responding to a question on whether the government's primary responsibility was to maintain order or to maintain the freedom of the individual, two-thirds prioritized the maintenance of order in society. This percentage was higher in Myanmar's regions (areas with larger populations of ethnic Bamar relative to other ethnic groups) compared to states (border regions and traditional homelands of various ethnic groups with smaller populations of Bamars). In terms of expectations, respondents prioritized government services and infrastructure, followed by law and order and security. However, in states, nearly one-in-five respondents prioritized peace as a key expectation for the government. Infrastructure, mainly roads, were a common priority for both urban and rural populations, but concerns about crime and security were highlighted by eight percent of urban residents. The expectations for positive transformation under the NLD government were high, and despite considerable improvements in civil, political, and economic infrastructure during its tenure, pre-election surveys in 2020 found that the proportion of people who thought the economic situation in the country had deteriorated was higher than that in 2015 (24.8 percent vs. 18.5 percent, respectively). However, the landslide electoral success of the NLD pointed to factors beyond public expectations of tangible benefit as the key driver of support. Gallup polls conducted prior to the 2021 coup revealed a steady increase in people's sense of personal freedom:

> In the wake of these [2012] reforms, 65% of Myanmar residents said they were satisfied with the freedom they have to choose to do what they want with their lives. Satisfaction only continued to rise after that. In Gallup's 2016 survey, conducted after the now-detained Aung San Suu Kyi led her National League for Democracy (NLD) political party to victory in the country's first

> free elections in 2015, 87% were satisfied with their personal freedom. Satisfaction remained at or slightly above that level through 2019. (Reinhart, 2021)

Fast-forward to 2025 and the military junta's proposed multi-stage election, which has been widely dismissed as a sham by all but its staunchest supporters. Prior to these elections, polls conducted of respondents both within and outside Myanmar showed an overwhelming majority rejected the junta's process as a pretense for reifying military dominance and would avoid voting:

> The poll, released on 8 November, found that 96 percent of respondents said they would not cast their votes, while 99 percent rejected the 2021 military coup. Another 98 percent said the junta's election was unfair and believed it would fail to solve the country's ongoing crises. (Mizzima, 2025)

These findings were largely due to perceptions of the illegality of the coup, post-coup brutality, and the general public's outright rejection of authoritarian military rule.

In contrast, perceptions of the NUG remain broadly positive, even in areas nominally administered by EAOs. In a 2022 survey (Kim, 2023), 69 percent said that they "trust the NUG" and 70 percent felt that the NUG would "care for their ethnic group's interest." However, the role of tangible delivery of public services was also held to be important: over one-third of respondents had exposure to EAO-led provision of health and education services or interventions to deal with drugs and crime, and these individuals were more likely to express trust in their EAO compared with those who had had negative exposure to an EAO, usually in the form of taxation. However, those receiving social services and governance from EAOs were less likely to trust that the NUG would advocate for the interests of their ethnic group in any future national government.

## Mapping post-coup fragmentation

One of the challenges with capturing public perception of local governance in post-coup Myanmar is the high degree of fragmentation across the country. This is understood not just as an issue of political control, but one of economic and social lived realities. The term "localization" has been used to describe processes by which donors seek to empower local actors in humanitarian responses (DeGeoffroy, 2017), but in the post-coup Myanmar context, localization needs to be understood as a "lived experience" of communities whose life experience is constrained by conflict (Yut Won, 2024).

The complex web of territorial control, involving hundreds of different militia either opposed to or aligned with the junta, effectively demarcates the country through roadblocks and checkpoints. This creates a series of internal "border crossings" which represent points of hazard for those trying to cross them, as well as points of opportunity (in the form of extortion) for those controlling them. This also extends to the control of the movement of goods. Control of key border crossings with China, Thailand, and India, as well as those connecting main highways, is fiercely contested with the majority of key crossings in the hands of non-junta forces.[4] Control of these ensures access to both military and commercial goods, which in turn links to the war economies of key actors. The control process extends into Myanmar through a web of smaller road networks, again controlled by a myriad of actors. Goods may pass through a myriad of checkpoints, requiring payment equal to hundreds of dollars' worth of tolls, taxes, and bribes before reaching their final market destination.

4 This represents a critical geopolitical pinch point in which China in particular seeks to exercise leverage over EAOs that control border crossings to ensure free passage of goods across the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor which stretches from Yunnan Province in southern China to Rakhine State in the southwest of Myanmar.

Locally, roadblocks and threats of arrest or confiscation of goods by the junta or their allied militias also restrict outward travel from villages by rural residents for commerce, such as the selling of produce (McCarthy, 2026). Likewise, a combination of restrictions and tolls has increased the cost of key elements of the rural economy, such as fertilizer and pesticides, with an overall effect of substantial disruption to agricultural cycles. The net result is restrictions and burdens related to localized existence:

> 'Localization' viewed from the perspective of communities [...] does not primarily refer to policies and practices of donors to direct funding through 'local partners'; rather it refers to a dynamic and ongoing process of shrinking networks in areas more proximate to conflict. Where previously livelihoods, trade and social interactions involved and maintained networks with entities and actors beyond the village or township, these have now become much more localized [...] where governance, commercial and social activities largely take place within a bounded sphere of influence. However, movement of people, goods and money into and out of these areas is more complex and hazardous due to the requirement to cross new 'borders' between areas controlled by SAC forces and [...] anti-SAC forces. The result is a significant localization of previously more expansive networks; [...] previously, agents and merchants would come to villages to sell seed or fertilizers, or villagers would sell produce via urban-based merchants, [now] these are far more limited. (Yut Won, 2024, p. 23)

Across Myanmar generally—and in conflict-affected areas in particular—post-coup life is characterized by a decline in freedom of movement. Even prior to the coup, Myanmar had some of the most draconian immigration laws in the region, requiring detailed reporting of movements of both citizens and non-citizens (Rhoads, 2023).

COVID-era restrictions and technology were strengthened by the coup leaders to further control and monitor movement, ostensibly to track protest leaders and dissidents, as well as striking civil servants participating in the CDM. The introduction of forced conscription via the People's Military Service Law (PMSL) implemented in 2024 resulted in even greater restrictions, as young people were increasingly exposed to both formalized recruitment (relatively rare) and forced abduction (Hein Htoo Zan, 2025). The restrictions on movement are experienced more profoundly by young people, not only in relation to forced conscription, but via the narrowing of educational and vocational options since the coup. Teachers and doctors have been at the vanguard of the CDM movement, but resistance in the education sector has extended to university students—huge numbers of whom disenrolled and either migrated or joined resistance groups (Hein Htoo Zan, 2024)—and to primary and secondary education, where parents have refused to enroll their children into schools under junta administration, prompting a rapid growth in private, unaccredited education, including NUG-affiliated schools. However, in the previous two-to-three years, the junta-led administration has increasingly targeted both teachers and students engaged in non-SAC education, and employers and tertiary institutions both within Myanmar and abroad have offered only lukewarm acceptance of education certificates earned outside of the SAC system.

Reduction in opportunities for youth has led to large numbers of educated young people remaining trapped with a bounded locality: unable to move freely within the country due to the risk of arrest or conscription, and with limited educational or employment options. For many, out-migration remains the only option. Hence, the paradox of all these restrictions has been migration on a massive scale, as millions have fled either to neighboring countries or into territories controlled by EAOs or other militias. This is matched by the rapid increase in displaced persons, both internally and across borders. By 2026, five

years after the coup, the total number of those displaced was estimated to be 3.5 million (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2026), the majority from areas such as Sagaing Region that had seen little conflict in the decades prior to the 2021 coup.

Much of the post-coup displacement has been relatively local, rather than to established camps or cross-border refuges. Military raids prompt entire villages to empty, after which junta troops and allied militia enter to loot and burn. Villagers flee either to nearby villages, or to surrounding "forest" areas where they set up temporary shelters. Sometimes, return is possible after a few days or weeks; at other times, ongoing threats, such as regular artillery or airstrikes, mean that villagers cannot return, and remain displaced and dispersed. In Sagaing Region, more than half of displaced households have experienced repeated displacement—a type of flee-return-flee dynamic (Yut Won, 2024). Displaced populations represent a key target for junta military action, with weekly reports of airstrikes on monasteries, schools, and temporary camps sheltering internally displaced persons (IDPs). Over 1,500 such sites have been destroyed since 2021, over half of which were religious buildings (Center for Operational Analysis and Research, 2026). This describes a fragmented and precarious context in which local governance takes place.

## Public opinions on local governance after the coup: The Civic Monitoring Study

In 2021, a consortium of local researchers, led by the authors of this book, launched a longitudinal survey of socioeconomic conditions, access to humanitarian and development assistance, and opinions on community life and local governance across Myanmar. Later called the Civic Monitoring Study, the methodology involved collaboration with civil society organizations and volunteer networks to collect quantitative data on socioeconomic conditions, conflict and other hazard exposure, access to humanitarian assistance, coping strategies,

food security, and opinions on community issues such as governance, women's participation, and social cohesion. Operating under severe restrictions and continual risk of arrest by junta authorities, the consortium nonetheless managed to collect data three-to-four times per year from the same respondents in the same communities in over 30 sites throughout the country. This included a large number in areas facing ongoing conflict.

Although not designed to be representative either nationally or regionally, this survey provided regular insights into changes in conditions and opinions in different types of communities. Analysis was linked to wider local and national events, such as military campaigns, conscription laws, and economic crises triggered by fuel, currency, or food shortages (Yut Won, 2025). One of the largest continuous longitudinal studies currently being conducted in Myanmar, the Civic Monitoring project has completed eight rounds of data collection and analysis, with further data collection scheduled. Whilst not the main methodology for the research in this book, data from the Civic Monitoring Study will be utilized at various points in the analysis presented in this and subsequent chapters. More detailed methodology is available in Yut Won (2024). Unless specified otherwise, most of the analysis presented in this chapter is drawn from three rounds of data collected through the Civic Monitoring Study between February 2025 and March 2026, which comprised 2,515 households.

With the collection of data for the Civic Monitoring surveys, the impact of specific hazards and threats could be measured over time, as the same indicators were measured at intervals from the same households. For example, economic activity, measured by how many working-aged adults were engaged in livelihood activity, showed a significant drop in the period after the announcement of PMSL national conscription law in early 2024. This was most pronounced in areas under the control of the SAC, where the average number of working-aged adults engaged

in livelihoods per household dropped from 1.53 to 1.33 during the six months after the law was announced as young people either out-migrated or could not risk traveling to work sites for fear of forced abduction. Likewise, commodity price volatility was closely linked to certain key events, such as major battles resulting in the closure of borders. In the aftermath of the coordinated Operation 1027 offensives of late 2023 and early 2024, commodity prices of basic goods such as rice, oil, and fuel rose sharply, particularly in urban areas more reliant on food imported from rural areas.

These surveys also collected data regarding public perception of local governance, both in terms of overall changes, and changes in particular metrics or expectations of governance such as drugs and crime, disaster management, and unity. Sampled areas were categorized according to the main actor considered to have nominal control of the territory. This was either the junta-led administration (the SAC at the time of surveying), EAOs, or PDF militias aligned with—or at least not in active opposition to—the NUG. This categorization oversimplifies a fluid context, where many of the communities sampled experienced ongoing conflict due to territorial contestation. However, analysis of data from Round 8 of the Civic Monitoring Study (February–March 2026) showed that most communities remained under the same type of administration as in previous rounds. In most communities, the control was somewhat incomplete or tenuous. For example, areas in Monywa (the main urban population center of Sagaing Region) were classified as under SAC control, but ground realities show considerable penetration by the NUG.[5]

The communities sampled were exposed to a range of hazards: in EAO- and NUG-controlled areas, military raids and artillery and airstrikes

5 For example, whilst the SAC was able to conduct limited elections in Monywa and exert some control over security in the city itself, issues requiring legal jurisdiction, such as land disputes or even traffic accidents, were often resolved by the NUG, operating clandestinely just outside of the city.

were commonplace, resulting in high levels of displacement, which was often repeated. Roadblocks, part of the "four cuts" strategy employed by the Myanmar military, resulted in restrictions on access to both essential medicines and agricultural inputs. More broadly, economic mismanagement resulted in significant inflation, with the cost of basic food items such as eggs, rice, and cooking oil increasing by more than 30 percent in March 2026 compared with prices in April 2025. Households in SAC-controlled areas, whilst not experiencing the same level of conflict violence, were nonetheless frequently victim either to forced eviction (mainly in urban areas) or natural disasters, such as the March 2025 earthquake, as well as significant flooding in 2024.

**Table 1.** Village exposure to risks and hazards in the previous 12 months by territorial control of areas *(analysis of data collected for Rounds 6, 7, and 8 of the Civic Monitoring Study, 2025-2026)*

| | **displaced at least once** | **experienced theft, non-conflict violence, arson, or arbitrary arrest** | **experienced flood or natural disaster** | **experienced food insecurity** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **EAO** | 83% | 17% | 15% | 68% |
| **NUG** | 50% | 9% | 2% | 18% |
| **SAC** | 20% | 11% | 38% | 29% |

In terms of challenges, the economic difficulties arising from scarcity of work, rising costs, and increasingly restricted access to loans were common across all the surveyed areas. However, unsafe conditions were a particular issue for respondents in EAO- and NUG-controlled areas.

**Table 2.** Main challenges faced by households in previous 12 months by territorial control of areas *(analysis of data collected for Rounds 6, 7, and 8 of the Civic Monitoring Study, 2025-2026)*

| | lack of job opportunities | lack of financies | insecure conditions | inflation | health/ other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **EAO** | 10% | 28% | 21% | 22% | 18% |
| **NUG** | 14% | 26% | 25% | 24% | 11% |
| **SAC** | 13% | 38% | 14% | 22% | 13% |

In the face of these challenges, what did people expect from local governance? Table 3 shows the proportion of all prioritizations allocated to each category by respondents asked to identify what the main focus of local governance should be. Responses reflected ground conditions to some degree, but safety of movement and shelter were also high priorities for respondents in SAC-controlled areas.

What is noteworthy is the difference in priorities compared to surveys conducted in previous decades, where infrastructure concerns dominated the prioritization. The relatively high proportion of respondents prioritizing public services, justice, and systematic administration in NUG-controlled areas also reflects post-coup ground realities. Unlike EAO-controlled areas where alternative governance and public service systems have been operating for many years, the communities sampled in NUG-controlled areas tended to have newly established governance systems, emerging only in the post-coup era.

**Table 3.** Priorities for local governance, by territorial control
*(analysis of data collected for Rounds 6, 7, and 8 of the Civic Monitoring Study, 2025-2026)*

| | safety, shelter, welfare and disaster management | economics and livelihoods | public services, justice, and administration | infrastructure |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **EAO** | 43% | 36% | 15% | 10% |
| **NUG** | 32% | 33% | 22% | 14% |
| **SAC** | 32% | 53% | 9% | 5% |

Gendered differences in priorities were not significantly pronounced, but households with persons living with disabilities were more likely than others to highlight safety as a key issue, particularly in SAC-controlled areas, where nearly two-thirds considered it a priority for governance.

Despite the relative novelty of governance systems in NUG-controlled areas, the majority of respondents felt that governance was improving, based on a number of key metrics. On three separate occasions during the study period, respondents were asked whether they felt the situation had improved, stayed the same, or worsened in relation to governance, drugs, crime and violence, management of disasters, community unity, and women's participation in public life. In every single metric, respondents from NUG- and EAO-controlled populations were more likely than those in SAC-controlled areas to report a positive trend. Furthermore, respondents in NUG- and EAO-controlled areas reported a net positive trend in all metrics, whereas in SAC-controlled areas, only women's participation in public life was perceived to have improved.

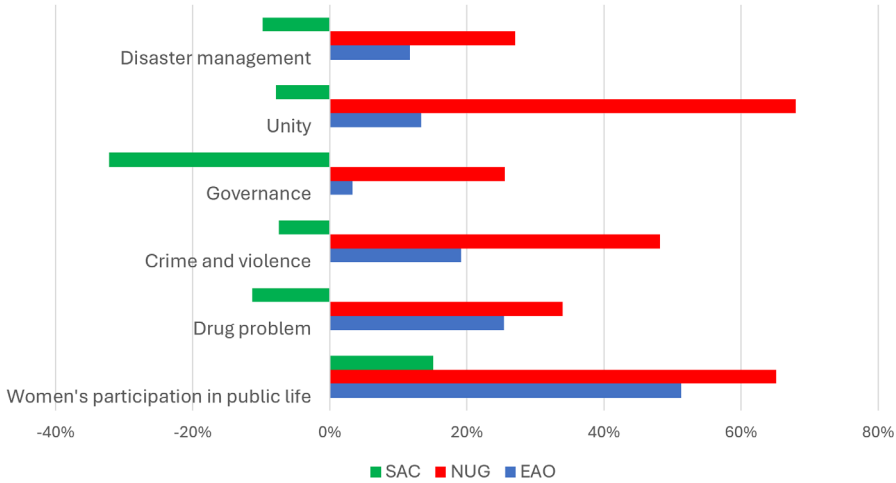


**Fig. 2** *Perceptions of changes in governance (2025-2026, by territorial control of area)*

What influenced these perceptions of changes in governance? Household demographics were significant, whereby households with people with disabilities were less likely to report improvements in governance and more likely to prioritize safety as a key governance issue. However, differences in contextual factors, such as the main challenges faced (see Tables 1 and 2) were associated with differences in perspectives on governance. The experience of displacement, for example, was associated with a positive view on governance in EAO and NUG areas, as respondents felt that governance actors had responded positively to help mitigate the impacts of displacement, particularly through the provision of security and welfare services. However, displacement was associated with negative perceptions of governance in SAC areas, as respondents felt the main actors responsible for their displacement were the local government authorities themselves or their affiliates.

Likewise, in EAO- and NUG-administered areas, the role of community organizations was a significant factor in perceptions of change. There,

respondents in communities where at least one community or civil society organization was active were nearly twice as likely to report improvements in governance. In communities with active voluntary organizations, these often worked in tandem with governance actors to generate a more tangible display of unity, organization, and engagement. However, in SAC-controlled areas, the presence of an active community organization was likely to result in a perception that governance had worsened—reflecting the sense that local government had failed, and thus the community had to step in and fill the gaps.

Finally, there was a significant association between the perception that women's participation in public life had increased and a perception that other governance metrics had improved. Whilst not possible to demonstrate any causality, more detailed inquiry, some of which will feature in later chapters, has highlighted the impact of the conflict on gender roles. The SAC's announcement of mandatory conscription via implementation of the PMSL in 2024 was followed by a large uptick on forced abduction of young men (Maier, 2025). Often, abductions have taken place on roads or at roadblocks, making travel riskier. Together with rules prohibiting male passengers on motorcycles (The Irrawaddy, 2021), movement has become more dangerous for young men. Many have either migrated or joined anti-junta militia. In this context, women have assumed new roles in business, village affairs, and governance previously dominated by men. This has been seen throughout EAO-, NUG-, and SAC-controlled areas.

Local governance is situated in a fluid context of needs and expectations, and functions as a co-creation of citizens and institutions, particularly where formal institutions are absent or weak. Unlike in previous decades, large numbers of communities experienced both a breakdown in formal governance and an increase in conflict violence following the 2021 coup, meaning that safety and security have become significant governance priorities, alongside economic and infrastructure concerns.

In SAC-controlled areas, local governance structures remain, but in many cases provide little effective public-facing engagement, focusing largely on military and security concerns. In EAO-controlled areas, prior systems have expanded and consolidated to provide governance and public services, including in areas newly acquired by the EAO. An example of this are two townships, Hopang and Panlong, in northern Shan State which came under the control of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in 2023. The governance emerging in those areas will be analyzed in Chapter 8 as a comparative case study to contrast emergent governance in areas controlled by groups nominally affiliated with the NUG, which is the main focus of Chapters 3-7 of this book. The analysis of emergent local governance comprising those chapters will be arranged around four primary questions:

1. What are the specific conditions in which governance has emerged?
2. Who are the main actors involved, and what forms of governance have emerged?
3. What are the underlying factors which give shape to governance, and how does that vary in different contexts?
4. What are the likely trajectories of governance in these communities, and what specific factors might influence those trajectories in positive or negative directions?

The following section introduces the main study area, Sagaing Region in the northwestern part of Myanmar, sharing an international border with India.

## Sagaing: The troubled heart of Anyar region

Myanmar's central dry zone (CDZ)—called the *Anyar* region in Burmese—is considered the heartland of the majority Bamar ethnic group, as well as a center for Buddhist religion and education and Burmese culture and tradition (UNDP, 2015, p. 12). Including much of Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay, and parts of Bago Region, the CDZ

accounts for around 10 percent of the country's total land area, but around 34 percent of the country's population (UNDP, 2018). Prior to the coup, these areas were relatively stable and experienced little sustained conflict (Kaung Myat Thu et al., 2026), apart from periodic outbreaks of political violence such as the Depayin Massacre of 2003 (Farrelly, 2016) and communal violence between Buddhists and Muslims in 2013. However, post-coup, this area has sustained near-continuous violence perpetrated by Myanmar military forces. At the time of writing in May 2026, over 100,000 homes in the Anyar region had been destroyed by arson, either through ground raids, artillery, or airstrikes by the junta (Progressive Voice, 2026). The majority—nearly two-thirds—have been in Sagaing Region, the second largest among the country's 14 states and regions.

Agriculture forms the backbone of the economy of Sagaing Region, where the majority of the population live in areas classified as rural (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2014). Most live in areas along the shores of the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) and Chindwin rivers. Many of Sagaing's 6,500 villages have large populations of several hundred households (Myanmar Information Management Unit [MIMU], 2026); Shwebo, Monywa, and Sagaing districts are major urban centers for trade, culture, and religion (UNDP, 2015, p. 12). Although detailed statistics on ethnicity and religion have been withheld from recent state-conducted census reports, the majority would identify as Burman and Buddhist, with smaller numbers of ethnic and religious minorities, including Naga, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and some Muslim populations in urban areas.

Since mid-2021, Sagaing Region has seen a steady increase in airstrikes, ground attacks, and targeted violence against civilian infrastructure, including clinics, schools, and religious buildings. In September 2022, an airstrike hit a school and monastery in Let Yek Kone Village, Depayin Township, killing 14 people, including children (Myanmar

Witness, 2025). In addition, a total of 174 incidents of school-related violence were recorded between 2021 and 2024, with Sagaing Region also experiencing the country's highest frequency of attacks on medical facilities (Myanmar Witness, 2025). Several of the junta's attacks have achieved widespread notoriety, including a campaign of terror in Budalin Township in 2025, where aside from dozens of homes being burned, village members were beheaded and dismembered by Myanmar military personnel (Hunt, 2024). During a popular and well-attended Buddhist festival, Myanmar military forces used a paramotor (a motorized parachute operated by one or two persons) to drop bombs on the religious gathering, killing at least two dozen civilians and injuring many more (Regaldo, 2025). Ground raids, artillery, and airstrikes have resulted in widespread and often repeated displacement. By 2025, Sagaing accounted for one of the largest concentrations of IDPs in the country, with over 1.3 million people forced to leave their homes due to conflict and insecurity (UNHCR, 2026).

The scale of violence experienced in Sagaing is likely due to three factors. Firstly, the area is of strategic importance to a wide range of armed groups in resistance to the Myanmar military. The region is located between the Ayeyarwady and Chindwin rivers, which are major transport routes for goods, people, and military supplies, and is also close to important trade routes connecting other regions and border areas. This includes transport routes connecting Rakhine State in the southwest with the Chinese border in the northeast via complex overland routes passing through Kachin State. Strategically, these routes facilitate military, economic, and political link-ups between the Arakan Army (AA) and EAOs operating in the northeast theater, including the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The NUG's Ministry of Defense claims over 300 PDF "battalions" and over 250 township-based groups, the majority of which operate in the CDZ, and in Sagaing in particular. Likewise, emergent administrative units

affiliated with the NUG are said to be present in 188 townships across the seven Bamar-majority regions, with the majority in Sagaing Region (Naw Theresa, 2024).

Secondly, Sagaing Region is also host to large numbers of local armed groups aligned with, and armed by, the Myanmar military (Crisis Group, 2022). The CDZ has long been a recruiting ground for Tatmadaw forces, and long-term, this has led to villages becoming populated mainly by retired service personnel or family members of active servicemen. These communities have then tended to support military-backed parties and the military coup, and subsequently be organized by the military into "people's militias" (Naing Aung & Aung Naing, 2025). Finally, the third factor that helps explain the large scale of violence in post-coup Sagaing Region is the sense of existential rage and fear experienced by the Bamar-majority military coup leaders who had anticipated resistance from ethnic minorities, but never expected such spirited resistance from their "own" people (Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, & Thida, 2025).

For decades, the Myanmar military has utilized the four cuts strategy, targeting civilian populations as a way to reduce the resources and capacities of armed resistance groups by cutting off their supplies of food, funds, information, and recruits (Jolliffe, 2015):

> The junta's strategy aims to weaken resistance and logistical support while forcing more people to flee and become internally displaced persons (IDPs), thereby burdening supporters of the resistance and dispersing financial and logistical support across multiple areas, including humanitarian aid for these IDPs. (Nyana, et al. 2024, p. 211)

In the post-coup era, a fifth cut—the deliberate targeting of spiritual authority and capacity—has led to unprecedented attacks on religious buildings, including the bombing of Buddhist monasteries, the use of

sacred stupa areas as artillery launch sites, and the targeting of Buddhist clergy who provide relief and support to displaced persons (Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, & Thida, 2025). Previously, Buddhist monasteries were considered inviolable "safe spaces" of refuge against natural and man-made disasters. The desecration and destruction of these reliable places of refuge, and the subsequent disempowering of village abbots as protectors of life, have in turn undermined the authority of both religion and religious leaders. Ironically, one of the main rallying calls of the coup leaders is the appeal to protect "race and religion"—specifically Burmese Buddhism. In reality, despite maintaining a continual rhetoric of protection and performative fealty to sacred sites, the effect of the junta's violence has been to undermine Buddhist religion and culture.

## Contested control: A bird's eye view of emergent administration in Sagaing Region

The military is estimated to be in control of less than half of all territory in the CDZ, although it retains control of most of the key population centers. In Sagaing Region, the major cities of Sagaing, Monywa, Myinmu, and Shwebo are all nominally controlled by Myanmar military forces, but rural areas, and even some peri-urban wards, are either heavily contested or under the control of anti-junta militias. These groups vary in size, capacity, modus operandi, and operational independence, ranging from those fully under the operational command of the NUG, to groups operating essentially as local warlords. The complex and shifting nature of territorial control has led to the emergence of hybrid and fragmented governance systems in which multiple actors—including formal authorities, local leaders, and resistance-affiliated groups—play roles in administration and service provision. This is complicated by the large number of military-aligned militia (*Phyu Saw Htee*) also active in this region.

Post-coup, the CDM resulted in the collapse of much of the administrative and public service elements of the SAC. Many of the

striking civil servants were at the vanguard of emergent administrative institutions, often linked to resistance groups (Mon, 2024, p. 5). Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay are prominent areas of armed resistance, and the military has been steadily losing control of the territory. According to the UN Special Rapporteur, more than 70 percent of the territory is now controlled by local defense forces (Mon, 2024, p. 20; Special Advisory Council on Burma, 2024).

Armed groups play a critical role in post-coup security dynamics. Many were formed ad hoc after the coup, initially to provide early warnings of raids and to assist with evacuations. Their evolution into more organized resistance forces has been well documented (see Berezini, 2025; Coyle, 2023; Medail et al., 2023). With the coup taking place in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis, much of the energy of youth-led, tech-savvy, self-organized volunteerism which had been directed towards pandemic-related issues came to be redirected toward resisting a coup which outraged a large population of first-time young voters who felt their opportunity to vote had been stolen:

Anger at the coup was swiftly harnessed into effective action, utilizing all of the skills acquired and honed before and during the pandemic response: mass communication, volunteer recruitment, fundraising, public messaging, and later on, organization of volunteer healthcare and relief services. (Spring Rain & Aung Naing, 2022, p. 59)

Thus, PDFs emerged and "came of age" during this period of crisis and transformation—not as a centrally directed, strategic response, but a visceral, diffuse, and organic movement. This has resulted in PDFs being characterized as diverse and networked, and mainly youth-led, but marked by a blend of naïvety and innovation. Some were formed through the CDM or strike committees, with students and young people joining. Some were able to find "shelter, training and armaments from established EAOs" (Berezini, 2023, p. 6), whilst others have remained

more isolated, especially those based in the CDZ. PDFs have included people local to the area, as well as those who have fled from other places to the nearest liberated area either to join the resistance or to avoid arrest or forced conscription (Berezini, 2023, p. 10).

The typology of individual PDFs includes those with a higher degree of both operational capacity and integration with other more established forces (mainly EAOs). In Sagaing Region, whilst an increasing majority of PDFs are affiliated with the NUG, most continue to operate semi-autonomously and with moderate capacity (Berezini, 2023, p. 15). Several larger, autonomous militias are based in Sagaing Region, but the majority of the more than one hundred PDFs remain "largely autonomous, self-sufficient, and focused on defending their localities" (Berezini, 2023, p. 15). Geographic isolation, lack of training, inadequate funding, and limited access to weapon supply routes hinder broader effectiveness. Most are funded through a mixture of local donations, road tolls, local taxes, and in some cases, smuggling or gambling revenues. The latter often results in local tensions, particularly where illicit economies result in increases in criminal behavior. Whilst many PDF members express frustration with the lack of support from the NUG, the NUG itself has also struggled to build coordination and cohesion within the disparate PDFs in Sagaing Region. In 2026, a well-publicized intervention by NUG-affiliated PDFs resulted in the defection of a large, autonomous armed group, the Bamar People's Liberation Army and its leader, Bo Naga, to junta forces.

PDFs are one element of the "3Ps" of governance in Sagaing Region. Post-coup, the NUG provided guidance and technical support for the establishment of security and administrative bodies in parts of Myanmar under the control of PDFs, including Sagaing Region. The three "Ps" consist of *Pa Ka Pha* (People's Defense Force, or PDF), *Pa La Pha* (People's Security Team), and *Pa Ah Pha* (People's Administrative Team). Broadly speaking, PDFs provide wider security, including

organized military activities against junta forces, while *Pa La Phas* function as local defense and police forces mainly focused on local security issues, including responsibility for law and order within the community. *Pa Ah Phas* act as the main administration providers, picking up roles previously undertaken by the General Administration Department at local levels. The organization of *Pa Ah Phas* is ostensibly hierarchical, with village, township, and state/region-level bodies that include some sector-specific groups for health, education, and welfare.

In 2025, a long process of consultation resulted in the development and publication of the Interim Constitution of the Sagaing Federal Unit (Mizzima, 2025). This document provided the foundation for the formation of the Sagaing Federal Unit Interim Government, a "unit" of the proposed new federal administrative structure being proposed in broader discussions with other anti-junta groups, including EAOs. The structure largely reflects previous state and regional hierarchies, with a chief minister and a cabinet of a dozen ministers, as well as a hierarchy of administration broadly based on previous administrative arrangements. However, effective local governance appears to be "most prominent at the village or village cluster level, with decisions being shared with the township" (Nyana, 2025, p. 226). This has led to tensions between the interim federal structure and local communities, particularly over the process of establishing local governance bodies where there is a strong local preference for elected (rather than NUG-appointed) officials, as well as a more hybrid model of governance that retains the roles of influential persons such as elders and village monks:

> People believe that key stakeholders should be elected instead. Observations indicate structural and administrative crises [between] stakeholders, such as NUG-appointed administrators, leaders actively involved in community affairs, and armed groups, leading to confusion. The NUG also imposes some regulations and works towards establishing township-

> wide administration, which are not always received positively. (Nyana, 2025, p. 232)

One of the critical roles of the new administrative structure is bringing order to the largely unregulated realm of revenue raising and taxation. A wide range of taxes and tolls are levied on civilians, particularly on transported goods, and taxes may be collected at different rates by a dozen groups along only a few miles of road. This is a considerable source of tension:

> The lack of transparency and repeated claims of the right to tax by different armed resistance groups, even within the same township, has led to criticism. [...] checkpoints, which are set up in areas under resistance control, are primarily targeted to control the passage of fuel, cement, and high-value goods like timber logs […] such practices may also undermine the legitimacy of resistance movements. (Nyana, 2025, p. 228)

NUG efforts to both regularize revenues and formalize revenue sharing arrangements by, for example, designating the majority of revenue for local investments, have sought to both address local grievances and increase its own legitimacy as a public-facing broker. This speaks to the broader theme of legitimacy, which in villages under resistance control in Sagaing Region is derived from a complex interplay between conflict dynamics, the innate self-organizing tendency of Anyar communities, and the desire of the NUG to both bring order and establish its own legitimacy as the de facto leader of liberated areas not controlled by EAOs, and, more broadly, the core agency of any post-conflict federal structure. At the heart of all this are the people at the grassroots themselves. In contrast to previous decades in which political life was confined to limited electoral participation at best, the post-coup landscape is characterized by both extreme hardship and danger on one hand, and unprecedented opportunity for self-determination on the other.

After considering the broader features of post-coup local governance, we now turn our attention to the stories of how this has emerged, and is evolving in conflict-affected communities in Sagaing Region.

## Narratives

Whilst quantitative data collected for the Civic Monitoring Study has yielded broad insights into trends and opinions, a different approach has been necessary to capture the more nuanced details of emergent governance in post-coup Myanmar. There has been considerable research focus on established and emerging governance in EAO-controlled areas (see Ashley South, 2025; Khun Behdu, 2026) but less on emergent governance in central regions, such as Sagaing, Mandalay, and Magway. Where this has been analyzed, it has tended to follow three lines of inquiry: a security/military focus, looking at the roles and functions of emergent armed groups (Berezini, 2025), the inscription of governance structures and systems, largely in terms of formal arrangements such as the Sagaing Interim Government (Centre for Ah Nyar Studies, 2025), and analysis of specific issues such as taxation and land rights (Nyana, 2024). While these analyses provide excellent insights into what is there, and to some extent, the challenges being faced, they capture fewer insights into the *hows* and *whys* of governance—in particular, the deeper emotional, ideological, and narrative shapers of what is essentially a large experiment in reimagining community in a post-conflict environment.

To enable an analysis of deeper currents, we have chosen narrative research, a qualitative methodology, as our primary approach. Narrative research treats the whole story as data (Riessman, 1993), paying attention not only to what is said in terms of information and opinion, but the manner of telling—what words or examples are used, what is left out, and how particular narrative choices reveal subconscious elements. In using narratives, we are also able to analyze changes over time, especially if the narratives are collected from the same individuals in

the same communities at different time periods. We are interested not only in the changes people narrate, but the nature of their narrations: fearful, hopeful, resigned, or defiant, for example.

Mazurana et al. (2013) highlight the significant challenges of conducting research in conflict settings, particularly those of access, methodology, safety, representation, and ethics. By providing space for research participants to tell their own stories, narrative research can be positive and cathartic, but issues of confidentiality, safety, and above all, a thorough embrace of the "do no harm" principle are required: the "repeated telling of one's story has the potential both to open wounds and to produce silence" (Mazurana et al., 2013, p. 18). This research has been conducted according to five core principles:

- *Collaboration* with trusted humanitarian actors, not simply as facilitators for access, but those who would be learning partners in the process, able to bring tangible benefits of the research back to the participating communities. This principle also enables access to interventions. The research team has worked alongside a well-respected local humanitarian organization, and the research was conducted in a way that also supports the learning process of that organization.
- *Capacity-building*: The research process was embedded in a broader initiative that included training elements for representatives of the communities involved. Researchers worked alongside humanitarian staff to build the capacity of communities to respond to emerging crises. This meant that the research was not conducted in a vacuum, but linked to a wider humanitarian effort.
- *Co-production of knowledge*: Many of those interviewed were also involved as volunteers in humanitarian efforts in their communities. Research data was not extracted, analyzed, or published elsewhere; rather, at regular intervals, insights were discussed with the respondents, who were then invited to provide further analysis of

the observations of the field researchers. Interviews were conducted in-person, despite considerable security risks.

- *Cohort principle*: We sought to interview respondents from the same communities at intervals to enable us to analyze how their narratives changed over time. This also enabled longer-term trust-building as respondents became more confident in their roles as research collaborators and co-creators of knowledge.
- *Comprehensive data recording and analysis*: Rather than rely on field notes, all interviews were audio-recorded with consent and subsequently transcribed. Anonymization removed any identifying markers, and care was taken to upload interviews to cloud storage to avoid storing on phones or hard drives, which could be seized and searched during travel between locations. Analysis was done on the original Burmese transcriptions with selected quotes later translated into English to avoid loss of nuance.

Interview participants included ordinary villagers, as well as volunteers and committee members of village welfare organizations. The interview questions were structured in an open-ended format and focused on lived experiences, daily interactions with local government, trust, problem solving, and attitudes toward legitimacy. Altogether, nearly 20 researchers conducted more than 100 interviews between December 2022 and April 2026, with respondents from 61 communities. Research participants were drawn from four townships located in the central part of Sagaing Region: Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale. Some interviews were conducted in the villages themselves, others at safe locations when the interviewees were able to travel. In total, the interviews yielded well over one thousand pages of transcribed text. Analysis was conducted collectively, with the entire research team participating in a detailed consideration of the key findings of each interview.

Interviews were loosely structured around five main themes: experiences of violence, displacement, and broader impacts of conflict;

the nature of local governance in their community, including the key actors and common methods; the types of issues which tended to involve local governance and how these were handled; how individuals perceived the local governance in their community; and how they felt local governance had changed since the coup. However, these categories were deployed in such a manner as to provide significant scope for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss related topics and issues as well. One of the key subtexts of the interviews was to provide an opportunity for community members deeply affected by conflict to be listened to by someone not directly involved in their context. By arranging for repeated interviews with people from the same communities, and in many cases, the same respondents, we were also able to develop a high level of trust, such that often during the second or third interviews, respondents felt able to speak more freely. On numerous occasions, respondents expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to narrate their experiences. What emerged, time after time, were stories of extraordinary courage, innovation, and determination. Our research team continually reminded itself that our primary task was not analysis, but to witness, to record, and to represent, as best we could, the stories of those living amidst the terror of war.

The following table lists the codes for the locations of interviews. Actual village names cannot be published for security reasons. In the following chapters, the village codes will be used to reference the interviews, enabling the reader to refer back to the table to get contextual information on the particular interviewee's location. This is a critical part of the analytical process, as our research demonstrates a complex interrelationship between geography and exposure to violence, between exposure to violence and governance actors and methods, and between governance actors and methods and the broader nature and public support for local governance. The following chapter thus focuses on the first dimension—geography—and how this both links to exposure to conflict violence and other hazards, as well as influences the capacity of a community to respond.

**Table 4.** Locations and characteristics of communities where research participants reside (all townships in Sagaing Region)

| village code | township | location (proximate features) | size (# house-holds) | arson (# homes burned since 2021) | interview year(s) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
| BDL01 | Budalin | road & checkpoint | 77 | 46 | | x | | x | |
| BDL03 | Budalin | road & town | 100 | 31 | | | | x | |
| BDL04 | Budalin | checkpoint & town | 80 | 24 | x | | x | | x |
| BDL05 | Budalin | N/A | 366 | 0 | | | x | x | |
| BDL07 | Budalin | river & checkpoint | 267 | 15 | | | x | x | |
| BDL08 | Budalin | checkpoint & town | 120 | 4 | | | | x | |
| BDL09 | Budalin | road & checkpoint | 529 | 300 | | | | x | |
| BDL10 | Budalin | road & checkpoint | 106 | 1 | | | x | x | x |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BDL11 | Budalin | N/A | 150 | 13 | | | | x | x |
| BDL12 | Budalin | near NW military HQ | 175 | 1 | | | | x | |
| BDL15 | Budalin | road & checkpoint | 147 | 3 | | | x | | |
| BDL16 | Budalin | road | 165 | 5 | | | x | x | x |
| BDL17 | Budalin | N/A | 152 | 0 | | | | | x |
| BDL21 | Budalin | checkpoint & town | 119 | 5 | | | | x | x |
| BDL22 | Budalin | army camp | 306 | 250 | | | | x | x |
| BDL23 | Budalin | army camp | 210 | 24 | | | | x | x |
| BDL25 | Budalin | N/A | 240 | 37 | | | | | x |
| BDL27 | Budalin | N/A | 112 | 0 | | | | | x |
| BDL28 | Budalin | N/A | 110 | 0 | | | | | x |
| BDL29 | Budalin | N/A | 103 | 47 | | | | | x |
| BDL30 | Budalin | road | 580 | 300 | x | | | x | |
| BDL31 | Budalin | town | 141 | 0 | | | | | x |
| BDL33 | Budalin | N/A | 150 | 0 | | | | | x |
| BDL34 | Budalin | N/A | 135 | 5 | x | x | | | x |
| BDL47 | Budalin | N/A | 305 | 41 | | | | | x |
| BDL50 | Budalin | N/A | 125 | 43 | | | | x | x |

| village code | township | location (proximate features) | size (# house-holds) | arson (# homes burned since 2021) | interview year(s) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
| MYA01 | Myaung | river | 320 | 82 | x | x | | | |
| MYA03 | Myaung | river | 683 | 280 | x | | x | | |
| MYA05 | Myaung | checkpoint & river | 461 | 180 | x | | x | x | x |
| MYA06 | Myaung | road, checkpoint, & river | 768 | 273 | | | x | x | |
| MYA08 | Myaung | river | 390 | 78 | | | x | | |
| MYA09 | Myaung | road & river | 139 | 6 | | | x | | |
| MYA12 | Myaung | NA | 425 | 17 | | | x | x | |
| MYA14 | Myaung | NA | 360 | 29 | | | x | x | |
| MYA15 | Myaung | river | 200 | 12 | | | x | x | |
| MYA17 | Myaung | town & river | 215 | 35 | | x | x | | x |
| MYA18 | Myaung | road & river | 163 | 60 | | | x | | x |
| MYA20 | Myaung | checkpoint & river | 127 | 0 | | | x | x | x |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| MYA22 | Myaung | N/A | 250 | 26 | | | | | x |
| MYA23 | Myaung | river | 336 | 112 | | | x | | |
| MYA31 | Myaung | river & town | 527 | 23 | | | | | x |
| MYA34 | Myaung | river | 225 | 0 | | | | x | x |
| MYA35 | Myaung | river & town | 150 | 25 | | | x | x | |
| MYA36 | Myaung | river | 45 | 2 | | | x | | |
| MYA37 | Myaung | river | 484 | 2 | | | x | | |
| MYA40 | Myaung | N/A | 120 | 3 | | | | | x |
| MYA41 | Myaung | river | 235 | 0 | | | | x | x |
| MYA42 | Myaung | many check-points, river confluence | 330 | 0 | | x | | x | |
| MYA43 | Myaung | N/A | 270 | 6 | | | | | |
| MYA44 | Myaung | army camp | 286 | 44 | | x | | | x |
| MYA46 | Myaung | N/A | 175 | 0 | | | | | x |
| MYA47 | Myaung | river | 298 | 3 | | | | | x |
| MYW01 | Monywa | checkpoint | 260 | 64 | | x | | | x |
| MYW04 | Monywa | road & checkpoint | 325 | 3 | | | x | x | |

| village code | township | location (proximate features) | size (# house-holds) | arson (# homes burned since 2021) | interview year(s) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | 2022 | 2023 | 2024 | 2025 | 2026 |
| MYW05 | Monywa | checkpoint & town | 378 | 15 | | | x | x | |
| PL02 | Pale | N/A | 149 | 82 | | x | | x | |
| PL03 | Pale | town & army camp | 263 | 328 | | x | | x | |
| PL04 | Pale | N/A | 172 | 3 | | | x | | x |
| PL06 | Pale | N/A | 122 | 0 | | | x | | x |
| PL07 | Pale | N/A | 347 | 0 | | | x | | x |

Chapter 3

# Warscapes: Spatialized Dynamics of Violence and Displacement

*The first time they came, they didn't burn the houses. They said to the village abbot, "If you don't resist, we won't burn." Next time they came, they raided from the south, they were burning everywhere. They raced through, set fire to the houses, and then carried on to the east, like a fiery dragon. Once they had gone, we could go back and try and put the fires out. My house was destroyed, just one pole left.*
—57-year-old female, Myaung Township, 2022

*You really notice the difference. It's not just the craters and scorch marks in the road from mine explosions, or the checkpoints. It is the abandoned houses and shuttered up shops by the main road. It is the absence of human life in places which were previously thriving. When you do see people, there is a permanent wariness which makes every movement efficient at avoiding unwanted attention from armed soldiers. At night, even before dusk, there is nothing on the streets apart from stray dogs.*
—researcher's field notes, November 2023

Analysis of how geography shapes politics, particularly conflicts, has gained popularity in recent years (Marshall, 2016). Such analysis has been extended to the study of war, including civil wars (Flint, 2023).

Aspects of terrain, such as the location of land masses and bodies of water, have influenced the "capabilities, limitations, and vulnerabilities of armed forces since the Stone Age" (Collins, 1998, p. 11). According to Buhaung et al. (2002, 2009), in civil wars, factors such as proximity to borders, sites of natural resource extraction, and transport and communication arteries are significant influences in the direction and duration of conflict: "Difficult terrain, porous boundaries, and access to lootable resources also affect the relative strength of a government and rebel group engaged in conflict. Location matters" (2009, p. 545).

However, the focus on geography is not limited simply to issues of military tactics. In *A Different Kind of War Story*, Carolyon Nordstrom (1997) introduces the term "warscapes" to describe "landscapes characterized by brutal violence, political volatility, physical insecurity and the disruptions and instabilities that exist in many civil war zones that different social actors navigate through" (Korf, 2010, p. 387). This view considers how particular kinds of spaces are transformed through conflict and terror, producing new types of spaces, referred to as "warscapes." As Lubkemann (2019) points out, although war is not "all terror, all the time" (p. 13), the concept of warscapes describes the "social condition of war" (p. 15) where the intersection of violence with quotidian concerns and preexisting social dynamics produces a particular set of conditions in which life is negotiated. Whilst often characterized by unpredictability and instability,

> warscapes are not per se 'socially unstable places', but differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories co-exist. As social spaces, warscapes are always under construction [...] Indeed, violent conflict can be a threat or an opportunity for those immediately concerned, often at the same time. Whether violence is threatening or offers opportunities depends, however, on the specific spatial and temporal configuration of power, authority

> and economic flows, which open certain trajectories while foreclosing others. These trajectories may vary in different places and at different times in a given warscape. In other words: violence has ambiguous, often contradictory effects on agency at different times, in different places and for different individuals. (Korf, 2010, p. 387)

The spatial aspect of lived experiences in warscapes relates to three dimensions: how particular spatial dynamics have shaped the social order prior to the outbreak of conflict; how spatial dynamics render vulnerability; and how spatiality intersects with attempts to render a space governable. For example, have spatial realities such as relative isolation or proximity to a river or site of natural resources resulted in out- or in-migration, interconnectivity with other communities, or encroachment by external actors such as foreign mining companies? In terms of vulnerabilities, how does distance from a river, road, or mountain affect the risk of ground raids, shelling from water-borne artillery, or airstrikes? Does relative isolation result in a lower risk of being raided—but reduce the options for safe havens if you are? How does being close to a reliable water source render advantage or disadvantage during civil conflicts? It may sustain life, but also attract other displaced populations, in turn increasing the risk of overcrowding, disease outbreaks, and targeting by hostile forces. What happens when natural disasters intersect with conflicts such as floods and earthquakes? How do such disasters tilt the balance of conflict and shape the experiences of those caught in the middle? Finally, how do these factors all combine in the process of making a space governable? How do the spatial dynamics, as they intersect with war and disaster and are superimposed on local history, influence the way in which a space can be governed? This highlights the importance of considering space in relation to conflict, as described by Korf (2010):

> These struggles and life projects of warscape inhabitants take place; they are strongly embedded in governable spaces of a

> given time and in a given locality, they relate to, circumvent and reproduce competing governable orders, and they are part of (local and global) social networks that territorialize in the warscape itself. We have argued that it is useful to analyse the geography of warscape as it reveals the dynamics of 'ragged, unstable, perhaps ungovernable spaces' and indicates the social mechanisms that produce agency, threat and opportunity, stability and instability, security and insecurity in the social condition of war. In this sense, warscapes can be interpreted as struggles over geography. (p. 407)

These spaces of conflict are also the sites of production for other crises. Issues of climate and conflict risk in rural Myanmar have often been analyzed separately with limited attention being paid to how spatial location mediates vulnerability. Overlapping risks mean that conflict and natural disasters may intersect in ways that tend to construct risk in uneven ways. Rather than being episodic and time-bound, crises may be more uneven, continuous, and embedded within specific geographical contexts. Risk is not uniformly distributed but varies according to environmental conditions, infrastructure, and sociopolitical factors (Koks et al., 2020). In conflict-affected settings, these differences are intensified as violence itself is spatially organized while environmental hazards remain unevenly distributed. As a result, certain locations—such as riverine corridors or areas in proximity to military installations—become sites of intensified and prolonged vulnerability.

Such attention to space thus provides a lens for understanding how patterns of harm are structured through the intersection of geography and human agents rather than being randomly distributed. Spatial arrangements are not neutral; they reflect and reproduce power relations. Vulnerability is not the result of conflict or environmental hazards alone, but of structural inequalities and power relations that shape access to land, resources, and livelihoods. Flooding, for

instance, does not independently produce crisis but amplifies existing vulnerabilities in contexts where mobility is restricted, infrastructure is damaged, and governance systems are fragmented. Violent conflict reshapes economic and social geographies by disrupting markets, isolating rural communities, and altering land-use patterns (Justino, 2012). These in turn may result in the erosion of physical and legal infrastructure which typically mitigates the effects of natural disasters (for example, deforestation by armed groups needing clear fields, neglect of flood barriers, or destruction of arable land). Villages located near strategic transport routes, military installations, or contested territories tend to experience higher exposure to violence and displacement. In this context, location functions as a key determinant of both risk and resilience. Thus, geography becomes an active mechanism through which inequality and insecurity are organized.

## Warscapes: The spatial production of crises

Warscapes are spatially produced and structurally sustained through the interaction of conflict, environmental stress, and political control. Rather than treating violence, displacement, and environmental risk as separate processes, these dynamics coproduce differentiated and enduring patterns of vulnerability across space.

This chapter draws on data from both the Civic Monitoring Study (described in Chapter 2) and the qualitative interviews described in the previous chapter to analyze the production of crisis in four townships in Sagaing Region—Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale—shown in the map in Figure 6 below. The data and subsequent analysis move forward in five layers:

1. **Topography, built environment and environmental hazards:** The map in Figure 3 shows the broader topographical outlines to orient the reader, whilst Table 5 provides details of key built environment features such as roads, which are a critical element of conflict risk.

2. **Conflict-specific geography:** Table 6 shows the political and military features, including territorial control, key locations of SAC troops, and typical patterns of movement by SAC troops. This highlights how location often confers risk—for example, for villages located along major transit routes between SAC army camps.
3. **Conflict incident mapping:** Table 7 shows the incidence of different types of conflict in each township since 2021, highlighting how the different geographies are linked to different exposure to conflict.
4. **Hazard impact mapping:** Table 8 shows the impact of the confluence of conflict and environmental hazards in each township, highlighting how the specifics of physical and social geography result in the generation of different warscapes.
5. **Warscape mapping:** Table 9 and Figure 5 utilize detailed analysis from interviews to analyze three kinds of warscapes: camp-adjacent villages subject to chronic militarization and repeated anticipatory displacement; riverine villages exposed to deadly interaction of flooding and conflict; and more isolated, inland villages exposed to sudden, unpredictable violence and displacement, with fewer resources for coping and recovery.

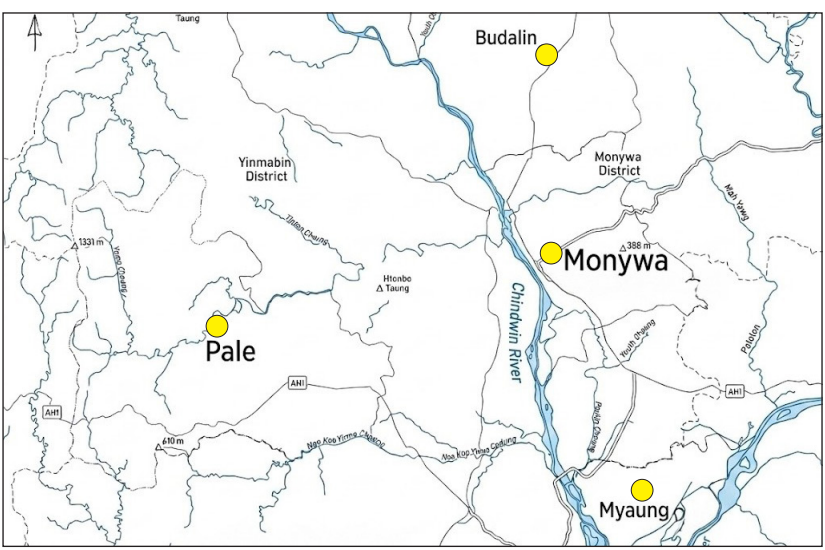


**Fig. 3** *Map of Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale Townships (adapted from Myanmar Information Management Unit, 2026)*

**Table 5.** Geographical features of Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale Townships, Sagaing Region

| township | population | # villages | % urban | terrain | rivers | major roads | economy | risks |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Budalin** | 123,000 | 191 (camp-adjacent,[6] near transit routes, isolated) | 4% | hilly uplands and valley plains | none | Monywa to Ye-U highway, frequently used by SAC troops | agriculture (beans, pulses) and livestock | drought, earthquake |
| **Myaung** | 106,000 | 84 (riverine, near transit routes, isolated) | 7% | flood plain and lowland plain | Chindwin and Ayeyarwady | main entry/exit point on Asia Highway 1 controlled by large SAC checkpoint | agriculture (paddy, peanuts), influenced by flooding | seasonal flooding affects over one-third of township |
| **Monywa** | 372,000 | 194 (camp-adjacent, near transit routes) | 56% | alluvial flood plain (near river) and flat plain in transitional zone | Chindwin | Asia Highway 1, major road connections to other urban centers | irrigation-based agriculuture, trading | periodic flood, earthquake |
| **Pale** | 144,000 | 199 (camp-adjacent, near transit routes, isolated) | 3% | plains in the east, but hilly area bordering Gangaw to the west | numerous small rivers | continuation of Asia Highway 1 to Gangaw | agriculuture | drought, earthquake |

6 "Camp-adjacent" means villages are located within the close proximity of a SAC or *Phyu Saw Htee* camp/base.

**Table 6.** Territorial control and SAC troop operations in Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale Townships

| | territorial control | location of SAC camps & personnel | operational routes of SAC troops |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Budalin** | urban areas and minority of villages controlled by SAC and/or *Phyu Saw Htee*; remainder controlled by resistance actors, mainly PDF | troops, police, and some government offices are located in Budalin town, although their presence is contested by resistance forces; SAC troops commonly establish positions in Budalin and two villages northwest of the town (including BDL23) | troops from the NW Command (*Na Ma Kha*) frequently move through southern Budalin via villages on their way northeast towards Shwebo; villages closer to the Northwest Command are within the range of paraglider or gyrocopter attacks |
| **Myaung** | majority controlled by resistance actors (PDFs), apart from Myaung Town and Kyaukyit camp; SAC controls the checkpoint at road entrance to Myaung from Mandalay-Monywa highway, which controls major road access | troops based in Myaung Town (in the hospital) and permanent camp known as Kyaukyit; SAC troops frequently establish camps in the neighboring township (Yesagyo); outbreaks of fighting between SAC and resistance troops are commonplace during exchange or resupply movements to Kyaukyit | Myaung experiences military forces from six sources: columns from the NW Command (*Na Ma Kha*); troops crossing from neighboring Yesagyo; raids from troops crossing from the opposite river bank; artillery fired from fixed positions on the opposite bank; artillery fired from ships traveling up or down the river; and from airstrikes from medium-range bombers |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Monywa** | Monywa town controlled by SAC, although administration only partially functional; surrounding villages mainly controlled by resistance actors, although several large Phyu Saw Htee villages; many larger villages near the Northwest Command or main highway have been abandoned due to arson, frequent raiding, or persistent artillery fire from SAC | The NW Command (*Na Ma Kha*) is based in Monywa, which also hosts SAC government offices; main highway between Monywa and Sagaing is highly contested and features dozens of checkpoints manned by SAC, *Phyu Saw Htee*, and, at times, resistance troops | Monywa serves as the primary departure point for military operations and columns moving into Budalin, Myaung, and other nearby townships |
| **Pale** | territorial control and administration of rural areas by resistance actors, mainly PDF; the Burma National Revolutionary Army (BNRA), a large previously autonomous militia, recently defected to the SAC largely as a result of attempts by the NUG to address extrajudicial killings and extortion on the part of BNRA (Mizzima, 2026) | SAC maintains troops in the main town (Pale), plus a number of large *Phyu Saw Htee* villages; Pale is on a main transit route between the Regional Command and Gangaw (which is also largely controlled by resistance forces); military columns have been conducting intensive operations in villages located south of Pale Town and its surrounding areas | Gangaw is one of the main routes to Chin State, so SAC troops frequently pass through Pale Township when seeking to reinforce other areas; Pale has been subject to airstrikes from Myanmar Air Force jets; in June 2025, ground forces downed a Chinese-built F7 jet (The Irrawaddy, 2025) |

**Table 7.** Conflict incidents since February 1, 2021 (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data *(Armed Conflict Location and Event Data [ACLED], 2026)*

| township | battles | arrests | aerial attacks (mixed) | arson | raids & displace-ment | artillery strikes | drone, gyrocop-ter, or paraglid-er | airstrikes | total incidents |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Budalin** | 111 | 21 | 59 | 45 | 150 | 13 | 8 | 13 | 473 |
| **Myaung** | 182 | 7 | 51 | 67 | 14 | 33 | 7 | 5 | 439 |
| **Monywa** | 571 | 108 | 66 | 63 | 51 | 51 | 14 | 8 | 1,228 |
| **Pale** | 292 | 12 | 51 | 54 | 58 | 58 | 10 | 27 | 715 |

In terms of sheer density (incidents per village/ward or per 1,000 people), Pale experienced the highest frequency of conflict events, followed by Myaung. However, the pattern of violence varies, with ground raids making up nearly one-third of the incidents in Budalin, whereas arson and artillery were more frequent in Myaung. In Budalin, a high frequency of troops moving through the township has meant regular anticipatory displacement as whole villages have emptied out to escape capture by SAC forces. In Myaung, there have been three main loci for incidents: road entry points, particularly the main checkpoint on the Sagaing-Monywa highway (Asia Highway 1); the connecting roads between Myaung town and the other main SAC base in Kyaukyit; and raids and artillery either from SAC vessels on the Ayeyarwady River or from the opposite bank near Myinkyan. In Monywa, large peri-urban villages have often experienced permanent displacement due to extensive arson rendering villages uninhabitable, the occupation of the village by SAC or allied militia, or scheduled, pre-sighted artillery strikes from the nearby regional command. Here, artillery would identify the village as a target, and then schedule regular artillery fire—usually with limited rounds—on that village. This has rarely resulted in significant fatalities, but renders the area unsafe so that residents are permanently displaced either into neighboring villages or into Monywa town. In Pale, the presence of larger, semi-autonomous militia exerting territorial control, as well as significant numbers of Phyu Saw Htee strongholds, has intensified the active contestation of territory.

The pattern of incidents reflects three spatial factors: proximity to a large SAC base (from which paragliders can be launched, or where forced abduction and arrest are more likely); proximity to major roads or rivers used by SAC troops (and hence a greater likelihood of ground raids); and the presence of SAC-allied Phyu Saw Htee-controlled villages, which act as enablers for SAC operations.

**Table 8.** Outcomes of conflict violence and environmental hazards by township households *(data from Rounds 6, 7, and 8 of Civic Monitoring Study, sampling 90 villages total)*

| | % of households ever displaced | % of households permanently displaced | % of households that ever had house burned down | % of households who experienced food insecurity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Budalin** | 49% | 16% | 2% | 2% |
| **Myaung** | 27% | 6% | 1% | 19% |
| **Monywa** | 39% | 16% | 1% | 28% |
| **Pale** | 33% | 26% | 14% | 49% |

The outcomes of conflict violence show considerable differences, particularly in relation to food insecurity. Whilst displacement incidence has been highest in Budalin, this was less likely to be permanent or to feature arson as a contributing factor. Whilst there is significant economic constraint, food insecurity rates remained low, largely due to the ability of Budalin communities to maintain livelihoods despite considerable constraints. Myaung communities, whilst experiencing less displacement, have had to contend with flooding, as well as a more restrictive economic blockade by SAC. Communities in Monywa have experienced a higher level of food insecurity for two reasons: permanently displaced villages have struggled to engage in livelihoods, and the lack of access to locally produced commodities such as rice and oil has left them more exposed to increases in commodity prices. Households in Monywa reported the highest prices for basic commodities like rice, eggs, and cooking oil, whereas communities in Budalin and Myaung maintained a higher degree of self-sufficiency.

In Pale, permanent displacement affected a much larger number of households compared to other townships, mainly due to burning of

houses by SAC troops. The proximity of villages to transit routes used by SAC troops has meant more intensive contestation of territory. Likewise, communities close to *Phyu Saw Htee* villages have also experienced a greater intensity of conflict incidents. Nearly half of all households in Pale Township reported lack of safety as the main constraint on their livelihoods—twice as high as the rest of Sagaing Region. This, combined with a relative weakness in community welfare systems and a lack of access to food aid, contributed to high rates of food insecurity in Pale. The effect of repeated conflict incidents and security threats is the militarization of the landscape: the formation of warscapes where the shadow of violence extends to all aspects of everyday life.

## Making warscapes I: Threats from land, sky, and water

Militarization in the villages surveyed is effected through three primary means: the direct actions of SAC forces, in terms of raids, airstrikes, artillery, and blockades; the responses and anticipatory actions of communities and resistance forces; and the secondary transformations occurring as a consequence of militarization on a particular sector (for example, changes in gender roles). This section looks at the role of external threats to the formation of warscapes in Sagaing Region.

Raids can come from either roads or rivers. Villages located in the proximity to transit routes used by SAC troops have suffered more than those at a distance:

> Our village is located between two camps, Budalin and [redacted], so when they send troops and ammunition between camps, our village is in between [redacted]. It is on the route they have to take. So, our village is often deserted. We have had to flee more than 30 times in 2023 and 2024 alone. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> Our village is in Myaung township near the border with Magway. So, no matter where they come from, if they come from Magway Region, they come to my village. If they come from Sagaing Regon, they come to my village. Sometimes they come in three columns [from different directions]. At those times, I don't know where to run. At first, they burned down three houses. It took about five days to burn them down [completely], and we couldn't even get to the village [to put the fires out]. When the next batch came, they burned down the village [again]. Many of the houses were burned down. We had to stay in other villages for about 10 days. Some of them [villagers] slept in the forest. It also rained. Then the jet planes came and we had to run [again]. We had nowhere to stay. (MYA08 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Likewise, villages situated near rivers have also been at risk of raids by waterborne troops or artillery fire from naval vessels travelling up or down the Ayeyarwady River:

> Our village is located next to the river. We run whenever a ship comes. Sometimes they pass through to Myaung Town. Sometimes they set up camp at the entrance to the village or just on the other side, and so on, so you have to run and get away. If the soldiers come ashore, they will build up on top of the village, build up on the side of the village, etc., so whichever way we run, we will be caught. (MYA05 villager, personal communication, 2025)

During the first two years of post-coup violence (approximately 2021-2023), ground raids were the main means of violence used by the Myanmar military against communities in these townships. These included ground raids by columns of SAC troops, ostensibly seeking to detain resistance fighters, but in practice, effecting the "four cuts"

strategic approach to what the junta termed "counterterrorism efforts." This included widespread looting of property, burning of houses, and the abduction of villagers to be used as forced porters or human shields:

> When they came, they burned around 300 of the 700 houses in the village. (MYA05 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> They had a system for burning. They came with fuel and equipment so they could burn houses. When they burned houses, they even tried to stop the children [term for armed volunteer village defenders] from getting back to put out the fires. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

This has often had devastating consequences, particularly for those who were not able to flee the advancing troops:

> When houses were burned, there was a person with a disability who could not run and had to be left inside their house. That house was also set on fire, and the person with the disability died in the flames. [...] A young man tried to escape, but his path coincided with theirs [SAC troops], and he was shot and killed. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Looting of property, livestock, and valuables has been commonplace, which, alongside the burning of standing crops or seed stock and the arrest of working-aged men, has severely undermined the economic capacity of communities:

> They [SAC soldiers] didn't burn houses. But when they came, we all fled. They would just take whatever they wanted from the houses. (BDL16 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> They destroyed things by shooting at them. Money, mobile phones, and gold were taken. After that, my father was hit by heavy weapons fire. His right arm was severely injured. They also arrested two men who were simply living peacefully. One was sentenced to 50 years in prison. The other was a person with a disability and [he] was sentenced to 15 years. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2024)

For others who were not able to escape, there was a high risk of abduction, abuse, torture, rape, and murder. In such circumstances, soldiers have ignored the normal ethical values of respect for the elderly or religious spaces:

> If the elderly people couldn't take anything with them, they [SAC soldiers] would beat them up, even in the monastery. They said, 'Don't run, nothing will happen,' but they did what they wanted to do, so people lost trust. If they came, they wouldn't like it if they [elderly villagers] ran, but if they didn't run, they would beat them up and take them away, and people would be disgusted when they saw them. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Women who have been abducted by the military and forced to serve as human shields have also been sexually abused and tortured by SAC soldiers. The social stigma of rape has often resulted in the self-exclusion of victims, who out of a sense of shame do not dare to return to their villages:

> If they were taken by the military, they [SAC soldiers] would abuse and torture the women. After they were tortured, they would release them. Then they [female villagers] would not dare to return to the village. Their families would move to other places, and they would not dare to show their faces in the village. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2024)

This illustrates a critical element of warscapes: the long-term capacity of violence to affect the integrity of social fabric, even long after the event itself. The generated fear and shame supercharge a single act of violence, destroying individual and community lives for years beyond the actual act.

As resistance became more entrenched in the years following the coup, and with mounting losses from ground raids, the SAC increased its use of airstrikes. These have increasingly targeted civilian sites, creating a degree of terror disproportionate to the actual physical damage done:

> Now, what's worse is that even if there is no fighting, the air force will come. The air force will come and drop bombs just like that. If you hear them coming, you won't be able to do anything. (MYA09 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Airstrikes have involved a mix of medium-range jet aircraft, older turboprop aircraft outfitted as bombers, drones, and locally launched paragliders or gyrocopters. Paragliders, either one- or two-person, can be launched from a standard army base and operated by soldiers with minimal training, reducing the pressure on more costly air force equipment. Unlike jet fighters, where there is little or no warning before strikes reach their targets, paragliders emit a low hum not unlike a motorcycle engine, meaning they can be heard and often seen before a strike. However, most villagers seek to stay out of the range of standard weaponry:

> There were occasional heavy artillery strikes, and there were occasional ground attacks, and there were occasional runs. What happened later was that we were in the open, and planes were flying overhead, and bombs were dropping from above—and when there was something like that, we had to immediately flee. (MYA05 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> They [use] heavy weapons [artillery] [...] now they drop bombs with drones, and now they have paragliders. Right now, I'm afraid of those. I was out to try and withdraw money and the paragliders came. All I could do was lie face-down in a field and wait for them to go away. (MYW05 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Another critical element in the creation of warscapes is the use of blockades. These include roadblocks and checkpoints, which contribute to a risk of goods being seized, money being extorted, and people being arbitrarily detained, abducted, or simply killed. In the villages surveyed for this study, the perimeters of SAC camps and some checkpoints had been mined to reduce the risk of attack by resistance troops:

> About a month ago, the roads leading to our village were blocked. Trees were cut down with chainsaws and landmines were planted around the felled trees. Two people have already stepped on landmines on two separate occasions. One of them was seriously injured. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> They [Myanmar military soldiers] check the phone numbers of the people who go to Monywa to work. They [soldiers] are in the north of Monywa Township, and they have set up a checkpoint in [redacted] Village. They have arrested two parahita [altruistic social welfare] volunteers and two other young men [from our village]. We have not been able to contact them since then. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Other aspects of blockades have included restrictions on mobile phone and internet use. In all four of the surveyed townships, mobile internet activity has been significantly restricted, mainly accessible only through either fixed fiber connections or Starlink portals operated by resistance

actors. Militarization in conflict-affected rural Myanmar extends far beyond direct armed confrontation, permeating the everyday spaces in which civilian life unfolds and creating the warscapes described earlier. Rather than being confined to battlefields or military installations, violence becomes embedded within ordinary environments, transforming homes, farmland, and even evacuation routes into spaces of surveillance, suspicion, and potential danger. In this context, the boundaries between civilian and military domains collapse, rendering everyday life inseparable from security risk.

## Making warscapes II: Avoidance, adaptation, and agency

Rather than being neutral, space is socially produced and politically contested (Harvey, 2006; Watts, 2012). In militarized environments, spatial arrangements are reshaped by power relations, control strategies, and patterns of violence. As a result, civilian spaces are reconfigured into zones of control and exclusion in which movement is monitored, access is restricted, and presence itself becomes a potential source of suspicion. Warscapes emerge as physical and social infrastructure are altered through the impact of violence on everyday life. Descriptions of more obvious elements of warscapes abound in previous sections: military infrastructure, burned houses, minefields, and checkpoints.

Landscapes undergo physical changes, due both to the impact of external violence and to the varied responses of those living under threat. Landscapes also undergo changes in their social infrastructure. Many previously thriving villages in Myanmar's conflict areas are today uninhabited as whole communities have relocated to avoid the risks of raids and artillery. Main roads and river crossings are avoided, while smaller side roads assume greater importance. Roads are increasingly appraised for their utility as escape routes from raids, rather than simply for purposes of commerce and transport. A humanitarian program providing small grants to communities found that an increasingly common application purpose has been for road repair (researcher's field

notes, 2026). In peaceful times, applications would focus on commercial utility, and hence, connectivity to other major transport routes. In the face of raids, the key objective is safe escape and the prioritization of back roads leading to more distant, safer havens.

The persistent threat of violence also impacts the way in which space is inhabited—in particular, what can be determined to be "safe space" has changed. Airstrikes, both from jets and paragliders, as well as long-range artillery, have transformed many previously safe places into death traps. For centuries, village monasteries and pagodas were considered safe refuges from all danger. Since 2021, however, the SAC's willingness to deliberately bomb religious buildings has meant these institutions are no longer safe:

> When we hear news and decide to flee, we usually go to the big pagoda at the entrance of the village. If we die there, then so be it. If even the pagoda is shelled and we die, then we die. There is nowhere else to run anyway. (MYA 36 villager, personal communication, 2024)

The psychological impact of targeting monasteries goes beyond simply the removal of a space of refuge. Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, and Thida (2025) consider this to be a new "fifth cut" that the Myanmar military has added to its standard four cuts counterinsurgency strategy, calculated as a "strategic undermining of moral authority by Myanmar Armed Forces" (p.119). Aside from the destruction of buildings, junta troops have frequently used religious buildings as temporary base camps, forcing monks to accommodate them. The garrisoning of troops in monasteries has

> 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 [Buddhist monastic community]. (Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, & Thida, p. 114)

Other civilian infrastructure is also vulnerable to either occupation or destruction. Schools, clinics, and other community buildings, including temporary structures established to provide shelter for displaced persons, are all targets, especially those which are more visible from the air:

> The entire village health clinic was destroyed by drones. What should I call it? We don't know what to call it. It was a bomb dropped from above. The bomb dropped by the drone destroyed our entire clinic. The female doctor from the clinic was also killed. Her son was also injured. Her husband was also seriously injured. Many people who came to the clinic for treatment were also killed and injured. (BDL21 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Between 2021 and early 2026, SAC actions have destroyed a total of 37 civilian buildings in these four townships, including 12 monasteries. In villages located closer to military compounds, raiding troops often commandeer schools, clinics, or even monasteries as temporary bases.

The threat of airstrikes serves to create a persistent atmosphere or terror, restricting free movement. Terror becomes normalized in everyday life, as violence becomes embedded in social reproduction and childhood experience:

> In the past year, our village was bombed by jet planes. If the mothers of the children heard that the planes were coming, they would hide. When the bombs actually landed, the children

> cried and I felt sorry for them. (MYA08 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> When the military arrived, we had to run, and it took two days, two or three days. We ran and ran. Now, we are afraid of the air defense drones, and the danger is even greater in our village. (BDL01 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Such situations and new village realities change the way in which built environments are used. Teachers no longer dare to assemble children in one place to teach out of fear of airstrikes. Village meetings are also limited, as are larger religious festivals:

> I don't dare to teach at school, not at home either. The teacher has to teach at other people's houses, and I don't dare to invite them to her house either. I'm afraid of being shamed if my name gets out. (MYA05 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Built environments themselves also change. Bunkers and bomb shelters have become a common feature in most of the villages surveyed for this study. These range from larger shelters constructed in central locations such as schools for communal purposes to smaller shelters in homes:

> There is a bomb shelter in the village for the school. That is what they [village leaders] are encouraging. (BDL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

**Fig. 4** *A 75-year-old woman in a Myaung village secured a low-cost loan from a village savings and loan organization not to purchase medicine or food, but to construct a bomb shelter under her home. (photo by the research team)*

The junta-affiliated government cut off electrical supplies and internet services to areas under resistance control in late 2021. The result has been a proliferation of alternative infrastructure, such as solar-powered water systems for both potable and non-potable water and clandestine community centers with Starlink hubs to enable villagers to access the internet by the hour.

The transformations are not simply to the visible, built environment. Conflict-related dynamics exert pressure on social topography by constraining the permitted visibility of particular groups. An effect of the targeting of young men for both conscription and forced labor, as well as the tendency of resistance personnel to be male, has been significant

changes in gender roles at the community level. Where previously it was safer for men than women to travel, militarization has altered this dynamic, making it far more hazardous for men—particularly young men. Thus, commercial travel is increasingly undertaken either by women or older men. Social and leadership roles previously exclusively taken by men are now increasingly undertaken by women, including involvement of women in military and security matters:

> The village security is the responsibility of the young people. There is no [longer any] distinction between men and women. (PL06 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In these townships, over 50 percent of respondents reported feeling that women's involvement in public life had increased during the previous six months.

However, warscapes are not universal. Geography, location, preexisting power structures, and political contestation interact with conflict dynamics to produce differentiated rearrangements of physical and social landscapes. Location is a key determinant of both exposure to harm and the capacity to respond.

## A typology of warscapes

Operating at a more localized level, the spatial positioning of a village—its proximity to rivers, forests, military camps, and transport corridors—plays a decisive role in shaping how violence is experienced and how displacement unfolds over time. As previously described, for our analysis, data from interviews conducted in more than 60 villages in four townships in Sagaing Region were analyzed to uncover relationships between spatial positioning and risk of different types of hazards. This analysis identified three different typologies of warscape: riverine villages, camp-adjacent villages (villages close to either an army camp, a major checkpoint, a town held by SAC, or a major transit

road), and inland or isolated villages, which were not proximate to rivers, camps, towns, or major roads. Riverine villages are exposed to artillery shelling, either from a military camp on the opposite bank, or from boat-mounted guns traveling up or down the river. This results in a high incidence of injuries such as shrapnel wounds. Raiding from an opposite bank was also found more likely to be accompanied by widescale looting.

The combination of exposure to flooding, asset-depleting raids, and repeated, often prolonged displacement has resulted in a high prevalence of food insecurity. Villages closer to army camps, towns, or on key transit roads were more likely to be raided, often by troops passing through to other villages. Residents of such villages are more likely to experience arbitrary arrest (where troops raid villages and abduct civilians for use as human shields), suspected militia members, or to forcibly abduct young people as porters or conscripts. They were also more likely to experience airstrikes, mainly from paragliders operating from local bases, with a limited range. More isolated villages—those classified as not having spatial proximity to roads, towns, rivers, or checkpoints—tended to have a lower risk of raids, arson, looting, and flooding, but were exposed to long-range airstrikes from junta jets. Their exposure was less frequent, but also less predictable. Whereas in camp-adjacent villages, there was a high frequency of anticipatory displacement (fleeing a village before a raid took place, for example), in more isolated areas, raids were less predictable, reducing capacity for anticipatory responses.

**Table 9.** Threats, incidents, and outcomes by geographic village typology *(based on interviews and data collected for the Civic Monitoring Study)*

| village geographic typology | **main threats** | **arrests** | **displace-ment** | **arson** | **injuries** | **robbery/ looting** | **flooding** | **food insecurity** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **camp/ town-adjacent** | raids, arrests, airstrikes (paragliders) | 22% | 67% | 33% | 0% | 11% | 11% | 15% |
| **riverine** | artillery, airstrikes (jet), ground raids | 15% | 62% | 15% | 15% | 54% | 15% | 25% |
| **inland or isolated** | raids, air-strikes (jet) | 14% | 14% | 17% | 0% | 14% | 0% | 8% |

***Camp-adjacent villages: Chronic militarization and repeated anticipatory displacement***

Villages located in close proximity to military camps experience some of the most sustained and intensive forms of militarization. In these settings, displacement is rarely triggered by a single episode of violence. Instead, it emerges through the cumulative effects of repeated incursions, surveillance, and the normalization of threat within everyday life. Under such conditions, residents inhabit a continuous state of anticipation in which the necessity of urgent flight remains ever-present. This produces a form of anticipatory displacement, in which households prepare for movement in advance of direct violence. In such situations, belongings are often kept in portable form and evacuation routes are informally mapped in advance.

This anticipatory logic fundamentally restructures social and economic life. Livelihood investments are minimized due to uncertainty, education

is frequently interrupted, and natural patterns of social cohesion weaken as households fragment or relocate at different times:

> In 2023 and 2024, we were forced to flee more than 30 times. (BDL 22 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> Our villages have been repeatedly invaded by the military more than 30 times. There have been cases where villagers have been captured after an invasion, and some have [still] not escaped yet. There have been cases where village houses have been burned down, houses have been destroyed, and there have been cases where people have been shot dead by the military. This is a village that the military has repeatedly invaded. (MYW05 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Rather than an absence of mobility, what ensues in such contexts of anticipatory displacement is a tyranny of entrapment in which the only movement permitted is one where moving is less risky than staying put. Such anticipation becomes a normalized survival strategy embedded within everyday routines in villages affected thus.

***Riverine villages: Cyclical displacement and seasonal entrapment***

In conflict, rivers pose a triple threat. Waterways can be militarized, providing points of entry for troops which, unlike roads, are difficult to defend. Rivers form natural boundaries that can increase the difficulty and risk of escaping from raids. Thirdly, during periods of armed operations, forced displacement frequently coincides with flooding, destroying crops before harvest is possible and submerging evacuation routes. Flooding further intensifies vulnerability by isolating villages for extended periods. Unpaved roads deteriorate rapidly during monsoon seasons, cutting off access to healthcare services, markets, and humanitarian assistance. In addition to physical isolation, contaminated

water sources and damaged housing structures increase public health risks and deepen food insecurity:

> It was raining when they [SAC soldiers] came. The people in the village ran. They blocked off the roads and were shooting from that side, so we had to escape another way, but the river was high and blocking the other way. There were only two boats. We put the women in the boats, then the men, [but] the boats sank and the men had to run through the water. In the pouring rain, there were footprints on the other side of the village. We ran toward the footprints. It was so difficult. Even now, these are very painful memories. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Communities thus experience overlapping shocks that prevent meaningful recovery between cycles of violence. As a result, return is often temporary and followed by renewed displacement, creating a repetitive pattern of partial stabilization and disruption. Such cycles produce a condition of "compound exposure" (Ide et al., 2021) in which the effects of environmental shocks and armed violence serve to reinforce each other. In this context, displacement is both cyclical and increasingly constrained. Entire households often temporarily move to relatively safer villages during periods of flooding or active military operations and return when conditions appear more stable. However, repeated exposure to both hazards gradually erodes assets, resources, coping capacities, and recovery potentials, both of the fleeing villagers and the host village which periodically supports a large influx of IDPs. What was once more commonly seasonal mobility linked to the agricultural cycle now increasingly resembles spatial entrapment in post-coup Myanmar as households remain locked within high-risk environments due to the absence of viable alternatives.

***Inland villages: Sudden displacement and unpredictable violence***

In contrast to camp-adjacent villages where threats are persistent, and riverine villages where displacement follows cyclical environmental patterns, displacement in inland areas is characterized by unpredictability. Whilst less exposed to permanent militarization, regular artillery strikes, persistent air threats, or frequent raids (unless close to roads), in inland villages, attacks frequently occur without warning, forcing households to flee on very short notice and to abandon assets, crops, and livestock. The absence of temporal predictability limits villagers' ability to prepare, reducing opportunities for anticipatory adaptation and increasing exposure to loss. Likewise, more isolated villages have weaker connections with other communities, and so less access to shared resources and cooperative responses.

The unpredictability of inland villages fundamentally shapes how risk is experienced by community members. Without clear patterns of threat, households cannot reliably plan evacuations, safeguard resources, or establish stable coping strategies. As a result, vulnerability is not only material, but also deeply psychological as uncertainty itself becomes a central condition of everyday life:

> We were in the middle of planting. They [Myanmar military troops] just came suddenly. We had to leave everything behind. (PL02 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> At night, around mealtimes, we turn lights off at 8 p.m. That's when the airstrikes come. We hear the warnings and we rush to turn all the lights off. We can't even eat in safety anymore. (PL06 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Building on the lived experiences of research participants in the surveyed villages, this study argues that protracted crisis is spatially produced through the interaction of militarized power, environmental stress, and

structural inequality. These interacting forces generate differentiated patterns of vulnerability, displacement, and recovery across geographic space, as illustrated in Figure 5. This framework illustrates how armed conflict, environmental stress, and structural inequality interact to produce spatially differentiated patterns of vulnerability, displacement, and recovery. Through mechanisms of militarized control, uneven exposure, and restricted access, crisis becomes embedded within specific geographic contexts. These processes generate cyclical displacement, spatial entrapment, and blocked recovery,[7] which in turn reinforce underlying structural conditions, producing a self-sustaining system of protracted crisis.

Displacement is not a temporary response to discrete shocks, but is rather a process actively produced through the interaction of spatial control, environmental pressure, and structural constraint. Through these mechanisms, a crisis is reproduced over time, generating localized, cyclical, and increasingly entrapped patterns of displacement that prevent recovery and sustain long-term vulnerability. Hence, vulnerability in this study is understood not as an inherent characteristic of certain communities, but as a condition produced through the convergence of militarized violence, environmental hazards, livelihood disruption, and the breakdown of effective governance (Justino, 2012).

Cyclical displacement, spatial entrapment, and blocked recovery—where violence and displacement occur simultaneously with other effects which undermine economic and political recovery—are the outcomes of these spatially differentiated warscapes. Whilst conflict violence is both extreme and tangible in post-coup Myanmar, the prolonged obstruction of recovery can also be understood as a form of slow violence, described by Nixon (2011) as

7 "Blocked recovery" refers to a situation where the pathways for recovery are obstructed, and hence recovery is not possible.

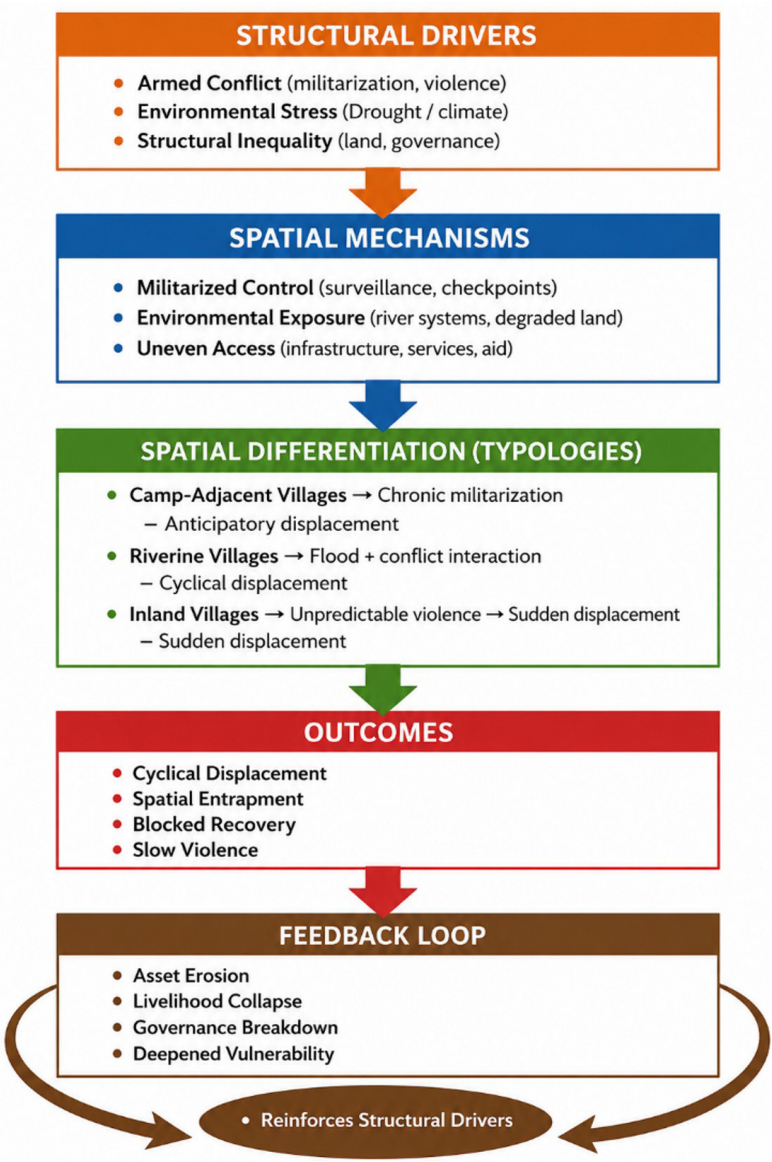


**Fig. 5** *Spatial production of protracted crises*

violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence

> at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. (p. 2)

In these communities, the inability to recover from repeated shocks and ruptures leads to a steady erosion of livelihoods, education systems, health services, and social networks. Unlike immediate acts of violence, which are visible and attract attention, blocked recovery unfolds over extended periods, undermining the foundations of everyday life and producing long-term vulnerability. In contexts such as these, where conflict has altered the physical and social landscape, the capacity to reorganize is critical to the reemergence of community life. This reimagining of community takes place not in the aftermath of conflict, but in the midst of it. It occurs in what Gramsci (1971, p. 275) calls the "interregnum"—a rupture or gap in the continuity of a government or social order—through a combination or repudiation, rejection, and collapse where new forms of governance have yet to emerge. The following two chapters explore the forms and dynamics of this emergent reimagining in four stages. Chapter 4 looks at the *who*, or the key actors in warscape governance, as well as the *how*, or the methods of warscape governance. Chapter 5 looks at the *why*, analyzing the hidden currents shaping emergent governance in Myanmar.

Before moving on to the *who* and *how*, the next section briefly looks at how narratives collected from the surveyed townships have changed over the past five years since the 2021 coup. This is an important analytical strand in considering how people living in affected communities narrate the changes in their community. As the experience of terror becomes more habituated, so the language used to narrate it evolves.

The language reflects changes in attitude, which are also expressed in the nature of agency, or response to the ongoing threat. This in turn points to a key emotional dynamic of emergent governance: the gradual move from shock to defiance, adaptation, and stubborn—yet flexible and resilient—resistance.

## Narrating warscapes

Over 100 interviews were conducted by the research team between 2022 and 2026 from the same core group of communities—and in some cases, with the same interviewees. The language, vocabulary, narrative style, and accounts of the interviewees have notably undergone significant changes as the post-coup conflict has persisted. On a descriptive level, the narratives document adaptations in the Myanmar military's tactics, with the evolution from basic ground raids to more sophisticated, coordinated aerial attacks with jets, drones, and paragliders. However, on an emotional level, the narratives demonstrate a shift from descriptions of the horrific experiences of war to narratives that focus on the survival, adaptation, and resilience of the population in the face of unequal warfare and prolonged instability.

### *2022-2023: Narratives of fear and loathing*

Observation, vigilance, and situational analysis are evident in the interviewees' early post-coup narratives. During this period, the Myanmar military's tactics shifted from somewhat arbitrary violence to methods aimed at systematically destroying rural communities and their livelihoods. The interviewees' narratives, therefore, largely focus on the nature of these evolving military tactics and their impact on local populations. Some early narratives revealed a sense of shock and disbelief, but as the exposure to violence became repetitive and more extreme, the narrative language became colder and more detached. They increasingly described military incursions from a tactical perspective, using analytical terms such as "not random invasions," "became more systematic," and "main method." These narratives sound as if they

derive from a tactical report documenting military incursions more than emotional pleas for relief. The military is not seen as a force that loots and retreats, but as an illegitimate organization that has colonized and bastardized the landscape, occupying schools and monasteries as bases from which to destroy the local community. Emotionally, the narrative language is of shock and hatred, often using pejorative terms such as "dogs" to describe the military and its personnel. However, a sense of growing emotional detachment in the narration of hatred is also evident.

***2024: The language of loss and fragmentation***

By 2024, the narrative structure of participants' testimonies has largely broken down, reflecting the expansion of the conflict resulting in more people suffering specific, personal loss. The language shifts from systematic overviews to highly personal, fragmented narratives of material and psychological abuse. Narration becomes more urgent and frantic, describing lists of things stolen or destroyed, but also serving as tacit acknowledgement of the more brutal realities of torture, rape, and murder. The language of hatred and fear is compounded by anxiety, as more frequent and widespread attacks threaten or destroy safe spaces. Many become familiar with the experience of displacement, sheltering in villages, monasteries, or relatives' homes not far from their villages. They are also experiencing chronic unpredictability, as the military changes its raiding tactics. The language of displacement remains tied to home. Locals "hide not far from their villages" and "continue to receive information." The participants' narrative language of 2024 is the language of a population clinging to the edge of their known world, desperate to return.

***2025-2026: Stories of defiant survival***

In 2025 and 2026, the language has again shifted, now from fear, hatred, and loss to defiance and determination. The format commonly shifts to dark, realistic accounts of sustained exposure to evolving military

technology, such as artillery, jet fighters, drones, and paragliders. The description of these devices as "cost-effective and manpower-saving" introduces a cold, administrative tone into the narratives—akin to what Hannah Arendt (1963, p. 287) describes as the "banality of evil." Killing has become both more targeted and at the same time more indiscriminate. Targeted as air and artillery strikes deliberately destroy schools, clinics, and monasteries, and indiscriminate as these strikes, unlike early ground raids which focused on detaining young men, result in casualties of all ages and genders. While narratives from 2023 and 2024 describe how "men are targeted," the 2025-2026 narratives expand to include "men, women, and all ages" and "children of all ages and genders." The terminology utilized shifts from that of selective punishment to more widespread destruction.

More recent narratives also reveal a sense of acceptance, defiance, and fatigue. For example, in 2026, testimony from village BDL15 demonstrates a narrative pattern characterized by fatigue and cyclical exposure: "We are always fighting—at dawn, at night, this very morning" (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026). Narratives reflecting on the previous five years of conflict reveal an absence of optimism that conflict will cease, focusing instead on the years of losses: "We farmers will not be able to do anything this year, last year, 2023, or 2024" (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026).

Survival has become normalized, as emotional terms change from "fear" and "hatred" to "practical concern for survival." Narratives speak of how the population "feels less afraid [now] and has become more concerned for their survival." Narratives of conflict from this period increasingly employ specific technical terms and jargon for military raids, columns, and equipment. Parents report how children are able to differentiate the caliber and trajectory of artillery strikes upon hearing the sound of projectiles in the air.

However, despite a lack of optimism that peace will come any time soon, the 2025-2026 narratives also shift towards descriptions of survival and defiant rebuilding in the face of persistent threats. It is as if the ultimate act of defiance is not simply to survive, but to stand up and rebuild community life even when the threat to destroy has yet to be neutralized. In the early stages, the narratives are filled with fear, panic, and uncertainty, and focus on direct experiences of violence. In particular, the psychological impact can be seen in the descriptions of artillery fire, airstrikes, and forced displacement. Later, these conditions come to be perceived as part of everyday life and more attention is paid to future plans for village development, education, and governance. The pressures of protracted insecurity, the fatigue of hosting displaced persons, and extended economic hardships still persist. The hope that is evident in later narratives is not due to the disappearance of the threat, but rather to a defiant resilience of communities unbowed by several years of intense brutality. These communities undertake their daring and risky reimaginations as the only meaningful alternative to submission or surrender.

Chapter 4

# Actors and Scripts: Reimagining Communities in Myanmar's Post-Coup Warscapes

*With the 3P administration, there are different ways to control [the village]. If they [new village administrators] come with sticks, knives, or weapons to beat us, we have to speak [out] against that.*
—Villager in Myaung Township, 2025

*The governance model is currently in the interim period. Some rules and regulations have been issued, but the village administration is not fully formed yet. Mostly, governance depends on local conditions.*
—Villager in Pale Township, 2025

Prior to the military coup in February 2021, governance in Myanmar's Anyar region functioned under a relatively clear and hierarchical administrative structure. Village governance was primarily managed by a single village administrator who was appointed or recognized through formal state procedures. This administrator played a central role in overseeing local affairs, including civil administration, tax collection, land management, dispute resolution, and communications with township and district authorities. While state capacity in rural areas was often uneven and sometimes limited, this system nonetheless provided

a degree of stability, predictability, and administrative continuity (South & Lall, 2016). Public services such as education and healthcare were largely delivered through government institutions. Public schools operated under the national education system, and rural health centers provided basic medical services to local populations. Although access to quality services varied depending on location and resources, these systems formed the backbone of social infrastructure in the region. At the same time, social cohesion within villages remained strong. Communities were bound together by shared cultural practices, religious institutions such as monasteries, and long-standing traditions of mutual assistance. Informal networks of support often complemented formal governance structures, helping communities manage everyday challenges (Griffiths, 2019).

The 2021 military coup led to the rapid fragmentation of state authority, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Anyar (also referred to as the central dry zone, CDZ). In areas aligned with the NUG, formal judicial and administrative institutions—including courts, police forces, and township-level governance structures—continue to function to some extent, but their authority is uneven and often constrained by insecurity, limited territorial control, and resource shortages. As a result, local communities have assumed primary responsibility for their own governance, developing innovative alternative mechanisms to resolve disputes and maintain social order.

Up to this point, we have not made specific reference to Myanmar being a "failed" or "failing" state, despite a wealth of evidence highlighting the central authorities' receding territorial control, their inability to deliver public goods and services, their lack of legitimacy, and the paucity of international relations of the military junta-led administration (Wells & Aung Naing, 2024). Rather than focusing deliberations on whether the state has failed or not, our analysis has followed lines of thinking proposed by Aung Naing (2025) and others at the fourth International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies held at Chiang Mai University

in Chiang Mai, Thailand in 2024, which employed assemblage theory to consider not what has been lost, or what ought to be in post-coup Myanmar, but rather

> 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[ir] current situation[s]. (p. 21)

Our analysis of local governance in communities in the four townships in Sagaing Region included in this study draws on assemblage thinking to look at how community in Myanmar has been reimagined in terms of organization and administration. A key facet of resistance in rejecting military rule has been the ejection of actors and systems associated with militarized control. In the absence of previous external actors exerting influence through a downward, hierarchical, and largely uniform system, communities either disperse, disintegrate, or become ungoverned or ungovernable—or a process of reimagining takes place in pursuit of new potentialities. As Krieder and O'Leary (2025) note,

> new societies are not founded as products of historical necessity. Rather, social formations are self-instituted through acts of creative imagination [...] the emergence of new institutions and of new ways of living is not a "discovery" [...] but an active constitution. (p. 51)

The authors do not claim that the results of creative imagination are necessarily good, positive, or superior to forms of governance that existed previously, or that the emergent forms have no elements or resemblances to previous iterations. However, this perspective asserts that the process of new community forms emerging are not simply reactions to external circumstances, but instead arise from active

reimaginings that take place in the crucible of conflict and protracted adversity. However, the collapse/withdrawal/ejection of previous governing authority represents a form of decolonization, as described by Joronen and Griffiths (2022):

> [a] 'disenclosure of the world'—an opening up to the new emergence of what has been closed-off, repressed. Such 'disenclosure' comprises [...] more than a responsive form of decolonisation, particularly as it undoes the prevalent colonial power relations by [...] 'raising a barrier' from what had been previously enclosed and suppressed, and by opening a space, or an 'advent', for 'something new, a blossoming'. (p. 8)

In the more than 100 interviews conducted in the communities across four years of fieldwork, what has emerged is a complex, overlapping matrix of old and new, of traditional and radical, and of formal and informal. Informal justice is an ever-present implicit presence in community life in Myanmar (Kyed, 2021) with pragmatic solutions enabled by webs of interpersonal networks and deeply enshrined habits of bribery, corruption, and tacit avoidance of officialdom. Arguably, the emergent forms of governance represent a more explicit rendering of what was already there, repudiating not so much the actual systems, structures, and actors of previous governments, but the notion that their actual authority was ever legitimate in the first place.

In considering the emergence of local governance in spaces where territorial control is maintained by armed forces in opposition to a previously state-affiliated armed group, it is tempting to frame the discussion under the rubric of "rebel governance." However, aside from the broader debates of just causes and which side has a stronger claim to legitimacy, this may also represent an error of categorization. As Worral (2018) points out, it is important not to focus too intently on the term "rebel" in "rebel governance," as

> [r]ebels clearly are a part of an ordering process, often an important part, but they are never in complete control of that process. This reality, therefore, forces us to focus on the interaction of the rebels with a whole range of ordering forces at play […] As if formalised state structures are so penetrated by societal and cultural norms […] it is equally likely that rebel groups' governance abilities and the order over which they preside, whether largely collusive, coexistent or coercive in nature, will also be shaped by a range of factors and actors. (p. 710)

A category of rebel governance presumes the primacy of a specific—and usually armed—group. The reality is far less clear-cut. In the four townships where interviews were conducted, a multitude of actors, both armed and unarmed, have interacted to produce "governance" in particular spaces. The actors, methods, and outcomes have been shaped by geography, prior social hierarchies, their exposure to different kinds of violence, and peculiarities of their own community. In the area included in this study, the NUG bases claims to its ongoing legitimacy through their appeal to both the previous election in 2015 and the subsequent landslide of 2020.[8] As described in Chapters 1 and 2, the NUG has sought to establish and maintain a system of governance in "liberated" areas of central Myanmar based on three intersecting sets of actors, collectively known as the "3Ps," responsible for defense, security, and administration. However, these designations represent the "given" structure and set of actors as specified in constitutions and guidelines. The reality (or realities) is far more complex. Returning to assemblage theory as a useful way to map out entities which have fluid, often overlapping constituent elements, our analysis looks at what is actually present as governance in the everyday experience of people living within it by considering how different categories of elements are arranged in relation to each other:

8 The NUG was initially formed with elected lawmakers, primarily from the NLD party, as key members and leaders. The Committee Representing *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* is effectively a legislative body in exile, was key in forming the NUG in early 2021, and hence claims a mandate based on electoral success.

> [...] local governance in an area controlled by several different armed factions may be considered as the notional assemblage. [...] [The] different elements [which] may be part of local governance, [...] human elements, such as armed actors, civilian actors, religious leaders, merchants, village elders, teachers, and farmers, [and] 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. [...] These are tentatively mapped out, usually in a way which allows them to be easily moved around to demonstrate multiple or shifting relationships. (Aung Naing, 2025, p. 26)

Our study here focuses on four main categories: geographical elements; individual human actors; collectives; and non-material elements such as tradition, history, laws, and revolutionary traditions.

**Table 10.** Components of local governance assemblage *(adapted from Aung Naing, 2025)*

| **geography (natural features and built environment)** | **individual human actors** | **organizations (collectives)** | **non-material elements** |
|---|---|---|---|
| rivers | villagers | armed groups | tradition |
| hills | religious leaders | NUG | history |
| roads | village elders | SAC-affiliated villages | laws |
| camps | merchants | trade networks | previous policy |
| checkpoints | youth | *parahita* (social welfare) organizations | revolutionary demands |

Having considered aspects of geography in Chapter 3, this chapter will consider key actors and collectives involved in the production of governance, and how these interact with non-material elements to produce different forms of governance.

## Governance actors

Returning to assemblage theory, the forms of local governance experienced by people living in communities in these townships feature a more nuanced and complex interpretation of this system. If local governance is conceptualized as performative, actors and audiences alike (and frequently, people are both) recognize a script. However, the "script," which people recognize and validate as "real" and legitimate, is not always the one passed down from above by the official bodies. The majority of the community members represented in interviews reported governance in some way connected with the NUG. However, there was a considerable range of difference in the influence of the NUG, often linked to public perceptions of effective performance.

In terms of specific roles, armed resistance groups (PDFs) were widely cited as wielding the critical power. Whilst often comprised of local youth, such groups also include young people having joined from other areas, such as students and CDM staffers. PDFs are widely regarded as youth-led and youth-maintained, to the extent that the common term for them is ကလေး (*Kalay*), literally meaning "children." Participant interviews reporting PDF actions commonly feature descriptions such as "The children came and organized how we should evacuate." However, whilst armed groups (mainly PDFs) remain a dominant force, their involvement in day-to-day governance is relatively limited, often focused on broader security issues or specific issues where security and commerce intersect, offering opportunities for revenue-raising (for example, the licensing and supervision of gambling, mining, or smuggling activities). Public support for PDFs is nuanced: although their endeavors and sacrifices are honored, alongside requests for donations,

there is a growing concern regarding abuses of power, tolerance of illicit activities, and a fear that those involved may never be able to renounce violence.

More prominent in day-to-day governance have been local village administrators, often referred to either as the village head or the အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးမှူ (*Ok Chok Yay Hmu*), who were either selected by the village members themselves or appointed through a NUG-led process. Some operate within the broad 3P framework, whilst others operate more independently. One significant feature has been tension between radical and pragmatic; in the early days of the post-coup resistance, old administrators were rejected in favor of new appointees, but in the majority of cases, a failure to deliver a credible performance resulted in the return of previous village leaders who could demonstrate a higher level of competence.

The village head is often part of, or served by, an administrative team. The structures vary from village to village. Administrative teams typically consist of three-to-seven members, depending on village size. Villages registered with the NUG receive security support from NUG-affiliated PDFs. In contrast, villages not registered do not receive security protection or security-related information. This reflects a "give-and-take" dynamic in NUG authority-building. One respondent explained:

> One good thing is that because our village is registered under NUG, we have not suffered village destruction or loss of lives. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

***Educated professionals***

CDM staff—including teachers, lawyers, and engineers—are often important personnel in village administration. This brings a level of experience and technical know-how to administrative teams, but at the same time highlights tensions between a desire for radical solutions

and pragmatic continuity. Village elders have played an increasingly important role in village affairs, particularly where NUG-appointed administrators have not managed to gain the trust of the community. The role of religious leaders, primarily Buddhist monks, has diminished in many communities, apart from smaller villages, except within the roles of "elder" and "administrator." Within these categories, different actors and models of governance have emerged. Although the roles are designated, the way in which they are performed varies, resulting in different expressions of governance.

In a relatively large riverine village in Myaung Township, an NUG-affiliated former schoolteacher has taken responsibility for administration. There, a governance structure has been formed consisting of a village head (chairperson), village committee members, and village focal persons. Among the village committee and focal persons, there are both high school and university graduates. Under the leadership of trained and educated persons, some of whom are part of the CDM, governance is functioning well, and as a result, livelihood and development activities can be undertaken. The education and professional backgrounds of the chairperson and committee members have contributed to their development of strong communication skills, and hence their governance style is characterized by transparency, openness, and non-discrimination in which the administrator welcomes villagers to openly criticize, point out weaknesses, and highlight inequalities in governance—all important components of effective governance:

> Under the leadership of the teacher, there is a village committee and focal persons. Among them, there is also a teacher and some who have passed Grade 10 or are [university] graduates. These people are socially skillful and know how to act appropriately in different situations and how to deal with different organizations. (MYA08 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Under such governance, villagers currently perceive their village as secure. The authority of the chairperson and committee members, derived from their professionalism and the approval of the public, also enables them to maintain good relations with local PDFs:

> In our village, when PDFs come, they do not carry weapons openly. You cannot even recognize them as PDF soldiers. They respect elders and do not discriminate between men and women wherever they go. (MYA08 villager, personal communication, 2025)

After the 2021 coup, thousands joined the CDM, including many professionals such as teachers. After an initial crackdown by the authorities, many fled their places of work and returned to their hometowns and villages. The junta placed the names of many on arrest lists, which restricts their ability to travel. A consequence of this is a concentration of educated professionals in rural areas—a kind of enforced localization of human capacity. Ironically, this has served to bolster the efforts of the NUG to establish technically competent leadership in the areas under its control.

***Altruistic locals***

In a small village in Budalin Township located near to an army checkpoint, local residents have assumed leadership responsibilities under 3P structures. There, former village heads and farmers serve as People's Administration members. These individuals take on governance roles based on their altruistic motivations for the benefit of their community. Here, villagers perceive local 3P governance actors as being driven primarily by altruism:

> They always organize the community. Their core motivation is based on altruism. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026).

> That child [PDF volunteer] is a priceless young man in our village. He truly works with a spirit of charity. Because of him, our village was able to get electricity. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Working for their small community, People's Administration groups have taken responsibility for many practical issues, such as for irrigation by pumping river water for agriculture, often working late into the night. They also provide security for those needing to travel outside of their village to access healthcare and facilitate safe transportation of agricultural products for trade between villages. The PDFs coordinate information sharing among village administrators to ensure safe travel routes. Due to their involvement in essential livelihood activities and healthcare support, villagers view these groups as genuinely working for the community's benefit. These groups also demonstrate transparency and emphasize community mobilization. As a result, villagers respect and comply with their governance:

> Villagers listen to what the People's Administration members say. I think people follow them because they believe they are working for good. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026)

These administrators' participatory, non-authoritarian approach is also valued:

> People respect them because they do not use authority to command. They call meetings and discuss [community issues] openly. Everyone has the right to speak. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Here, locally embedded 3P governance actors have gained legitimacy through addressing practical needs such as livelihoods and healthcare, reinforcing trust based on altruistic governance.

***Domineering militiamen***

The experience of residents in another riverine village in Myaung Township has been vastly different from the one described in the previous section. In this second village, although governance is ostensibly facilitated under NUG 3P structures, the influence of the NUG and of non-armed elements is weaker and there is less local embeddedness of administrators. Villagers accept these actors as authorities because they are part of the anti-military resistance but do not genuinely approve of their behavior or style of governance. Support for these actors is therefore based more on necessity than trust:

> During the NLD time, governance was better. Our village leader was good. Now, we support PDFs because we oppose the military, but we do not like how they govern. It is not systematic or correct. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

A key dislike is the lack of transparency on the part of the post-coup administrators. Aid projects are not openly explained to villagers, and they perceive nepotism in the way that benefits seem to be distributed mainly to close associates or relatives of authorities. Public meetings are only held for issues where the value of benefits, such as cash or goods, is limited, while decisions involving valuable resources are made privately. Villagers do not dare to criticize openly due to fear:

> We do not like their actions, but we cannot speak out. We are afraid of PDFs. Also, those involved are not educated and cannot make proper decisions. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Administrators and PDF soldiers are also perceived as not providing an admirable moral example for others by, for example, engaging in gambling and alcohol consumption. Their relative lack of education is seen to result in often hasty and inappropriate decisions:

> We accept them as leaders, but they gamble, drink alcohol, and are not [positive] role models. Their decisions are careless and not well thought out. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Although governance structures exist in theory, this village is located far from township-level governance, resulting in weak oversight and limited reach of NUG authority, thus limiting the impact of effective check-and-balance mechanisms. Villagers are aware of governance failures but feel they cannot raise complaints due to fear and lack of access to higher authorities. Here, geography plays a critical role: relative remoteness from the NUG power bases results in the relative hegemony of armed actors with little civilian authority to balance them.

***Consensus democrats***

In a number of villages included in this study, governance actors are selected through community consensus rather than following the NUG appointment system. Administrative teams consist of three-to-seven members to ensure appropriate oversight and balance of powers. Team members include former village leaders and respected community figures. Selection is not done through formal voting but through community meetings. Each household sends one representative, and agreement is confirmed verbally through repeated consensus (three rounds of approval). If a member resigns, replacements are proposed and approved by the community.

> We hold a meeting. If a leader cannot continue, we propose a replacement and ask if people agree. Each household must [send a representative to] attend. (BDL 03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In one village with three elected administrative members, the team includes people with diverse skills and qualities and explicitly recognizes the need for a balance of skills within an administrative team:

> One person is educated […] another is physically strong and brave […] someone who can control troublemakers in the village […] and another has a large social network with many relatives and connections in the village. These three types of people come together and lead the village. (BDL 07 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Through a form of consensus democracy, community members collectively choose individuals who are most suitable, effective, and capable of serving the village's interests. Whilst not following formal electoral procedures, it is notable that they succeed in demonstrating a participatory and practical selection system, even during a period of protracted conflict.

***Independents***

In several smaller villages—especially those in proximity to checkpoints or army camps and thus somewhat vacated by young people—the repetitive cycle of displacement, arson, and return has rendered formal governance nearly impossible. Instead of NUG-facilitated governance, many of these villages have established their own governance bodies to carry out administrative functions and resolve local disputes. These are referred to as self-reliant governance groups, not falling under any particular political organization. Their independence serves as a form of protection, as these villages are located close to army camps, where overt affiliation with the NUG would likely result in severe reprisals:

> We are not really on this side or that side. We are in the middle, so we don't come under anyone's authority. So, we do it ourselves (ကိုယ်ထူးကိုယ်ထ, *Ko-Htoo-Ko-Hta*), according to what works

> for our community. (PL06 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Self-reliant local governance groups tend to rely on individuals with a form of personal authority, such as village elders, monks, and other influential individuals. In some villages, the leader of the local governance group, referred to as "respected elder" (ရပ်မိရပ်ဖ, *Ya-Mi-Ya-Pha*), is selected by monks, while in others, leaders are chosen through village consensus. In many cases, villagers reappoint individuals who had administrative experience prior to the coup. The governance group typically consists of at least five members. Those who are selected avoid political terms such as "administrator" or "chairperson" and instead use safer terms like "respected elder." This is a mitigation strategy employed to reduce their vulnerability to personal risk. This situation reflects the overarching condition of civilians being trapped and insecure, as they are unable to rely on any formal political institution for protection. This is particularly the case in a small village in Budalin Township located close to a major army checkpoint. There, any open affiliation with the NUG risks serious reprisals from the Myanmar military:

> No one dares to be called a chairperson. They are afraid that if they take the role, their name will become known. (BDL01 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In the decision-making processes of independent local governance bodies, both the perspectives of the administrative group and the community are commonly taken into account. However, villagers still express a preference for having a formal governance system:

> Because there is no clearly defined authority, we don't feel secure. (BDL01 villager, personal communication, 2026)

These governance organizations often lack a formal structure, and the shortage of young people in the community means that security groups cannot be easily formed:

> Our village is small, so there are no PDF members. Most young men live in Yangon, so the majority [of residents] are [now] women. Because of this, there is no one to join such groups. (BDL01 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This again illustrates the role of geography: proximity to camps, towns, and major roads results in a state of "permanent impermanence" due to repeated displacement, a state of heightened insecurity due to frequent raids, and an outmigration of young people. This constrains the options for local governance, leading to the formation of pragmatic and flexible models.

***Guardians: Monks and village elders***

Across the four townships included in this research, the role of Buddhist monks is varied. In some communities, the authority of monks has been undermined by a combination of deliberate sidelining by SAC military actions—the calculated targeting of moral and religious capital as part of the "fifth cut" (Lwin Lwin, Su, Aung Naing, & Thida, 2025). Monasteries have been transformed from sanctuaries to targets, and so have been stripped of their traditional role as safe havens, educational spaces, and community gathering places. Some monks are perceived of being unable or unwilling to assist their communities by, for example, allowing storage of goods or shelter of people in their monasteries. The treatment of monks by SAC troops who try to use them as mediators or go-betweens to convince PDFs not to attack them has, in some cases, resulted in suspicion of the monks on the part of villagers, thus serving to undermine their authority. In a number of cases, senior monks have had legitimate fears of civilian casualties if they were to allow IDPs to shelter in their monasteries. But others have been reported to be simply

worried about infrastructural damage. In some cases, monks have become a marginal presence in their communities:

> As for the village monk's role, what can we say? He is not currently involved in any political activities regarding this matter [conflict]. He just stays in his own monastery. (PL02 villager, personal communication, 2025)

However, in some smaller villages, and military camp- or urban-adjacent villages subject to repeated raids and displacement, the role of Buddhist monks is more significant in the emergent self-reliant governance systems. In these villages, monks often play a role in selecting village elders or appointing individuals with altruistic intentions as village leaders. Monks may also play a role as arbitrators of disputes. If people are dissatisfied with how village elders resolve administrative issues, final decisions are often referred to the monk. Hence, some monks play a key role in mediating disputes and facilitating negotiations within the village:

> Most issues are resolved by the village elders. If they cannot solve them—since there is a monk in the village—the monk will step in and resolve the issue. He mediates, and his influence over the whole village is strong. (BDL16 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In some cases, monks act as the most senior arbiters of disputes or issues:

> If there is a big problem, there is a monk in the village. The monk is the most influential person in the village. The monk solves the administrative problems of the village. If there is a misunderstanding or a problem, if there is a big problem, such as education, then you can rely on him. The village is under

> his influence, he does everything, including religion. (MYA35 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Monks often act as guarantors of safety. When people need to seek medical treatment at night and must pass through checkpoints, monks will frequently accompany them. The presence of monks allows villagers to pass through SAC checkpoints more easily, as soldiers tend to assume that no harm will come from groups accompanied by monks.

Elders also function as de facto leaders in villages where governance structures either have not been established, or have not gained sufficient credibility:

> We only take cases to the village elders. They are like administrative officials, so we just go and tell them. If there is a decision to be made, we go and tell them, 'This guy is drunk,' or something like that. Only if they can't solve it do we try to find someone with more authority. (PL07 villager, personal communication, 2026)

The source of legitimacy for elders derives partly from their conferred status, but also from their deep local knowledge.

***Youth activists***

Youth involvement in the villages included in this study has tended to be in two main forms: as soldiers in PDFs or local defense forces, and as community volunteers in village welfare organizations. Often, village youth gain status and power through their involvement in armed groups, derived through a mixture of respect by others for their commitment and sacrifice, and fear of their guns. However, a common narrative is also of young people gaining influence through their involvement in village social organizations, known as parahita. Griffiths (2019) has noted the transition after 2012 from village youth leader organizations in

rural areas (known as Kalatha Kaung Saung), often tasked with defense against bandits, to parahita organizations undertaking responsibilities for social functions such as funerals, fundraising, and education.

The 2021 coup has in all reality reversed that trend, with the youth organizations reverting back to a security focus. However, this means that there is often considerable slippage in roles, and as such, young people in some villages have also gained considerable influence in the governance sphere through their organizational and leadership skills in parahita organizations. In a medium-size village in Budalin Township, NUG-registered village administrators technically function as the official governance actors. However, it is young people who hold power and trust in the village as a result of their demonstration of capacity for leadership in organizing social affairs such as funerals and overseeing disaster management efforts. Their performance of effective leadership contrasts with that of the official administrators, who are widely considered weak and ineffective:

> In the past, the administration included only village elders. Now the youth are also included. Rather than the village administrators, the youth are the more active members. (PL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

During repeated experiences of displacement, youth groups play a significant role in helping vulnerable populations, including people with disabilities and the elderly:

> Youth leaders are the ones governing. Young men are relied upon for everything—social affairs, funerals, all aspects. They also have authority. We rely only on the youth. (BDL21 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Here, young people are afforded legitimacy by the rendering of a credible performance of public service.

## Governance models: The collectives

The absence or withdrawal of formal state institutions has compelled communities to reconstruct governance from the ground up. This process is not uniform but rather varies significantly across locations. In many NUG-aligned villages, governance has evolved into a hybrid model that combines elements of formal administrative systems with informal, community-based practices. Leadership is typically collective rather than individualized. Village committees, local leaders, civil society actors, and respected elders collaborate to manage administrative functions, resolve disputes, and coordinate responses to emerging challenges (Progressive Voice, 2022). This shift toward collective leadership reflects both practical necessity and changing notions of legitimacy. In the absence of state authority, legitimacy is increasingly derived via community trust, participation, and the ability to deliver tangible outcomes. Decision-making processes have become more participatory, involving consultations and consensus-building among community members. However, this has also introduced new complexities, as different actors may hold competing priorities or perspectives.

Post-coup, security has become a central dimension of governance in the CDZ region. Without reliable protection from the state, local defense responsibilities have largely been assumed by PDFs and community-based security groups. These actors play a crucial role in safeguarding villages, monitoring threats, and responding to military incursions. At the same time, their involvement in governance extends beyond security. They often influence administrative decisions, resource allocation, and the enforcement of rules. This creates a situation in which civilian governance and military functions are deeply intertwined, occasionally leading to tensions but also enabling coordinated responses to external threats (Crisis Group, 2022).

Despite the ongoing conflict and instability, community resilience remains a key pillar of governance. Local populations have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in maintaining essential services under extremely difficult conditions. In the education sector, many communities have established informal or "interim" education systems to replace state-run schools. Similarly, healthcare services are provided through mobile clinics, community health workers, and civil society groups. These efforts are frequently carried out under significant risk with limited resources and constant security threats (UNDP, 2025).

Social cohesion continues to play a critical role in sustaining these adaptive systems. Shared experiences of conflict, displacement, and resistance have strengthened collective identity and solidarity among community members. Mutual aid networks, resource-sharing practices, and collective decision-making processes contribute to the resilience of local governance structures. However, prolonged conflict also places considerable strain on these social systems, potentially weakening trust and increasing internal inequalities. As a result, governance in these villages is both a unifying and contested process. While communities work together to address common challenges, they must also navigate internal tensions, power dynamics, and resource constraints. The balance between cooperation and conflict within communities is constantly evolving, shaped by changing circumstances on the ground.

In most of the villages across the four townships surveyed, governance mechanisms recognized by the NUG are functioning to some degree. Among the townships, Myaung has more developed structures, including township-level administration, defense, and security. Some townships have established multi-tiered governance structures (village, cluster, and township levels), while others only have village or cluster-level structures. However, the ground conditions, particularly exposure to violence and ongoing security threats, has had a significant influence on the emergent forms of governance. The exposure to frequent raids

by SAC troops experienced by military camp- and town-adjacent villages has reduced the capacity to establish visible, formal governance systems. Likewise, more remote villages, whilst on one hand enjoying more capacity to establish locally derived governance models, are also furthest from the influence of the NUG in acting as a balance to local militias. Within these categories, different actors and models of governance have emerged. These can be categorized in relation to two axes: institutional-individual, and written law-customary practice.

Few villages could be said to function in a consistently institutional way, which would entail both a stable arrangement of the 3Ps and consistent application of written laws and procedures. However, a minority of villages reported well-defined, functioning expressions of the 3P model, albeit providing key governance services through a mixture of written law and customary practice. The largest category of village governance models would be classified as hybrid, but with a recognizable connection to the 3P model. Here, established 3P structures work alongside local actors with shared authority. However, a significant minority of villages have exhibited a second model best described as "parallel-hybrid." With such models, governance actors and processes are largely determined by the community, either due to weak penetration of NUG influence or local contextual factors which have meant that overt NUG affiliation represents a security risk. This is particularly the case for villages located near army camps that have eschewed overt identification with the NUG for fear of retaliation by the Myanmar military. Lastly, a third category of ad hoc governance describes somewhat unstable, transitional village models, including areas where armed groups dominate, or where repeated or sustained displacement has made more established forms of governance impractical. This also includes areas where 3P-influenced governance has broken down, is dysfunctional, or has been rejected by the local community in favor of its own models.

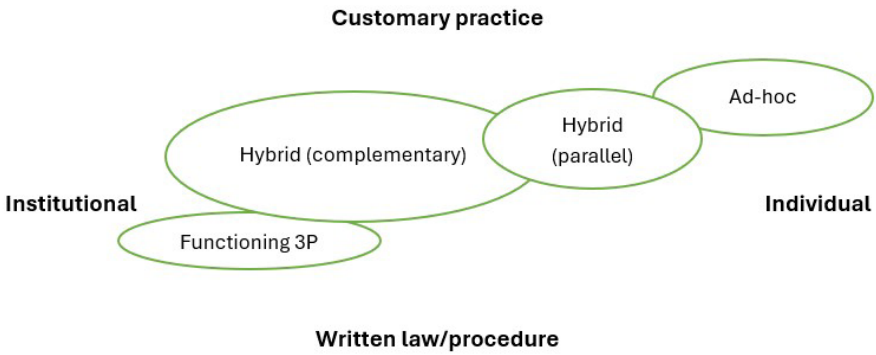


**Fig. 6** *Forms of governance structures in Myaung, Budalin, Monywa, and Pale Townships*

Whilst not necessarily representative of the studied townships as a whole, Sagaing Region, or the Anyar region, this analysis suggests that the process of institutionalization is far from complete, and exists more on paper than in reality. Likewise, the influence of written law and procedures remains marginal—although this has been a feature of local governance and everyday justice in Myanmar for decades, even when administrative systems were more formalized (Kyed, 2021).

As noted previously, geography and location play a significant role in shaping governance systems, mainly through constraining the influence of the NUG and exposure to disruptive security incidents. Hence, camp-adjacent villages have tended to have more informal hybrid structures, or in some cases, ad hoc governance arrangements based on specific local conditions and constraints. Riverine villages, by contrast, were the most likely to have functional 3P structures, or at least more formalized hybrid arrangements, largely due to the enablement of sustained NUG influence as a consequence of more stable territorial control. Remote villages tend to have less NUG influence, and as a consequence, more variegated forms of governance.

Table 11 outlines the types of actors and models that were found to be most likely to be involved in governance based on the village typologies (camp-adjacent, riverine, remote) introduced in Chapter 3. These should be interpreted as tendencies rather than fixed statuses reflecting fluid situations on the ground.

**Table 11.** Key actors and governance models based on village location

| | **primary governance actors** | **level of NUG influence** | **governance model(s)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| **camp-adjacent** | elders, monks, youth | medium | hybrid (parallel), ad hoc |
| **riverine** | educated professionals, administrators | high | functioning 3P, hybrid (complementary) |
| **remote** | mixed, higher likelihood of armed actor influence | low-medium | hybrid (both types), ad hoc |

Villages may also shift between categories, due either to external pressures, such as raids, or internal issues, such as disputes, power struggles, or a breakdown in trust between the public and the governing authorities. The next section explores these different forms in more detail. There is considerable variation within these categories, and as shown in Figure 6, considerable overlap of these categories.

## Functioning 3P governance

As described in Chapters 1 and 2, the NUG has sought to establish and maintain a system of governance in liberated areas of central Myanmar based on three intersecting sets of actors colloquially known as the 3Ps. These designations represent the "given" structure and set of actors as specified in constitutions and guidelines, although their actual forms

in practice vary considerably. As previously detailed, in villages with a stronger NUG influence, village governance operates through a collective administrative arrangement structured around three interconnected sectors: administration, defense, and local security. The 'P' refers to the adjective 'people's' prefixed to each unit in order to differentiate them from units aligned with the military authorities:

- *Pa Ah Pha* (People's Administration Team) is responsible for rule of law and civilian administration at township, ward, and village levels, equivalent to the General Administration Department under previous authorities.
- *Pa La Pha* (People's Security Team) is responsible for local security, law enforcement, apprehension and arrest of suspects, and judicial matters, equivalent to police and judiciary.
- *Pa Ka Pha* (People's Defense Force, PDF) refers to armed groups, often formed locally, which fight against the Myanmar military in cooperation with Local People's Defense Forces (LPDFs) for territorial defense. These are equivalent to military forces, and are organized and badged in military formations (e.g., battalions).

Rather than concentrating authority in a single village leader, responsibilities are distributed across these three actors, each overseeing one sector while functioning as part of a shared governance structure:

> Since it is under the NUG, there are the *Pa Ka Pha*, *Pa Ah Pha*, and *Pa La Pha*, which are the people's defense, administration, and security roles, and they are officially registered under the NUG. For each village, there is one person for each of the three positions, so there are three people in total. The administration is carried out by these three individuals. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This arrangement reflects an effort to institutionalize authority while maintaining a locally embedded and collaborative form of governance suited to conflict-affected settings where centralized state structures are fragmented, contested, or absent. Such configurations align with broader patterns of hybrid or "rebel" governance identified in conflict studies, where non-state actors attempt to construct administrative order through localized institutional arrangements (Arjona, 2016; Mampilly, 2011; Staniland, 2012).

In many cases in post-coup Myanmar, existing community-selected leaders are retained and formally recognized within the NUG administrative framework, while in other cases individuals are appointed to assume village-level administrative responsibilities where no prior leadership structures had existed. This dual approach reflects both pragmatic adaptation and political strategy: retaining local leaders enhances legitimacy and continuity, while selective appointments allow the NUG to extend administrative reach into areas where governance structures have collapsed. Interviewees consistently described this system as operating through collective decision-making and supported by additional village members who assist in governance tasks, suggesting a hybrid model that combines formal institutionalization with participatory local practices:

> In terms of administration, there are three distinct areas: defense, security, and public administration. Accordingly, three individuals are assigned to handle these respective roles. For the security side, their duties include maintaining vigilance, such as keeping watch and similar tasks. As for the defense side, when an emergency arises and a situation of violence occurs, they are responsible for resistance and protection. As for public administration, it involves managing the village's development and health-related coordination, as well as resolving village-level issues. That is the system of public administration they operate

> under. In this system, there is a group of seven people assigned to manage things. They handle everything from disputes and everyday problems to criminal matters—there is also a judicial function. This system extends upward from the village level to the tract level, then to the township level, and beyond to the district level. These various levels have been clearly outlined. (field notes of a CSO volunteer researcher, 2025)

These accounts illustrate that the three-sector administrative structure is not merely a local arrangement but is embedded within a broader hierarchical system extending from village to tract, township, and district levels. Such vertical integration suggests an attempt by the NUG to establish coherent governance across multiple territorial scales, even in the absence of centralized control. This reflects patterns identified in the literature on wartime governance, where insurgent or parallel authorities seek to construct layered administrative systems to enhance legitimacy, coordination, and territorial control (Mampilly, 2011; Staniland, 2012).

A defining characteristic of this structure is the functional differentiation between administration, defense, and local security. Defense functions are primarily oriented toward protection against armed threats and are often linked to the PDFs or other local defense actors. The relevant responsibilities include responding to attacks, organizing resistance, and ensuring territorial protection. In contrast, local security functions focus on maintaining internal order within the village, including monitoring, guarding, and ensuring safety in everyday contexts. Administrative actors oversee civil governance, including dispute resolution, coordination of development and humanitarian activities, and management of routine village affairs. Importantly, these functions are not isolated but rather are interdependent, reflecting the realities of governance in conflict settings where security and administration are deeply intertwined (Arjona, 2016).

Community structures are supported by administrative centers at the township level. Under the previous NLD government, these were located in the main urban center of the township, but, as these mostly remain under the control of the Myanmar military today, the NUG has established these in larger villages, selected based on security and accessibility. These administrative centers represent the township-level element in the governance hierarchy, operating both as an outward-facing hub to distribute public goods, such as financial and technical resources, and as an inward-facing hub to handle referrals, particularly legal cases that community systems are unable to resolve. These centers include courts, police stations, jails, and administrative offices for specific functions such as social welfare and health, all operating under the NUG framework. As one respondent explained:

> There is an office based in [redacted] Village. […] There is a court, a police station, and a township officer as well. If an issue is related to the police, it goes to the police side; if it needs to go to court, then it goes to the court. That's how it works. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Township centers function as referral centers for cases which cannot be resolved at the village level, or as checks and balances for village governance, enabling villagers to refer issues to a higher authority:

> We don't see a lot of bias or corruption. If we do, we will complain to the township [center]. In the end, people come from all backgrounds. Maybe we have some problems with the ones who were village heads before and [still] have old habits. (BDL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

While the three-sector 3P structure is designed to distribute authority and enhance governance effectiveness, interview findings indicate that its operation is highly contingent upon coordination among the

three actors. Respondents consistently emphasized that villages where the three sectors function collaboratively tend to exhibit stronger governance outcomes, including effective dispute resolution, higher levels of participation, and sustained community trust. In such contexts, collective governance enables a balance of power and shared responsibility, reducing the risks associated with centralized authority.

However, well-coordinated 3P structures were found to be relatively rare in the study area. Weak cooperation, overlapping responsibilities, and disagreements among actors were commonly reported challenges. These issues are particularly evident when sectoral boundaries are unclear, or when actors operate beyond their designated roles, leading to tensions and governance inefficiencies:

> If we talk about whether the three pillars are harmonious, there are more villages where they are not. […] If the three leaders are not in agreement, the village becomes very difficult to manage […] the villagers lose trust in them […] and it can be said that their governance system declines. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

These coordination failures underscore that governance effectiveness depends not only on institutional design, but also on relational dynamics among actors. Even where formal mechanisms such as leadership rotation—reportedly occurring every two years through community-based selection—exist, these mechanisms do not guarantee effective governance. Instead, the quality of interpersonal relationships, mutual recognition of authority, and adherence to role boundaries are critical. Where these conditions are absent, governance structures become weakened, public trust declines, and the capacity for collective action diminishes. This again highlights the critical role of legitimacy and social embeddedness in sustaining governance in fragile contexts (Arjona, 2016).

## Hybrid (complementary) governance: Functional 3P in cooperation with local actors

While the 3P system provides a formal institutional framework for localized post-coup governance, its effectiveness is contingent upon coordination among actors, clarity of roles, and the degree to which leadership is socially embedded. Where elements of the NUG-influenced 3P structure do exist, they most frequently operate alongside or in tandem with village structures or traditions, or are subject to local modifications, resulting in a context-dependent model shaped by collective administration, local legitimacy, and overlapping authority structures. Sometimes, the basic structure of NUG administration is established, but with little direct involvement from the NUG:

> *Participant:* We didn't like the previous village head, so we selected a new one. The new one is better, he does it in NUG style.
> *Researcher:* Did the NUG come to the village?
> *Participant:* No, we did it ourselves.
> (MYA47 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Village committees adhering to customary practices have remained the primary means of resolving community disputes, highlighting the adaptive capacity of local governance structures. A common iteration has been "hybrid governance," which describes a situation where governance has been undertaken by a combination of actors, including appointed or elected 3P bodies, elders, and other influential people such as monks:

> In our village, we have the 3Ps. They work together to maintain unity in the village. They work together with the village elders.
> (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2026)

This iteration of local governance was found to be more common in areas where insecurity was high, making visible structures risky:

> Our village has combined governance. We have a committee of 10 persons, but we don't have [an individual] nominated headman. (PL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

With the collapse of previous formal judicial systems, villages today rely on a combination of customary norms, informal mediation, and emerging legal frameworks introduced by the NUG. The coexistence of formal legal institutions and informal, community-based practices constitutes an expression of legal pluralism in many NUG-aligned villages. Dispute resolution is often handled by village committees or respected elders, drawing on local traditions and social expectations. In some cases, NUG-affiliated legal mechanisms provide additional guidance or structure, often with cases being referred to the township center:

> If they [village authorities] can't resolve issues of inheritance, debt, marriage, or other social issues, they send them to the next level, like in [redacted: two large villages where NUG township level judicial bodies are established]. We send them to a higher level than our village. From our village, we send them to the village administration, then to the township administration, then to the district administration, and so on. If the case is too big to handle, I take it to the township. If the township can't handle it, I take it to the district. But mostly, we solve [problems] ourselves in the village. (MYA34 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In other cases, the resolution is made solely by local actors, including PDFs, who rely on their control of the means of violence to locally enforce contentious decisions, such as inheritance disputes:

> There was this case where there were six acres of land as an inheritance, and there were five family members. The problem is that some of the land was good, some was not so good, so they disputed how to divide it. In this case, the PDF was involved in resolving it. They divided the land into five plots, and then cast lots to decide who gets which plot. They handled it by themselves, without any reference to the NUG. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2026)

While this pluralistic system allows for flexibility and context-sensitive solutions, it also raises important questions about consistency, accountability, and the protection of rights (South & Lall, 2016).

There are numerous reasons for hybridity, even in contexts where NUG influence is strong. Longstanding preferences for mediated, negotiated justice are well documented (Kyed, 2021), avoiding long, often costly legal procedures. This reinforces roles and functions of administrators, but outside of the formal legal or administrative framework. Empirical data from a large village in Myaung Township illustrates how dispute resolution is embedded in everyday social relations that dictate the village's relationship with formal authorities. Rather than relying on formal legal procedures, community members turn to local leaders and committees to mediate conflicts. As one respondent explained:

> There must be someone who mediates between the perpetrators and the organization [3P]. These can be village elders or those who were former village chairmen in the good times. They coordinate with the organizations, and if it's big or small, they can adjust it. If it can be easily settled within the village with a fine, they do it like that, and so it doesn't get referred officially. (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This account demonstrates the centrality of negotiation and compensation in local dispute resolution. Such practices align with what Merry (1988) describes as the localization of legal processes, where formal legal concepts are adapted to fit local contexts. They also reflect restorative approaches to justice, emphasizing reconciliation and social harmony rather than punitive enforcement (Braithwaite, 2002).

Plural or hybrid governance models may also arise where NUG-appointed leaders have been deemed unacceptable by the community. This may result in a process where the 3P system is nominally in place, but its function is modified by the community, often through the influence of key local actors. This also hints at a longstanding tradition of resistance to external control amongst rural communities in Myanmar:

> The NUG came and appointed one set of leaders. But they were not competent, and so we complained. They came again and appointed different ones, but these [new leaders] were not concerned with local issues, they were mainly focused only on their own situation. After the last time we were displaced and SAC burned the houses, it was us [members of the local parahita organization] who arranged everything. So, after that, we proposed people from our side [the village] and these were accepted to be the new administration. Because they have already proven to be effective in leading things, the community readily accepted them. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

A hybrid model may also emerge through weakness or breakdowns in coordination or cooperation between components of the 3P structure, resulting in individual elements operating solely under their own authority. The result is governance which is not cohesive; it quickly becomes fragmented due to external intervention, competing authorities, and institutional division:

> The village is still run by a group of five local administrators. But even though the structure says there is one leader, it's very hard for that one person to manage the whole village. They don't discuss things with others. They just do whatever they want in the village. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2026)

These dynamics highlight the fact that governance in conflict-affected settings is not solely a matter of institutional design but also involves ongoing negotiation over authority, legitimacy, and social cohesion. The interaction between formal structures and localized practices ultimately shapes governance outcomes, suggesting that sustainable governance depends on both institutional coherence and community acceptance. Where there is a dysfunctional relationship between formal (3P) structures and local actors and bodies, the resulting governance is more fragmented, as described in the next section.

### Hybrid (parallel) governance: Fragmentation/parallel authority

The distinction between formal and informal hybrid systems of local governance rests largely on the extent to which the hybrid arrangements between 3P structures and village bodies operate in a consistent, constructive, and functional manner. Largely as a result of relentless pressures due to conflict displacement, and the fact that the 3P structures and systems are relatively new, the majority of villages, whilst reporting 3P structures, also report that these are not functioning well. This often results in fragmented, parallel authority rather than complementary hybrid systems.

In another large village in Myaung Township, education provision has emerged as a central site of contestation. As the area's schools operate under the education system managed by the military authorities are no longer functioning, a community-based school has been established. This was initially operated effectively under local leadership, reflecting a model of locally-driven service provision. However, conflict arose

when 3P-aligned bodies attempted to impose authority over the school, leading to resistance from local educators:

> I am currently working as a teacher at a community-based school […] At first, things were going well. But then an organization came and tried to make us work under them. Our belief is that education should be run by educators, not by outsiders who don't understand. Because of that, the school we had originally split into two schools. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This intervention triggered not only institutional division but also broader social fragmentation in the overall governance of the village:

> [...] after the split [of the school], the whole community became divided. The way the village is governed also split into two sides. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The conflict experienced with the school corresponded with a spatial and social division within the village, with different sections aligning with separate institutions. Although the village has formally remained a single administrative unit, governance has become functionally divided:

> The village is still run by a group of five local administrators. But even though the structure says there is one leader, it's very hard for that one person to manage the whole village. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This case illustrates how governance fragmentation can emerge when external authority is perceived as illegitimate or misaligned with local expectations. It also highlights the interconnectedness of institutional and social dynamics: divisions in service provision (education, in this case) can translate into broader divisions in governance and community

cohesion. Importantly, while the NUG provides an overarching framework, the situation of this village suggests that governance outcomes depend on how authority is exercised at the local level. When interventions are perceived as imposed rather than negotiated, they may undermine rather than strengthen governance structures (Staniland, 2012). Where there is a lack of respect for 3P structures, the result is frequently dysfunction and disunity:

> There is little cohesion between the villagers and those appointed by the NUG. It is difficult for the village to carry out collective activities. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In some cases, dysfunctionality arises where multiple armed and administrative actors operate simultaneously, sometimes contesting territorial control, resulting in spatially divided authority, such as in Pale Township. Here, resistance forces include those affiliated with the NUG, as well as a large, independent militia (the BNRA) at that point under the command of an infamous warlord known as Bo Naga. Tensions arose when the NUG sought to intervene in cases of extortion and murder committed by Bo Naga's militia, resulting in the defection of Bo Naga to the Myanmar military (Mizzima, 2026). This led to a situation where NUG-affiliated areas became juxtaposed with areas controlled by SAC-aligned militia:

> On the Pale side, the NUG controls the checkpoints, while on the north side, the Myanmar military and Bo Naga's group control the checkpoints. Although there are disputes among these groups, they have not yet directly affected the villages. The Pale region is distinct, and it is evident that there are two separate governing authorities. (CSO volunteer, Pale, 2026)

The result is a form of parallel governance in which multiple authorities coexist within the same broader territory. While tensions among these

actors exist, they do not always translate immediately into direct impacts on village-level governance. The presence of dual or competing authority structures introduces underlying instability and uncertainty. Over time, such conditions may affect governance outcomes by complicating coordination, creating overlapping jurisdictions, and challenging the legitimacy of local authorities (McCartan & Jolliffe, 2016). The consequence is that whilst 3P structures are nominally present, they are not fully functional, or are deliberately obscured to avoid reprisals from the Myanmar military or allied militia. This may also occur through the impact of sustained security threats effected through blockades and checkpoints, and controls of movement and information. Particularly for camp- and urban-adjacent villages, as well as villages with a known presence of SAC informers, overt identification with NUG-affiliated structures carries the risk of raids or detention:

> We have a situation where if someone is appointed who is on this side or that side, then they are afraid. They [SAC soldiers] have guns, and so we are afraid if they know we are on this side [NUG]. So, we try to stay on the sidelines, try to stay neutral. Even if people are appointed, the villagers don't dare to go to them. (MYA09 villager, personal communication, 2024)

The above illustrates the intersection of geography and security issues with governance dynamics. Based on the prevalent conditions, villages may move either towards a more stable hybridity with greater cooperation between formal and informal actors, or towards the third and final category of local governance, best described as ad hoc.

## Ad hoc governance

In a small minority of villages included in this study, governance is ad hoc, with individuals or groups taking authority based on circumstance. In some cases, these groups were selected by the village or appointed by the village monks:

> Our village is not under the NUG. We do it our own way, with our own unity. The village elders take responsibility, and they are appointed by the monks from the monastery. (BDL01 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In others, governance has been largely provided by the local PDF, which oversees civilian actors who undertake governance roles under their supervision:

> *Researcher:* Which organization provides the governance [in your village]?
> *Participant:* Village PDFs.
> *Researcher:* Who is doing the work?
> *Participant:* Civilians and volunteers.
> (BDL11 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Local leaders typically address disputes by convening the parties involved, facilitating dialogue, and negotiating outcomes. Minor disputes such as interpersonal conflicts, domestic disagreements, and everyday altercations are handled entirely at the village level. As another informant noted:

> As for ordinary, everyday disputes, like arguments, that break out—those can be settled right in the village, just by the elders mediating and knocking heads together. If someone deserves to be beaten, they get beaten. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In several villages, governance is provided by a village "strongman," often a previous village administrator who had sufficient status and power to act as a village leader. Governance, and particularly justice issues, draw heavily on personal legitimacy and village traditions, including public displays of remorse and restitution:

> For some things, they make the offenders come and apologize at a ceremony honoring the elders. (BDL10 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This approach reflects a pragmatic form of governance in which community elders and leaders exercise discretionary authority. While such practices enable timely and context-sensitive resolution, they also introduce variability and potential arbitrariness, as decisions are shaped by local norms and power dynamics rather than standardized legal procedures. There is recognition of inconsistency and a lack of consistent rule of law, but this is broadly considered as acceptable, or at least necessary so that each village may utilize its own approach to governance and justice:

> In the past [before 2021], the administrative system was this order, this rule, this system [for the village administrator]. Now, there are no rules, no rules to show what punishment he [a villager] gets for what he does. As I said before, if you live in your village, you have your own rules, and if you go to his village, it is [their] rules. But the village's own laws are not consistent. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Despite these challenges, the findings of our study consistently highlight the central importance of community-based leadership in sustaining governance. Locally embedded leaders are widely perceived as more legitimate, effective, and responsive to community needs:

> When those involved in the village administrative sector are people from the village itself, decisions are made fairly without favoritism or bias. (MYA06 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Because these leaders are socially embedded, they are better positioned than outside groups to mediate disputes, mobilize participation, and maintain trust. This reinforces the argument that legitimacy in conflict-affected settings is not derived solely from formal authority, but from alignment with local social structures and norms (Arjona, 2016).

Emergent governance in a context of ongoing civil conflict is inherently complex, often taking on a hybrid or polycentric nature as "local governance shapes and becomes shaped by civil society and state building [...] processes" (Khalaf, 2015, p. 39). However, hybrid governance is assessed in terms of its ability to provide "security [and] effectiveness in the delivery of services and legitimate governance" (Khalaf, 2015, p. 42). Johnson and Wilson (2000) note that especially in these early stages, there is a "voluntaristic element in institution-building" where "proper management and accountability mechanisms have to be negotiated and established between stakeholders" (p. 22). Key elements of institution building along the civil society-governance nexus are negotiation, persuasion, voluntarism, and the capacity to demonstrate effectiveness and efficiency. Whilst authority may remain vested in control of the means of violence—i.e., armed groups—legitimacy is derived from a credible performance in which "local leaders [...] enjoy some legitimacy due to their effectiveness in dealing with local disputes" (Van Leeuwen & Verkoren, 2012, p. 91).

The discussion above points to the critical role of the performance of governance in generating and sustaining legitimacy, particularly in a context where old forms have been vigorously repudiated, thus requiring new forms to demonstrate robust evidence to support their claims to legitimacy. The following chapter considers the multifaceted performance of local governance and how different performative demands are critical elements of the claims to legitimacy.

Chapter 5

# Performing Governance: Everyday Justice, Public Service, and Contested Legitimacy

*I respect the 3P leaders. They don't abuse their power. They call public meetings and negotiate to resolve issues. Anyone [in the community] has the right to speak to the leaders.*
—Villager in Budalin Township, 2025

*To be honest, I prefer the previous form of government. I think the previous form of government is not worse [is better] than the current one. Now, I feel like the administration is worse. In the past, the administration used to say, "Make big issues small, and eliminate small issues." Now, it's like "Make big problems bigger." I think it's worse. I prefer the previous system.*
—Villager in Budalin Township, 2025

Having explored the components and forms of post-coup local governance in Myanmar in the preceding chapters, we now turn our attention to what local governance actors and structures actually deliver to the people they purport to serve. Ontologically, it can be helpful to differentiate between the mapped assemblages of actors and emergent forms of local governance discussed in the previous chapter

with local governance as a lived experience or performative reality. Drawing on Austin's speech-act theory (see Searle, 1968) and more recent scholarship by Judith Butler (2015), "performativity" recognizes that particular acts, when repeated and validated by an "audience," are able to produce something which was not there before. This renders certain things as reality—not through verifiable, empirical data, but by the fact that they are *recognized* as being "something" through a pattern of speech or action.

Certain actions and words repeated and recognized by a crowd of demonstrators and police alike may, for example, "produce" a protest zone in a particular space. The space has no inherent properties to make it a protest zone, but the practice of people within that space makes it so. But only certain "performances" have the capacity to achieve this: particular chants, slogans, gestures—and only those done at certain times and with certain people. A celebratory or angry crowd of football supporters does not a protest zone make. The performance needs to follow some form of recognizable "script" which enough people can "read" and thereby validate what is happening as the "something" which is being performed. Thus, "practices can be seen as performative to the extent that they succeed at bringing into being the very effect that they proclaim" (Glass, 2014, p. 2).

By applying this concept to emergent local governance in post-coup Myanmar, we can move beyond the given forms of actors and structures to the performance itself and ask, what does local government look like in practice? What is the nature of the performance which people recognize and validate as local governance? People commonly proclaim, "I will know it when I see it," affirming that some things are best captured through experience. In that sense, then, what do people need to "see" in order to say "that's local governance"? To frame the inquiry in more theoretical terms, what is the performance required to produce local governance? This leads us to consider the what and how of local

governance: what is done, and how it is done. This chapter looks at how the performance links to legitimacy—not only where legitimacy is in some ways a prerequisite for being allowed to perform in the first place, but where a particular performance may confirm, refute, or confer legitimacy.

The performance and derived legitimacy of local governance have relevance beyond the local community. In the case of administration in villages in the four townships included in this study, what is at stake are the broader claims of legitimacy of the NUG itself. Here, the audiences are thus not only local communities and their members; the NUG is engaged in a high-stakes contest to prove that it can deliver stability, security, and order in the territories nominally under its control:

> [...] 'state-building rebels' become wartime 'democrats' for economic reasons, and by the time the war has ended [...] have developed representative institutions, created a support-base and gained legitimacy among the population living in the territory they control. (Peclard, 2015, p. 18)

However, the local dimension is critical. For most non-state armed groups, there is a form of reciprocity between the armed actors and the populations under their control. According to Huang and Sullivan (2020), there is a kind of

> wartime system of mutual dependence [where] rebel groups establish order and security and provide social services to local populations in order to present themselves as powerful and credible alternatives to state authority; in turn, rebel groups rely on civilians to offer their loyalty and support as well as war-fighting resources (p. 2)

## Service delivery

Armed actors rely on the local populations for numerous forms of support; in turn, the local population has expectations of the armed group in terms of service delivery—mainly security, but also civic order, justice, education, healthcare, and economic services. Hence, as Arjona (2016) notes, there is a wide range of difference in the nature of the social contract between armed groups and populations:

> 'Rebelocracy' is defined as a social order in which armed groups intervene beyond security and taxation. The specific domains in which armed groups rule under rebelocracy vary. Most of the time, they include the provision of mechanisms to adjudicate disputes. Often, armed groups regulate various economic activities beyond taxation and establish rules on conduct that belongs to the private sphere. Many armed actors also intervene to provide or regulate the provision of basic services such as education and health. (p. 8)

Where the social contract is stronger, armed groups undertake a broader range of intervention, either more directly (described as "rebelocracy") or in a more supportive role of civilian governance (termed "aliocracy" by Arjona [2016, p. 7]). The overall content and character of the delivery of governance determine its nature. Glawion et al. (2023) differentiate between rebel governance and rebel extraction:

> [W]e see rebel governance where nonstate armed groups provide public goods or organize decision-making processes in a way that is appreciated—and thereby legitimized—by at least a significant part of the population they rule over. Rebel extraction on the other hand is the enrichment of a small circle of non-state armed group members through physical and structural coercion, to which most of the populace is opposed. We thus argue that the reactions and opinions of the populace

> vis-à-vis non-state armed actors are key to understanding the legitimacy of forms of ordering beyond the state. (p. 25)

Surveys of households in villages from the four townships in Sagaing Region highlighted six key issues which the public expects local governance to address: security, public order, serious crime, land issues, domestic disputes, and public services such as education, health, and village development. The delivery of these, both in terms of the content and the manner of delivery, has been critical in shaping public opinion toward local governance actors and the legitimacy of their performance.

***Security and justice***

Security is the fundamental public good communities require in "liberated" territories. PDFs themselves arose out of the urgent demand for security for anti-coup activists and protesters, initially in urban strike camps, and later in villages which hosted demonstrations and sheltered strike leaders. Security extends beyond the basic protection of life and property; it is a critical requirement for the maintenance of territorial control through the management of movement; it allows for the resumption of key economic activities which in turn are required to fund and maintain the revolution, and it protects the space needed to undertake the delivery of other public goods, such as health, education, and justice. Security also includes supervision of evacuation during raids as well as the staffing of local checkpoints. These tasks are often undertaken by PDFs or Local Defense Forces (LDFs):

> Each village has their own [armed] group. They form security organizations. They have gatekeepers at the entrances and exits of the village. They do not allow anyone they do not know to enter, and they do not allow outside vendors to enter. They govern with these kinds of [methods]. (PL04 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In terms of responsibility, security is divided into two main spheres: broader security provided by PDFs with a mandate beyond the immediate locality, including offensive actions against SAC camps and targets, and local security, provided by village-based, often part-time local LDFs:

> The system of governance is first the village Pa Ka Pha [PDF], then under the Pa Ka Pha is this village's Pa Ah Pha. Under the village Pa Ka Pha is the village defense force. If we have to flee our village, they supervise that and protect our retreat. They are in control of that because the security of the people is their responsibility. Which roads do you take? Which ones to avoid? Is it safe today? We follow their command. Basically, it's the PDF that is in charge. They come to the village, and whatever issues are there, they are presented to them via the administrator. That's how it works. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Security is seen primarily as the responsibility of younger people in the village. They provide warnings of airstrikes and raids and coordinate raids on junta-aligned villages. Security is taken seriously; despite their relatively new status and lack of available equipment and expertise, training and discipline are given a high priority. Over time, as the young people become better trained and more experienced, they become more proficient leaders:

> When they came at first, it was "Do this, do that." Now, they give training and from there, they become leaders. (BDL29 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Providing security for village meetings, training events, and other gatherings maintains safe working space in which development and governance can take place:

> When it comes to village donation events, they do protect us. They provide security. Even if it is not your village, they will connect with others to provide a small group of armed men. If we have to flee from a raid, they give us information on where to run to. (BDL23 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Whilst there is a distinction between security in relation to external threats, often considered the responsibility of the PDFs, and security as public order, more seen as the role of the Pa La Pha and Pha Ah Pha, in some communities, village governance maintains control over the broader security portfolio. In most villages studied, power was largely invested in the PDFs by virtue of their control over the means of violence, although they were still to some extent under the authority of broader governance structures:

> The village security is the responsibility of the Pha La Pha. But the village's governance is set up to the needs and requirements of the village. (MYA44 villager, personal communication, 2026)

***Public order: Fighting and public drunkenness***

In cases of minor disputes such as fighting and drunken disorder, punishments such as the use of stocks are commonly applied in which the offender is restrained for one-to-three days and guarded by villagers on a rotational basis. Although this practice had largely disappeared prior to the coup, it has since reemerged in areas controlled by resistance forces:

> There are cases of drunken disorder. If someone gets drunk and causes trouble, they are put in the stocks in the village. If there is a fight, both sides are fined 30,000 kyats each, and they are also kept in the stocks overnight. (BDL15, personal communication, 2026)

**Fig. 7** *Wooden stocks (photo by research team)*

> They will usually only be held for 24 hours. So, if they are arrested at 5 a.m. today, they will be released at 5 a.m. tomorrow. (PL07 villager, personal communication, 2026)

This form of punishment is designed to generate shame and prevent repeat offenses. Offenders placed in the stocks are sometimes displayed in public spaces, or they may be beaten. The purpose of this type of punishment is to make the offender understand the pain or damage they have caused others:

> People who are put in the stocks are usually placed in public view in the village. (BDL16 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> To make them feel ashamed, they are sometimes kept in the stocks at road intersections. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Although not common, sometimes offenders are beaten as a form of public punishment:

> If the offense is serious, they are beaten—usually on the buttocks with a cane. (MYW01 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Less shaming and humiliating forms of punishment may include community service, such as carrying stones for road repairs or clearing plant growth along village roads. Such punishments not only benefit the community, but also provide a public demonstration of justice that is both punitive and rehabilitative in that it allows the offender to make a form of restitution:

> If someone gets drunk and causes trouble in the village, there are bushes along the roads. They are made to clear those bushes and do cleaning work. (BDL16 villager, personal communication, 2024)

In cases of theft, if there is strong evidence, offenders are required to compensate according to the value of the stolen items or to pay fines. In addition, they may be required to sign a formal pledge not to steal again. The village administration commonly seeks to examine the root causes of disputes between parties. If both sides are at fault, both are punished; if only one side is at fault, only that party is punished. Minor disputes are usually resolved at the village level by the village administration. This is more complex when the theft has been conducted by a resident of another village:

> If someone from one village goes to another village and steals, the case is decided by the village where the theft happened. The thief has to accept that judgement. After punishment, the thief is handed over to his own village. We connect from village to village. (PL02 villager, personal communication, 2025).

Whilst considered somewhat barbaric by outsiders, these forms of relatively swift, public, and localized justice are relatively popular in the communities surveyed. Lengthy detention or travel to the township center for a more formal legal process would generate a significant burden on local security forces. A common concern is for the care of detainees

during airstrikes or army raids. Likewise, financial punishments such as fines are rarer, as communities are reluctant to impose financial burdens on offenders who were nonetheless community members, and are similarly struggling with the economic pressures of the conflict.

***Major crime***

Severe criminal offenses, such as rape, are usually referred to NUG judicial bodies at the township level for resolution. In cases of murder, punishments include expulsion to another village, detention in PDF camps, or imprisonment. If an offender is imprisoned, their family is required to provide a monthly food allowance of 30,000 kyats to the imprisoning village. Although offenders are often not allowed to return to their home village, they may still be able to live a relatively normal life elsewhere:

> For murder cases, the punishment is exile to another village. They can live like a normal person there, but they cannot return to their own village. They are just detained at a PDF camp. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Whilst written law codes are in circulation, problem-solving methods vary from village to village, with each village applying its own approaches based on what is considered most practical, including the village's capacity to detain suspects and access township-level judicial services. In cases that require direct negotiation with the SAC, monks sometimes act as intermediaries. In certain villages, however, no one may be willing to intervene, as villagers are reluctant to make themselves conspicuous under the current conditions.

***Land and debt disputes***

In interviewing community members for this study, questions regarding land issues almost always provoked weary sighs due to the sheer profligacy and complexity of such cases. Many arise from conflict-

related dynamics such as displaced households leaving land vacant which is then occupied by others; long-term displaced persons needing access to land for livelihoods; vacated land belonging to certain political minorities (for example, military supporters in an NLD stronghold) having fled or been driven out; and boundary disputes arising amidst demands for new infrastructure to respond to the pressures of war. These take place against a complex backdrop of incomplete— and in some cases, non-existent—formal land records. In such cases disputes may rest on historical claims passed on orally, often known only by village elders. These disputes tend to be serious, and in many cases, have involved the PDFs:

> Currently, if there is any land issue, they [PDF] will solve it. Even for a land purchase or sale, they are involved to provide the certificates. If there is any confusion about the land purchase, they said that they would come and solve it. (BDL10 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> For any dispute regarding land, we follow the directives from above [from NUG]. The Pa Ah Pha and Pa Ka Pha in our village are also very strict about it. If the two parties [in dispute] are satisfied, it is okay. If they are not satisfied, they can refer, and it is put on hold. The land use is suspended; no one can touch it. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The NUG has provided guidelines, usually through township-level administration bodies, which can act as a reference point for village-based bodies. However, there appears to be considerable discretion at the village level for the resolving of disputes locally:

> For land disputes, the village makes the decision. We get guidelines from the township [NUG] but it is up to the village

> to make the decision according to the village situation. (PL02 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Other debt-related issues, including mortgaged land, are additional types of disputes local governance actors are confronted with. In terms of mediation, practice varies, as there are fewer guidelines for smaller levels of debt. Resolution also often involves multiple groups, including the 3Ps and village elders, and even organizations representing persons with disabilities:

> Resolution is not done by just one person. There are many groups involved, and decisions are accepted based on their collective agreement. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2026)

***Drug-related offenses and punishments***

Drug issues represent an area where governance responsibilities, revenue raising, and business interests collide. Our research reveals evidence of the increasing importance of drug-related revenue for resistance groups. The relationship is ambiguous: revenue either directly from production and distribution, or payoffs from traffickers, is substantial and is known to be a significant source of income for certain armed groups. In some cases, drug-related transactions are directly linked to weapons procurement. However, most villages are keen to avoid direct involvement, as well as to keep drugs out of their communities. This requires some PDFs to manage a tight balancing act between a public-facing policy of low tolerance for drug-related activities whilst maintaining important sources of income, armaments, and influence. Although villagers are aware of these issues, they do not dare speak out due to fear of reprisals from armed groups and related concerns for their safety. Offenders are commonly not allowed to leave the village and are kept under a form of local surveillance similar to house arrest:

> A while back there was a case involving drugs. A young person was caught selling drugs in the village. This case was sent to the township. He was arrested and held for a while. But really, he was just caught in the middle. The drugs came via some armed group, and they just used him to sell [the drugs]. He took the blame as the middle person so they could prevent all the information from being known. People know about it, but are afraid to say much, because they [armed group personnel] have the guns. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2024)

If action is taken, major drug trafficking cases are typically handled by township-level administrative mechanisms. Offenders are detained in temporary holding facilities at the township level. However, the key players are rarely apprehended, leaving less significant individuals involved in drug-related offenses to be used as scapegoats.

***Domestic disputes***

In cases of marital conflict, particularly when the spouse (usually the husband) is considered at fault due to substance use or misconduct, the resolution may involve expelling one of the spouses to another village (often the husband's native village):

> When the husband behaves badly and the wife cannot continue the relationship, village elders decide to expel him. He is sent to another village and told not to return. (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2026)

However, according to rules set by the NUG, procedure must be followed, rather than informal settlements or customary laws, when handling inheritance disputes or disputed divorce cases:

> What law do things get settled by? Previously, it was just negotiation, kind of back and forth based on the rules at the

> time. Now, the NUG has given clear guidelines for things like inheritance and divorce. Divorce disputes can't just be handled informally at the village level [anymore]. If they just want to divorce, it's okay, but if it is disputed, it needs to be handled officially. If there is some violence involved, then they get detained. (MYA14 villager, personal communication, 2024)

In terms of the main form of punishment for crimes reported, this often depends on the nature of the dominant governance actor. Where local governance is either plural or dominated by elders or the village abbot, the main means of justice typically revolve around negotiation and mediation. Where governance is mainly led by a single, powerful administrator, the use of physical punishment was found to more likely be used as the primary means of justice.

**Table 12.** Methods of justice for non-violent public order offenders

| dominant actor | primary means of justice | second most likely means of justice |
|---|---|---|
| independent administrator | punishment | detention/negotiation |
| elders | negotiation | detention |
| monk | negotiation | community service |
| NUG | detention | negotiation/fine |
| plural | negotiation | detention |

***Public services: Education***

In the wake of the post-coup demonstrations in early 2021, education and healthcare became key sites of contestation for the CDM (Lall & Okamoto, 2026). Teachers, students and parents were urged to boycott government schools that remained under junta control, resulting in

huge numbers of children being out of school and subsequently seeking education from a myriad of non-state providers. For a wealthy minority, mostly in urban areas, private schools, many affiliated with international providers, filled the gap. The NUG coordinated a network of schools providing education online, although there were equally vigorous attempts by the junta to arrest teachers, students, and owners of any schools employing CDM teachers (The Irrawaddy, 2023). In villages in the Anyar region under the control of PDFs, education has been provided locally by volunteers, often CDM teachers who have returned to their villages. The NUG has provided varying levels of support—mainly textbooks, curriculum guidance, and limited financial support. However, the main impetus for providing education comes from the communities themselves:

> Education is a hope for the future of our region and exists as a source of strength for long-term sustainability. Even though the NUG has not provided sufficient support, we continue educational activities with the resources available in our villages. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In many ways, education represents the most vivid site of contestation, with parents and members of the older generation repeatedly affirming that they do not want their children to be educated under the junta lest they be "brainwashed" into continued acceptance of authoritarian rule. This frames education as a site of resistance, both in terms of avoiding and undermining the junta's system and claims to legitimacy, but also ensuring that a younger generation is inculcated with the themes of the revolution.

One of the most immediate challenges for education in the Anyar region is the destruction and inadequacy of physical infrastructure. Armed conflict has resulted in the burning of villages, displacement of populations, and damage to school facilities. In many cases, classrooms

have been replaced by temporary learning spaces constructed from locally available materials and often lacking basic amenities such as desks, textbooks, and teaching aids. The term "interim education" is often used to describe a transitional model bridging the gap between collapsed state systems and future formal reconstruction. This is characterized by flexibility, local ownership, and improvisation:

> It can be said that education has been improving since the early days [following the coup] […] When the coup happened […] interim education emerged through self-reliant efforts. There were schools reestablished by the people themselves […] and temporary learning structures had to be rebuilt anew. (field notes of a male CSO volunteer, Budalin Township, 2025)

**Fig. 8** *A temporary learning space (photo by research team)*

These sites of temporary learning continue to be vulnerable to raids and airstrikes, and in many cases, children cannot be taught in larger buildings. Instead, educators teach in a succession of smaller locations, often on a rotating basis. A mother of a school-aged child enrolled in a village school on a rare trip outside her village to a larger city under SAC control, reflected on the stark differences between education in junta-controlled areas and her own village, where schools remain a key target for junta strikes:

> I was just sitting here, watching all these children walk by in their uniforms. I was thinking about my son, who is enrolled in our village school. He cannot walk freely like this. Even while I was sitting and thinking like that I got the news that they [Myanmar military] had done an airstrike and bombed my village. The bomb dropped near to where the school is. Nobody was injured, but now we have to be careful not to use the school building, because they will try to bomb it again. The children should not have to suffer like this. How can some children just be free like this, and other children be targets? (35-year-old CSO volunteer, Myaung Township, personal communication, 2025)

A second major challenge related to education is the overall shortage of qualified teachers. Although a number of CDM educators are working in villages, many professional and experienced teachers have been displaced, joined resistance movements, or are unwilling to work in insecure environments. As a result, villages frequently rely on volunteer teachers or community members with limited formal training. This was particularly acute in the early stages of the resistance:

> In the early period, there was nothing—no human resources, not enough at all. (field notes of a male CSO volunteer, Myaung Township, 2025)

This process of reconstruction highlights the dynamic nature of education in conflict settings. Rather than remaining static, community-led systems adapt and evolve in response to changing conditions. Although the NUG has attempted to provide oversight and coordination, its capacity remains limited due to resource constraints and lack of territorial control. Consequently, education systems in the Anyar region operate largely in the absence of centralized support, relying instead on local initiatives and external donors:

> To reopen schools for children, we needed teachers, volunteer staff, and at least some money to pay phone bills. With the help of overseas supporters, we were able to reopen our schools. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2024)

A particular challenge has arisen in the past two years in relation to accreditation of education providers. Whilst the NUG has provided a parallel accreditation system for the high school graduate's qualification, both domestic and international employers and tertiary education institutes have shown a reluctance to accept these as legitimate qualifications. This has led to a growing frustration with the NUG, and a feeling that young people are now trapped in their villages with their only option being migration abroad into low-paying jobs. However, despite the challenges and limitations, particularly around accredited qualifications, education has also functioned as a site of resilience, illustrated by the emergence of strong, peer-led education models where older students assume teaching roles. This ensures continuity of education while fostering leadership and responsibility among a generation of young people:

> Currently, older students who have completed up to Grade 10 are taking the lead to ensure younger children continue their education. (MYA36 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Education has become the responsibility of the whole community, including roles for those providing security and increasing safety for students:

> In education, right now in the village there is work being done to build a bomb shelter for the school. In that case, they [village leaders] encourage and mobilize people. During the day everyone has their own jobs, so they dig at night. They don't hire outside labor. To reduce costs, they call out [announce] which groups will work on which days, and they also go to check on the work and take part in it themselves. (BDL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

**Fig. 9** *School bomb shelter under construction (photo by research team)*

Such initiatives engage a younger generation in the fabric of survival, self-help, resistance, and future-building, providing opportunities for the channeling of frustration into meaningful, constructive actions. From a theoretical perspective, this highlights education as a critical part of "resilience infrastructure" where schooling contributes to the capacity of communities to cope with and adapt to crises (Winthrop &

Matsui, 2013). In the context of Myanmar's CDZ post-coup, education functions not merely as a service but as a collective commitment to preserving the future.

## Healthcare systems in the Anyar region under conflict: Community resilience, structural constraints, and the politics of access

Healthcare, like education, was an early key battleground in post-coup resistance. In the CDZ, healthcare services have been reestablished post-coup through a combination of repurposing existing health infrastructure and human resources, including CDM staff, and establishing new sites and resources. The emergent system is adaptive and community-led, responding to multiple challenges and pressures, including shortages of medicines and equipment due to blockades, threat of arrest of healthcare workers, targeting of clinics by airstrikes, and needing to rapidly respond to conflict injuries—often shrapnel wounds or mine injuries. The Myanmar military has destroyed nearly 100 healthcare facilities in Sagaing Region alone, often killing or injuring healthcare workers in the process. A CSO volunteer in Budalin Township (personal communication, 2025) described an attack on a hospital operated by CDM doctors in 2025:

> The clinic was bombed by a military aircraft. Two surgeons, as well as a mother who [had recently given] birth and her baby, were killed. Now that clinic has been closed down.

Movement restrictions due to checkpoints, blockades, fear of arbitrary arrest, airstrikes, or drone strikes make travel to larger clinics, often based in nearby towns under junta control, difficult, dangerous, time-consuming, and expensive, sometimes resulting in fatalities:

> Due to poor transportation and checkpoints not being open […] both mother and child died on the way. (CSO volunteer, Budalin Township, personal communication, 2025)

A shortage of medicines in the region has been widely reported as SAC blockades have intensified, particularly after Myanmar's 2025 earthquake with its epicenter in Sagaing Region. In the aftermath of the earthquake, local volunteer organizations mobilized rapidly to bring relief assistance to stricken areas, including large numbers of villages in Sagaing City, just across the Ayeyarwady River from Mandalay. After recovering from the initial shock of the disaster, junta authorities moved quickly to restrict the movement of goods, particularly across the Mandalay-Sagaing Bridge (Aung Naing, 2025). This included restrictions on food, medicines, fertilizer, and even women's sanitary products, which were banned due to concerns that they would be used as makeshift field dressings by resistance fighters (Root, 2026).

Limited personnel has meant that healthcare workers often cover several villages, meaning that most village clinics have operated with limited opening hours during which they provide only basic services:

> Regarding healthcare, adequate medicine is not always available. However, for now, the village operates clinics on Saturdays and Sundays […] Free services are offered from 7am to 12pm. (MYA06 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This has led to an increased role for volunteer health workers and locally trained medics, who provide basic treatment for common illnesses and coordinate with village authorities for more serious cases.

Village-level clinics provide services with minimal resources, often supported by local contributions and donations from diaspora, including villagers who have emigrated overseas. The provision of free or low-

cost services helps ensure accessibility, even if quality and scope remain limited. This model reflects strong community ownership and collective responsibility. It also fosters trust between healthcare providers and residents, which is essential in conflict settings. However, the system is essentially a loose hybrid, with a network of village-led clinics supplemented by better equipped, bigger clinics in larger villages, but with major treatment still primarily only available in private clinics and hospitals operating in SAC-held urban centers. This makes healthcare difficult to access both physically and financially for the majority of the community members in the villages included in this study. Major challenges include more serious conflict injuries and even non-conflict accidents, which many private hospitals tend to refuse to treat due to fear of reprisals by junta authorities, and healthcare for young men, who are at risk of forced conscription if they travel outside of resistance-controlled areas.

Funding for healthcare in liberated areas is derived from a mix of fees, local donations, appropriations of locally generated tax revenue, and donations from non-local sources:

> The treatment is provided by people from within the village itself […] Even though it is free, people contribute donations. (MYA06, personal communication, 2025)

The delivery of healthcare and education services represents a key intersection point in emergent local governance. Aside from public demands for education and healthcare as essential public services, local governance actors are also faced with the challenges of organizing, financing, and protecting these services. Township-level structures supported by the NUG provide a degree of technical support, and more recently, arrangements for revenue sharing between local actors and the NUG central administration have begun to be formalized. Particularly for healthcare, where larger investments are required, revenue raising

apart from service fees remains both critical and contentious. Local levies on road use, fuel, lumber, and sometimes gambling are collected by PDFs, often at toll booths, mainly to support security-related costs. Based on high-level directives from 2023, revenues were meant to be divided based on a 30:30:30:10 formula, where 30 percent of revenue goes to the NUG, 30 percent to the administrative body (Pa Ah Pha), 30 percent to the Pa Ka Pha (PDF), and the remaining 10 percent to fund emergency responses and environmental conservation (Khine Win, 2026). However, the implementation of this has been reported as inconsistent, meaning that the cost burdens for both education and healthcare largely fall on individuals and communities:

> Education is a hope for the future of our region and exists as a source of strength for long-term sustainability. Even though the NUG has not provided sufficient support, we continue educational activities with the resources available in our villages. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

A largely neglected area of public service is community development. Surveys of respondents in the four townships continually highlighted the infrastructure and economic challenges in their villages, often representing intersectional risks. For example, security concerns have resulted in the widespread withdrawal of formal microfinance providers from many parts of Sagaing Region (Yut Won, 2024), resulting in a critical lack of access to credit for both large-scale farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs. Attacks, blockades, and fixed artillery shelling on key transport infrastructure, such as roads, restrict the ability to procure key inputs such as fertilizers and to sell agricultural produce. This, combined with the destruction and looting of fields, livestock, and agricultural equipment by raiding troops, has resulted in a significant downturn in the rural post-coup economy. Movement restrictions have also limited the opportunities for off-farm work for young men.

In interviews with village residents, some of whom were active members of social organizations or governance structures, many noted a paucity of attention paid to economic stimulus activities by local governance actors. Infrastructure investments, where undertaken, focused on four main areas: water supply systems (usually solar-powered due to the lack of grid electricity), repairing roads used for rapid evacuation from military raids, bomb shelters, and small buildings for use as schools or clinics. The nature of this infrastructure reflects the new realities of life in warscapes, again pointing to the necessity of working toward shorter-term horizons. The delivery of various public goods, an essential function of local governance, is linked to legitimacy. In order to be in a position to control resources and deliver goods, actors need legitimacy; likewise, the delivery of public goods is often a basis for gaining and maintaining legitimacy, the focus of the following section.

## Legitimacy and the performance of governance

Legitimacy is both the prerequisite and the outcome of successful governance. Actors need legitimacy in order to obtain and maintain the authority to govern, and in turn, different performances of governance generate legitimacy for ongoing administration. Hence, as Druckman (2023) points out:

> the politics of legitimacy remains central to the activities of rebel [sic] groups with long-term goals of survival, irrespective of whether these goals are personal, ideological, political or socio-economic […] rebel [sic] groups face continued domestic and international pressure to rationalize and vindicate their methods and goals; their strategies and tactics are contingent on their ability to attract and maintain wider support. (p. 220)

In our study, legitimacy for successful local governance administrations has been derived from various sources. For the provision of justice, the most commonly cited source of legitimacy for local governance actors

was customary practice. Whilst law texts, including newly revised legal guidelines from the NUG, have been made available, these were not commonly referenced as a source of legitimacy for decision making. Even in villages where the NUG was viewed as a significant governance actor, customary practice was by far the most commonly cited source of legitimacy. Customary practice was often applied to domestic disputes and represents a long-standing stream of everyday justice in Myanmar:

> Sure, there are beatings, but never without reason. It's how we do things. Ten days in the stocks, and 20 lashes, that's what they get. Maybe the victim will say, 'Isn't it more appropriate to give five days and 10 lashes?' Whatever, it is not going according to the book [*laughter*]. (PL02 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Similarly, Buddhist monks exercise significant influence over governance processes based on their moral authority and cultural embeddedness despite lacking formal administrative roles. This has a performative element too: their perceived capacity to reduce exposure to violence—such as accompanying villagers through military checkpoints. In these cases, legitimacy is not derived from institutional position but from the ability to lower risk and enhance collective safety.

Personal authority, often linked to an individual's role in society, is also seen as important. Previous village administrators or village elders have managed to claim legitimacy through a sense of local tradition. Wealthy individuals in a community have also been able to gain legitimacy through their wealth and status, often making them a critical source of loans. In selecting administrative leaders, preference is often given to individuals who are widely feared or respected by the community:

> When we were young, there were always people whom the whole village feared. If such a person exists, that person is given the

> responsibility of leadership. Once they become the leader, the entire village respects and fears them. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Some individuals have gained legitimacy based on their known proximity to armed actors:

> He is the one who runs everything. If anything happens, discuss it with him and his organization. We know he has groups behind him. (PL07 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In these contexts, legitimacy is largely linked to power, which in turn is linked to control of the means of violence. Authority is exerted through intimidation, and legitimacy is derived not by consent, but by coercion:

> Whether someone is educated or not doesn't really matter. What matters is having a bit of power. People are afraid of those who have power. The whole village is like that—if there is someone everyone fears, that kind of person is often given the administrative role. Once that authority is given to them, the entire village becomes intimidated. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The relationship between the legitimacy of governance actors and their reliance on armed groups may be nuanced, as a key expectation of local governance is the provision of public security. The ability to provide local justice is bolstered by the same control of the means of violence. When administrative decisions cannot be finalized solely by civilian actors, the local PDF may intervene and take action. In cases where disputes remain unresolved between the village administration and defense groups, decisions are sometimes referred to other villages for resolution. The transferring of cases to external villages is used as a mechanism to increase the perceived severity of punishment and fear of

consequences. The receiving village is given full authority to handle the case as it sees appropriate.

Legal authority, representing a form of conferred legitimacy, represents the main appeal of NUG-affiliated actors. This authority rests on three aspects: the broader claim to legitimacy based on previous elections, the pragmatic appeal as the only viable alternative to either surrender to the SAC or capitulation into anarchy, and the provision of technical services and resources, such as guidelines, law texts, and township-based judiciary and arbitration. Essentially, the appeal is to the right to govern based on national political settlements tempered by a pragmatic performative element. The NUG links this to the provision of security services, requiring villages to register and establish local structures such as the 3Ps. However, while these institutional structures are formally required, their effective and systematic functioning remains limited in practice. In terms of administrative services and day-to-day governance, villages largely have to rely on their own capacity and resources. This includes managing criminal justice, resolving disputes, and maintaining rule of law through locally adapted mechanisms. Consequently, punishment systems and legal practices vary significantly from one village to another.

In handling judicial cases, research participants' most commonly cited source of legitimacy for local governance actors was customary practice. Whilst law texts—including newly revised legal guidelines disseminated by the NUG—were available, these were not commonly referenced as a source of legitimacy for decision making. Even in villages where the NUG was viewed as a significant governance actor, customary practice was by far the most commonly cited source of legitimacy.

**Table 13.** Sources of legitimacy by dominant governance actor *(data derived from village interviews, n=40)*

| dominant actor in village governance | main source of legitimacy for governance actor |
|---|---|
| administrator | customary practice |
| elders | personal authority |
| monks | customary practice |
| NUG | customary practice |
| plural administration | legal and personal authority |

In most interviews, however, the issue of performative legitimacy was a recurring theme. A key requirement for governance actors was whether they could deliver a credible performance of the required public service. This generates "output or performance legitimacy among the domestic community" (Podder, 2017, p. 690).

Performative legitimacy is derived from a mixture of the pragmatic and the ideological. In pragmatic terms, governance actors need to be able to provide key services to be perceived as legitimate. Often, actors who lack other sources of legitimacy, such as young people, have nonetheless managed to win public trust through credible and consistent delivery of key public goods. This has been particularly true of young people who have been affiliated with local village welfare (parahita) organizations:

> Youth leaders are in charge. They—especially the young men—do all the social work like events and funerals. In all areas, we rely on them. They have the authority now. (BDL21 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The involvement of young people, and indeed groups formed and led by young people, often result in multiple, overlapping roles, with security, welfare, and administration often all undertaken by the same people functioning in different roles:

> The PDF collected donations to support poor households. They came around, collected about 1,000 kyat from each house. Then they gave this to the poor households. There are also the parahita organizations. During *Thingyan* [Myanmar New Year], they arranged for food for displaced people who were staying at the monastery. (PL04 villager, personal communication, 2026)

> There is a village welfare group and a defense group. They are led by the village administrator. He does all the welfare, defense, and administration. It's just him, basically. (PL07 villager, personal communication, 2026)

This was most common in smaller villages, and in some cases, parahita organizations were also involved in providing village security:

> The village security is the responsibility of the parahita group. It's mainly the men, with the women providing backup. (MYA22 villager, personal communication, 2026)

However, in larger villages, clearer distinctions were made between defense, administration, and social welfare roles:

> The parahita group is not involved in the administration. They take the lead in providing the food. The women mainly do the cooking, then men are involved in collecting donations and other welfare activities. (MYA47 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Youth leaders demonstrating leadership capacity through their involvement in defense, education, or welfare service provision have earned legitimacy not simply by effectively delivering a particular public good, but delivering that public good in a certain way. This highlights the importance of the qualitative dimensions of the performance of public service, which links to public expectations of how services are delivered. Legitimacy is derived not simply from a performance per se, but from a particular kind of performance that often includes more ideological elements.

## The qualities of governance

Our interviews with village residents, which included some with those managing responsibilities in welfare organizations, schools, and local governance bodies, revealed eight distinct qualitative expectations of the nature of public service. These were cited as factors that influenced not only whether villagers viewed a particular organization or actor in a positive light, but as something upon which conferred a sense of legitimacy.

### *Inclusivity*

Of primary importance is the nature of public service. Perhaps linked to the broader sentiments of the resistance, members of rural communities have expressed resentment toward governance that is perceived as non-inclusive and authoritarian. In some villages, PDF groups have assumed administrative responsibilities in authoritarian ways, making local residents feel as if they have experienced yet another dictatorial coup. These actors operate like secondary authoritarian rulers, despite presenting themselves as part of a revolutionary government opposing dictatorship:

> During the NLD era, the administration was good; we had a good village leader. Now, it's the PDFs who are in charge. I support them, because I don't support SAC. But I don't like the

> way they are governing. The system is not right. The path is wrong. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The NUG's grassroots reach in rural areas is still somewhat limited, resulting in situations where the public lacks the space to freely express their dissatisfaction. As a result, public trust in the NUG—often portrayed as a pro-democracy government—risks being gradually eroded and potentially transforming into public resistance toward the NUG government itself. Some involved in local governance bodies have acknowledged this. Whilst grateful for the governance provided, they have also recognized that the NUG's support and supervision have been insufficient:

> These PDF groups and the people are moving forward together cooperatively. In terms of the system, it does exist, but there is no one who can really provide proper guidance to them. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The calls for inclusion often include calls for more involvement from young people, considered to be more energetic and idealistic and less corrupt than the older generation:

> The main thing is that we want people from all walks of life to participate. We also want young people to be prioritized and included. (MYA35 villager, personal communication, 2025)

***Democracy***

The value village residents place on democracy is somewhat nuanced, referring less to specific practices of democracy such as elections and more to the participation of community members in the process of governance. The rejection of direct rule by SAC-appointed administrators was a primary component of the post-coup Spring Revolution resistance movement early on, and likewise, attempts by the

NUG to directly appoint administrators in some villages has also been resisted. In terms of the actual performance of the governance actors themselves, being democratic involves eschewing of authoritarian methods and expanding public consultation and involvement in community affairs:

> Four years ago, there was only one person called the administrative secretary. Now, it's not like that anymore, it's the public's advice, and then we think about it and make decisions. The main thing is that we want people from all walks of life to participate. We also want young people to be prioritized and included. (MYA 35 villager, personal communication, 2025)

In another village in Budalin Township, participants stated the 3P leadership was respected for their democratic rather than authoritarian approach:

> I respect the [3P] leaders, they don't use their power to do anything. They call public meetings and use negotiation to resolve the issues. Anyone has the right to speak to them. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

***Transparency***

The ethical behavior of governance actors is also scrutinized. When governance actors are seen to prioritize the interests of themselves, their relatives, and their close associates, they lose credibility, even if few would vocalize criticism due to fear of reprisals. NUG-affiliated PDF members have been reported to engage in reckless behavior and abuse of power, with authority being exercised through reliance on weapons rather than through legitimate or accountable governance mechanisms. A lack of transparency is viewed dimly by village residents in the study area. Under the mantle of resisting authoritarianism, these actors instead have been reported to pursue personal gain through duplicity. As a

result, the public increasingly lacks any government institution they can genuinely rely on. One respondent described the lack of transparency under PDF-led village governance as follows:

> For some issues, they invite villagers to meetings and proceed based on the village's agreement. But for some matters, the village doesn't know anything. They just decide among their own circle—those they can work with—and then proceed according to those decisions. The village doesn't know. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

However, for many, the degree of transparency exhibited by emergent governance actors was contrasted positively to that of the previous administration:

> I think the governance system four or five years ago was not transparent. It was because it was imposed from above, it was imposed on the village elders. Now the governance system is transparent. Many young people have returned to their villages, and the governance system has become better. (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2025)

***Moral character***

Linked to the issue of transparency was also an expectation of a certain degree of moral discipline from governance actors. PDFs in particular were criticized; whilst there was a high degree of sympathy for their stressful roles and considerable sacrifice, there was also an expectation that they should conduct themselves in line with a certain level of discipline:

> PDF is the government, but they are not educated. They are armed but do not know much about right and wrong. They gamble and drink, and people only accept this because they are

> also opposing the military [SAC]. (MYA15 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Linked to this is the perception that some PDF soldiers not only gamble and drink, but also encourage—and in some cases profit from—such activities. This is particularly true where PDFs provide protection for gambling events, generating considerable revenue for themselves, but often exerting a corrosive effect on local communities.

The demonstration of an altruistic spirit was highly valued by participants. For armed and non-armed actors alike, the exhibition of commitment that prioritizes the well-being of others was a strong source of earned legitimacy. Where either PDFs or parahita workers endured significant hardship in order to provide security, assist evacuees, or administer welfare programs, their leadership was publicly validated. For social welfare workers in particular, this leans into the core legitimizing factor of parahita itself. Translated as "for the good of the other," parahita organizations have long claimed a unique space in Myanmar community life between formal administration, religious traditions, and community practice (Griffiths, 2019). Given the high degree of slippage between social organizations such as parahita and local armed actors such as PDFs, it is not surprising that the village residents tend to expect a particular moral performance from groups which can largely be categorized as *Kalatha-Kaung-Saung* (youth leaders).

### Fairness/lack of bias

Fairness and lack of bias were also found to be key expectations, characterized by non-discrimination and equitable distribution of resources:

> The current administration is open and transparent. People also get equal opportunities. They don't discriminate between rich or poor. Whatever is given, everyone receives it. They just

> have to provide the records, and it's handled fairly and equitably. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Bias in decision making, particularly in relation to resource allocation, undermines credibility. There were numerous cases reported of a village administration group or PDF whose members prioritized their own family and associates either for positions of authority or to access resources. The issue of fairness was also a key constraint to accessing justice, particularly in sensitive cases involving gender-based violence:

> In the case of rape, it's not possible to resolve it through the judicial system […] Even if they do get to court, there are many weaknesses in the judicial process […] fairness cannot be achieved. (CSO volunteer, Myaung Township, personal communication, 2025)

This highlights fundamental limitations in both access and procedural integrity, raising concerns about justice for victims and due process for defendants.

***Effectiveness***

Another important aspect of the performance and delivery of public services is effectiveness. Whilst this could be argued as a more quantitative element, respondents pointed to the importance of demonstrable impact in public services, prioritizing for governance roles those who are perceived to be competent:

> The village appoints the people who can actually do the work and effectively carry out the administrative work. Those seven people are the main ones, but the main thing is that there are 14 people. If there is a major issue, those seven people take the lead and make decisions for the community. (BDL10 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Villagers compared the performance of their governance actors, such as BDL29, a small village in Budalin located near a larger one, which, whilst having its own struggles in establishing competent governance, had recently made more demonstrable progress:

> It has been four years. What progress has been made in the village? When we look at [redacted] Village, they are really making progress. Their administration is good. Their system is good. We see that we are relying on others. That's what we want to do. (BDL29 villager, personal communication, 2026)

***Consistency***

The fluidity, plurality, and inconsistency of justice and enforcement mechanisms undermine public confidence, which, in turn, leads to the emergence of retaliatory justice outside the governance system. A CSO volunteer from Myaung Township (field notes, 2026) described the impact of weak justice systems:

> Even if they say someone is imprisoned, they are actually still able to move about freely outside. It creates a mindset of 'Even if you go to prison, it doesn't matter.'

He continued:

> Even before the administration or the three pillars [3Ps] can resolve it, they take revenge into their own hands. [...] this is 'an eye for an eye' kind of approach [...] a murder happens on one side, and then the other side retaliates by killing someone. [...] Now, weapons are easy to get if you have money. That's how they end up resolving things.

These patterns illustrate how gaps in justice systems can contribute to cycles of violence. Legal pluralism in the Anyar region represents

a pragmatic response to state collapse, enabling communities to integrate formal, customary, and coercive mechanisms to maintain order. However, the system remains fragile, with significant limitations in addressing serious crimes, ensuring accountability, and preventing retaliatory violence.

***Flexible/contextual***

Governance actors were also, however, expected to be flexible and attuned to local contextual issues. Often, those who had previously served as administrators were selected for new roles despite their ties with the previous military authorities because they were known to possess the ability to work with different systems and actors:

> He understands the village's previous governance system; he knows how to speak and negotiate, and he understands how governance worked in the past. That is why he continues to govern in the same way. (MYA36 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Even the administration of justice was also expected to demonstrate flexibility, especially towards detainees from local armed groups. A recent high-profile case involving the arrest of local militia fighters accused of excesses by the NUG (Myanmar Now, 2025) illustrated the challenges of justice in warscapes: the need for a clear application of the rule of law, but a tacit acknowledgement of both the circumstances of the alleged crimes, the context in which they were committed, and the ongoing reliance on a largely volunteer force of young militiamen who are often inadequately trained and poorly led:

> These people, they were imprisoned. We know they were the ones responsible for providing security and also helping with food during the military raids. So, although they were prisoners, they are from our own area, so they are treated well [...] there

> is no violence or torture. In the end, if there is a problem, they are the ones who are needed. (MYA34 villager, personal communication, 2026)

The NUG's authority lacks capacity to fully extend to the grassroots level, and under such conditions, the public lacks the space to freely express their dissatisfactions. As a result, public trust in the NUG has gradually eroded, and this situation also reflects the potential for public resistance toward the NUG government itself:

> These Pa-Ka-Pha [PDF] groups and the people are moving forward together cooperatively. In terms of the system, it does exist, but there is no one who can really provide proper guidance to them. (BDL15 villager, personal communication, 105)

Based on the qualitative markers discussed above, how have those living in villages in Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale Townships developed their perceptions of "good governance"? The next section attempts to provide insight on this question.

## Views on governance

Drawing on data from the most recent round of Civic Monitoring data collected in March 2026, overall perceptions on governance in the CDZ villages are positive. This was most notable in Pale Township, where despite protracted territorial contestation and issues with independent militia, governance was found to be well established.

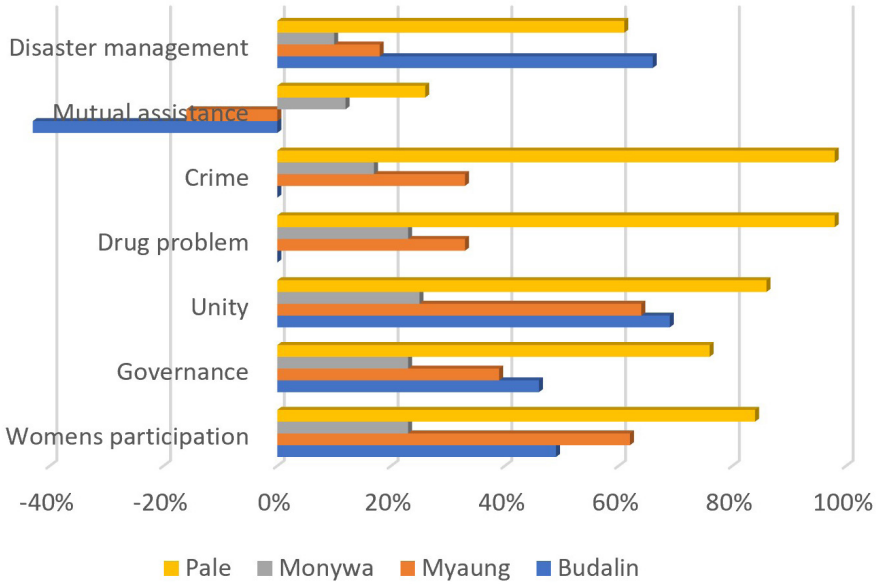


**Fig. 10** *Perceptions on changes in governance metrics in previous six months, net % reporting positive changes (n=813 households)*

Surprisingly, there was a positive correlation between village size and likelihood of perception of positive changes; this is due to smaller villages tending to report that the governance situation was relatively unchanged. Of note, however, was a positive correlation between perceptions of change and the role of village monks, whereas there was a negative correlation between the role of the NUG and perception of positive changes. This should not be interpreted as a negative perception of the NUG per se. Rather, in a number of villages with dysfunctional governance, the NUG has been required to invest more time and resources, illustrating the challenges facing the NUG in supporting local governance. Not surprisingly, proximity to camps or towns was associated with a lower rate of reported positive change, largely due to the unsettled nature of local governance in such villages.

**Table 14.** Factors associated with likelihood of reporting positive changes in governance

| factor | correlation with perception of positive change |
|---|---|
| size | larger villages have a higher rate of reporting positive change |
| monk role in governance | villages reporting more involvement of monks have higher rate of reporting positive change |
| NUG | villages reporting greater involvement with NUG have lower rate of reporting positive change |
| camp-adjacent | camp- and town-adjacent villages have lower rate of reporting positive change |

These findings were largely derived from qualitative interviews, which also tended to express an overall positive view of the current local governance in comparison with what was there before despite a number of ongoing weaknesses and challenges. The new forms of local administration were perceived to be more transparent than their predecessors with a more inclusive, unbiased approach:

> Four or five years ago, the administration wasn't transparent. It was just people obeying orders from above, and for any complaint, they just blamed the higher-ups. Now it is much more transparent. The young people have returned to their own village, and the administration has really improved (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2025)

For some communities, whilst the broader contextual changes of conflict and uncertainty have wrought significant change, the nature of governance, including key personnel, had changed little. Overall, communities where governance was undertaken by previous administrators had the highest levels of satisfaction, again underscoring the importance of personal and customary-based legitimacy:

> In our village, there are no thefts or anything like that. It's a small family village, so we can take care of our own affairs. (MYA36 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In a nearby larger village under NUG administration, the previous administrative system has largely been continued, with the previous designated individuals assigned similar responsibilities because they have traditionally been in charge of the village. Conversely, for others, a lack of change has been a source of frustration, with a lack of opportunity for wider participation and entrenched favoritism being notable sources of resentment:

> In the past three years, in terms of administration, it was only them who had the authority. The opportunities for authority for the people in the village have been limited. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2025)

For a significant minority in the villages surveyed, governance is perceived to have worsened. This was most commonly attributed to three factors: the weakness of administrative systems, particularly those that lack consistent procedures; the dominance of armed groups; and the failure of the NUG to either provide adequate support for overwhelmed and inexperienced administrators or to deal with overly authoritarian local strongmen:

> The previous administration had some rules and regulations, but it seems like this one has none. (BDL11 villager, personal communication, 2024)

> The difference is, before the takeover, things were more effective than they are now. (BDL03 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> Regarding their administration, sometimes I think it is fair. I mean, from my own perspective we are still young after all [referring to the fact that the revolutionary administration is still relatively new], so at times it feels balanced. But at other times, I feel that it is not fair at all, sir. That is just how I think. On their side, they have to handle many cases, so of course it must be mentally exhausting for them. (MYA12 villager, personal communication, 2025)

What these findings also reveal, however, is the greater sense of ownership of local governance by the rural populations from which our research participants were drawn. The distance between the governed and the governors has narrowed, and the unspoken social contracts required for this kind of small-scale state-building are more intimate and personal. Under previous regimes, with governance functioning largely as externally imposed authority, citizenship participation was characterized in more limited terms. During the brief period of the NLD government (2016-2021), this included elections at different levels of government, but little beyond that.

In the churn and noise of the post-coup warscapes, both the demands and the rendering of local governance often emanate from the same source. In that sense, people build the kind of governance that they want to see from the ground up, often reshaping remnants from the previous regime into new, more appropriate and locally-responsive forms. This

involves a degree of reimagining. However, rather than reimagining being understood as blue-sky thinking on blank canvases, the realities of reimagination are of constant threat, danger, and uncertainty, together with a complex legacy of previous power structures, personalities, and procedures that continue to exert significant influence on the shape of society. This highlights the role of intangible, often subconscious elements in shaping the nature and performance of governance—what in assemblage theory are termed "affective flows." In Myanmar's post-coup local governance landscape, it is fear in its many forms that exerts the most powerful influence.

Chapter 6

# Affective Flows: Fear, Hope, and Imagination

*The way the government was run back then is different from the way it is now. Back then, people were afraid [...] of those in charge. Now people come and speak bravely, speak openly to those in charge. Before, they [administrators] would say, 'Oh, back when the political situation was good…' like it was actually good when the military was in power. But now, the people are not afraid anymore. They don't like the old style of rule, and so the new administrators must act in a fair and just way.*
—Villager in Myaung Township, 2025

*As we always say, there is always a last day. In the end, I will do only good things, and if I die, I will die doing good things. And if I am killed, I will be killed doing good things. After getting rid of that fear, now I will do only good things until the end.*
—Villager in Myaung Township, 2024

Having considered the *who* and the *how* of post-coup governance, as well as explored the variation and complexity of emergent local governance in Myanmar's Anyar region, we can now consider a further question: what factors influence the emergence of different forms of governance? Perhaps more crucially, what are the forces that sustain

different forms—in other words, what is the "glue" that binds elements together in a particular way? These questions acknowledge the inherent fluidity both of the circumstances in which the field villages are in, as well as of the forms of governance which they either build and embrace, endure, or or evade.

In Chapter 4, we mapped out the elements of local governance in terms of material and non-material components, and considered the various forms in which they are arranged, resulting in particular local governance assemblages. These are not stable entities, but are instead highly contingent upon a number of factors, such as external pressure and internal dynamics. Our focus in this chapter is on the spaces between the elements of the assemblage—the interrelationships between different actors and elements. In graphic representations of local governance assemblages, these may appear as empty spaces between a multitude of squares, circles, or other symbols, but it is what occurs in these in-between blank spaces that ultimately maintains or changes the shape of the assemblage. A particular form of local governance emerges from a particular arrangement of a particular set of actors. However, how does that arrangement come to be, and why are the arrangements different in one place and another despite the places sharing very similar components and circumstances?

This discussion draws attention to the way in which different elements interact with each other to produce and maintain a particular arrangement. Local governance and local governance structures are not simply dropped from above, but rather emerge and shape-shift based on complex, often fluid interrelationships between their component parts. Thus, as Gherardi (2023) points out:

> Organizational practices do not simply occur in space, but actively produce it as the effect of the way that the practice elements (human, nonhuman, material-discursive) are

> entangled and express an active and aesthetic capacity of affecting each other and being affected by their intra-actions. (p. 3).

According to Patel and Hansen (2020), the "capacity to affect each other, and be affected by each other" means that there are no "inherent boundaries [...] only co-existence, intensities and extensions" (p. 2). The term "affect" is used in this context both as a verb and a noun. As a noun, affect is defined as "pre-individual forces that escape and exceed the human body. Affect is, thus, the capacity of things and bodies in social space to affect one another" (Gherardi, 2023, p. 4).

Affects are "intensities and sensations that infuse our lives" (Sointu, 2016, p. 312). Whilst emotions are consciously felt, affect largely remains unconscious "as the automatic, the involuntary and the non-representational" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 52). In a social organization, for example, an affect represents a shared idea, affinity, or unspoken prejudice which acts to bind a group together at a certain time. This produces what is termed "affective infrastructure." This is particularly useful in analyzing social and political organizations. For example, Clough (2012) studied the ways in which anarchist organizations "build and are built through affinity and solidarity in their political organizing against the Republican National Convention in Minneapolis" (Bosworth, 2023, p. 56). Key affects involved included "affinity as feeling and organization, and the emotional content of direct action as a galvanizing moment that contributes vitality to the movement" (Clough, 2012, p. 1674). Affects are not just sentiments, but the ways in which particular shared ideas generate affinities, and how those affinities are in turn part of collective actions which produce a particular identity. They are the "glue that hold assemblages together, as well as the vital forces that drive the processes of becoming" (Ghoddousi & Page, 2020, p. 6). They may be "[p]articular fears, hatreds, aspirations—even deeper, precognitive notions about land and belonging" which then "function as flows between different

material and non-material elements to influence how they relate, and what emerges from that relationship" (Aung Naing, 2025, p. 19).

Affects are often manifested in overt symbolic form, such as flags and slogans, but are more likely to remain invisible and intangible. When considering Myanmar's Spring Revolution as an affective political infrastructure, for example, there are overt symbols of particular shared affinities and aspirations, such as the three-finger salute (see Figure 11) and numerous flags and logos. However, much of the glue binding together disparate actors and non-material entities is less visible. Spring Rain and Aung Naing (2023) allude to this in their account of the emergence of post-coup volunteer organizations harnessing a mixture of outrage, altruism, and innovation into new expressions of older welfare traditions:

> Volunteers expressed a form of resistance to authoritarianism in organizing to deliver relief in such a way. Much of the anger against the coup perpetrators was motivated by the perceived insult to the extraordinary self-sacrificial volunteering undertaken during the successive Covid-19 waves by healthcare and other workers. However, this form of resistance is not simply public anger but a harnessing of existing kinesis: the parahita organizations that performed all the funerals and feeding and education before Covid; who then drove the ambulances, manned the quarantine centers—and still did all the funerals and feeding during Covid. All that self-organization, creativity, motivation, ability to mobilize community resources, funding and logistic support continues to be deployed, but in myriad ways over-and-against the coup and its supporters. (p. 48)

**Fig. 11** *Anti-coup sentiment expressed with the three-finger salute in Yangon a few days after the coup of February 1, 2021 (faces obscured; photo by Aung Naing)*

Key affects of the post-coup period have included the pre-existing affinities based around volunteerism and altruism, shared experiences of self-organizing during the Covid-19 crisis, and anger and rage at the military's latest abuses of power. What these affects have accomplished is to produce a particular kind of social organization from its constituent parts, which in many ways has represented the precursor of both armed and unarmed resistance groups.

Before considering the affective flows present in post-coup governance, we first look back to consider the affects that were critical in producing pre-coup local governance. Even after more than five years of the Spring Revolution, these "ghosts in the machine" have proved difficult to fully exorcise.

## Ghosts in the machine: Affective flows in pre-coup local governance

Considering the pre-coup local governance assemblage, many of the categories of elements are unchanged. In pre-coup governance, a cast of actors dominated by professional, typically centrally-appointed administrators operating under the central government's General Administration Department (GAD) worked from a large complex of office buildings and infrastructure designated specifically for local governance purposes and commonly adorned with a highly visible set of non-material components such as flags, symbols, procedural manuals, law books—and crucially, the 2008 Constitution.

The 2008 Constitution defined the shape of local governance, including in our study area of Sagaing. This document was specifically designed to confer and maintain "disciplined democracy" while preserving the central role of the Myanmar military (Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2008, p. 2). Although the constitution described a process of decentralization and designation of power to states and regions, in practice this represented a "deconcentration" rather than a genuine "devolution" of power (Nixon et al., 2013, p. 23) with power remaining in the hands of the GAD, often described as the "backbone" of the state. Crucially, at the national and subnational level, GAD remained under the control of the Ministry of Home Affairs (apart from a brief period under the Union Government Ministry in 2019) with military figures appointed as ministers and key personnel, ensuring centralized military-bureaucratic oversight at the local level (Kyi Pyar Chit Saw & Arnold, 2014, p. 5; Brenner, 2023).

According to Kempel and Aung Thu Nyein (2014), the GAD's hierarchical structure ensured that authority cascaded directly from Naypyidaw down to the village tract level. In this environment, local administrators were less servants of the people and more "external agents" (p. 26). Even during the pre-coup NLD administration (2016-2021), the GAD

continued to function as a surveillance and administrative apparatus (Thawnghmung & Htoo, 2021, p. 27). While public service delivery in health and education improved under the NLD due to increased budgets, the decision-making processes remained top-down. The overarching nature of governance was one of bureaucratic compliance; for the rural populations of Sagaing, the state was a functional but distant entity, characterized by what Boute (2018, p. 45) describes as "administrative capture," where local needs were often secondary to national stability and resource extraction.

What are the specific affective flows which have produced and maintained these particular forms of local governance? Underpinning the internal social order of pre-coup local governance is the basic affective flow of the military itself: a primal need for order, stability, and cohesion based on uniformity, hierarchy, and discipline. There is no sense of any social contract between the governed and the governors; rather, the governed are simply governed with the governors themselves producing the justifications for a particular order. This is largely framed around retrospect: the preservation of historical continuity, which itself leverages two implicit and largely manufactured threats. Firstly, the "non-disintegration of the Union" continually mobilizes against the threat of secession by ethnic minority groups (Crouch, 2021). Secondly, the appeals to "protection of race and religion" mobilize public sentiment against other minorities (such as Muslims) who are construed to represent a threat to the wider well-being (Naing Aung & Aung Naing, 2025). This anchors the affective flow in three key sources: firstly, the historical givenness of the current preeminence of Bamar/Buddhist identity, and secondly, the indispensable role of the core or center—and an existential fear of change. This enables an easy weaponization of the "other" as a justification for a rigid hierarchy designed to preserve an established historical continuity at all costs. This ensures a hierarchical form of local governance with a top-down, imposed order with local governance acting as an extension of central authority, and with the sole

purpose of maintaining an historically established social and political order. Thus, change, when permitted at all, was highly managed. The so-called reforms initiated under the USDP administration led by President Thein Sein (2011-2016) were an expression of the military's concession to "disciplined democracy."

The 2021 military coup did not merely change the leadership in Naypyidaw. It ignited a radical transformation of Sagaing from a peaceful agrarian region into the primary epicenter of armed resistance. The collapse of formal governance was triggered primarily by the CDM, which saw tens of thousands of Sagaing's civil servants, including teachers, doctors, and GAD clerks, strike in protest. This mass exodus of human capital meant that the junta's administrative capacity in rural Sagaing effectively evaporated within months. As Callahan (2022, p. 201) argues, the state in Sagaing was "hollowed out from within," leaving a vacuum that the military attempted to fill with brute force rather than administrative service. This period marked the transition from a single-state reality to a "dual-governance" landscape. In urban centers such as Monywa and Shwebo, the SAC maintains a tenuous, fortress-like presence as of mid-2026. However, outside these fortified nodes, the SAC's reach is limited to "fire-and-forget" military incursions and airstrikes. The breakdown of the formal state forced a reconfiguration of social capital. The rural populace, no longer able to rely on central ministries for justice, health, or education, has turned toward local networks. Thawnghmung (2023, p. 310) highlights that this shift was not just a political choice but a survival imperative. The functional state of the past was replaced by a repressive state, prompting a total psychological and physical break between the governing and the governed in the Sagaing heartland.

## Transitions

The transition of local governance in Sagaing Region following the 2021 coup represents one of the most radical shifts in Myanmar's modern

administrative history. Historically, Sagaing served as a Bamar-majority heartland, a site of traditional Buddhist education and identity, and a stable stronghold of the central state bureaucracy. However, since the coup, it has transformed into a complex patchwork of "liberated zones" and contested territories where the traditional state apparatus has largely collapsed. This evolution is politically significant because it marks the first time a Bamar-majority region has explicitly rejected central, military authority and moved toward a form of constitutional autonomy, challenging the centuries-old tradition of centralized "Burmanization" (Walton, 2017). "Rebel governance" (Arjona, 2016) describes the process by which local armed actors create alternative social and political orders when state power either fails or is ejected. In Sagaing, the rapid withdrawal or collapse of the SAC apparatus forced the emergence of People's Administration Organizations (PAOs), typically comprising the 3P model described in the previous chapters. These bodies, while aligned with the NUG, often operate with a high degree of local independence.

However, unlike the previous system—characterized by hierarchy, uniformity, and central control—the village system is no longer a cog in the military machine, but operates as a "self-help system" (MYA37, 2025). Decisions are no longer handed down from a distant capital; they are deliberated upon by community members and their organizations, creating a sense of local ownership previously unknown in the region. Governance has shifted from a top-down mandate to a negotiated agreement. There is a shift from fixed, uniform rules and codes handed down from above to localized, village-specific regulations derived from longstanding traditional practices and embedded knowledge. This aligns with theories of hybrid governance, where traditional village leadership, revolutionary fervor, and community-led defense mechanisms merge.

**Table 15.** Characteristics of pre- and post-coup governance

| feature | pre-2021 governance | post-2021 governance |
|---|---|---|
| **authority** | centrally-appointed (SAC/GAD) | community-selected/ NUG-aligned |
| **legal framework** | uniform national laws | localized "village laws" |
| **personnel** | paid employees | volunteers |
| **structure** | uniform, mandated by procedure | bespoke and local, determined by context |
| **decision making** | bureaucratic/top-down | consultative (edlers and youth) |
| **accountability** | vertical | horizontal |
| **boundaries** | fixed by state | functional based on scope of authority |
| **social contract** | between individuals and the central state, if any | implicit, linking support to governance |

Pre- and post-coup governance models exhibit a fragmentation where in the absence of either the central state or a dominant territorial actor such as an EAO, the shape of governance is deeply contextual and highly uneven. This critical difference will be examined in later chapters, but unlike in EAO-controlled areas, there is an absence of a unified, alternative armed authority able to either exert sufficient force or appeal to common identity markers in order to gain legitimacy. This means

that, compared with pre-coup governance, authority is more dispersed, with governance actors largely claiming legitimacy through local support. Even where the NUG has facilitated selection or elections, this is almost always contingent on local support:

> Two times the NUG came to select people, but they were not suitable. Now, as a village, we have elected the administration committee members and it is working much better. (BDL09 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> Those who are now in administrative positions are not the ones who were elected by the interim government or any other organization, but rather the people in the village agree and then the townships [NUG] appoint them. (MYA23 villager 1, personal communication, 2025)

Another resident of this village in Myaung Township (MYA23) describes a more fluid, integrated reality:

> To be honest, we have three organizations under this NUG: Pa Ka Pha, Pa Ah Pha, and Pa Lah Pha. However, in the village, the Pa Ka Pha and the Pa Lah Pha do not govern much. The Pa Ah Pha governs as both a local administrator and an organization. But we elected that organization from the village. There is not much of a problem. Our governance model is like that. Although it cannot be called democratic, it is implemented in that way. And there is no bias in our village. Who are the participants? They are chosen by the village. Those who have taken the administrative positions now are from the organization related to the interim government, and they are not selected and determined by them, but by the people in the village. The township just approves them. (MYA23 villager 2, personal communication, 2025)

One of the most transformative social changes noted during the period of research for this book (2021-2026) was the integration of youth and elders. Historically, Myanmar's village governance was strictly gerontocratic, with power resting solely in the hands of an older generation. The exigencies of the revolution, however, have necessitated a "combination of views" (MYA20, 2026). The digital literacy and military energy of the youth (often organized under PDF battalions) must now be coordinated with the social capital and wisdom of the elders.

Whilst the previous administration used uniform laws and procedures, the administration of justice at village level tends to be more ad hoc, based more on localized village practice and tradition, and shaped by the actors. As respondent from BDL04 (2025) explained, the community now draws up its own punishments for offenses ranging from theft to fighting, tailoring the "law" to the immediate moral and security needs of the village.

Whereas the central government-run GAD functioned through a large paid cadre of civil servants, emergent administration at the village level is largely voluntary with remunerations linked to local arrangements. Decision-making tends to be more consultative compared to pre-coup norms, including both informal groups like elders and villagers themselves. The focus is on being a "people's administration" rather than administration being a tool of central control:

> Straight after the military took over [in February 2021], the administration was from them [SAC]. But after 2021, the NUG changed the administration. They formed the people's government. The main person is the people's administrator who works for the people. (MYA36 villager, personal communication, 2026)

Previous GAD-led administration was noted for the huge volume of bureaucratic procedure, which in turn produced large amounts of paperwork, all oriented to reporting upwards to the next level of authority. Newer administration has retained much of the clerical roles, but with a much-reduced upward flow of data. What the administration takes responsibility for is largely determined by local dynamics rather than statute. Hence, the boundaries of authority for post-coup local governance in Sagaing villages are largely determined by the functional scope of authority. This may be constrained by internal factors, such as technical capacity, coordination, and resources, but also by the presence of external threats, including blockades by SAC troops or allied militia. Pre-coup local governance was marked by the relative paucity of the social contract, and based largely on vertical power. The word "အာမိန့်" (*Ah-Maint*) describes a verbal order backed by a form of threat:

> Back then, the governance was just orders (အာမိန့်). Just rules, just a rigid system. They do what they do, with their rules. Now, after these three years, in this interim period, it's not like that [any longer]. (BDL04 villager, personal communication, 2025)

As noted previously, the decentralization promised with the 2008 Constitution translated into a deconcentration in practice, with the functions of the central state reproduced locally, but with little meaningful participation by local populations. The social contract—if any existed—tended to be framed in individualist terms between citizens and the central state, or, in the case of the 2020 elections, a personal bond between a single party leader and voters. The social contract in emergent village structures is still largely implicit, but numerous examples were gathered via interviews of administrators being removed or voted out based on poor performance. Pre-coup reliance on procedural legitimacy (adherence to established legal norms) has been replaced by a focus on output legitimacy (the ability to provide services), but where the focus on output includes a wide range of both tangible and ideological

indicators. In short, the *how* of emergent local governance matters as much as the *what* in terms of delivery.

The *how* relates to the relationship between the elements of local governance—in particular, the relationships between different governance actors, and between governance actors and external bodies (such as the NUG): the people, place, laws, tradition, violence, and threats. The *how* of governance, manifested in the form of governance structures and their systems, as well as the performance of public service, is shaped by powerful affects, most of which are rooted in fear.

## Fear

One of the most telling aspects of the results of this research has been the analysis of changes in narrative forms themselves (see Chapter 3). Earlier narratives, those collected in 2022 and 2023, were recorded when exposure to conflict violence was a relatively novel experience. By 2024, it was a feature of daily life for most, part of the new emerging warscape. The earlier narrative forms reflected this, moving from shock and terror to a more resigned, watchful yet determined state. This narrates the changing nature of fear as it becomes more accustomed to the conditions of precarity.

Here, we are interested in what fear produces. Does it produce cowering submission, learned helplessness, or permanent flight? Does it produce cunning, logical adaptation and new modes of survival oriented mainly around self-preservation and self-interest? Or does it lead to deeper solidarities and renewed defiance? The nature of fear pertains both to what is feared and how it is feared. For communities under fire, how can fear as an affective flow be directed towards supporting stronger, more productive social affinities, rather than destructive or exclusionary practices?

The journey through fear is illustrated in the story of a young man from a riverine village in Myaung Township that has suffered multiple, devastating raids from junta troops. Initially, he, along with other villagers, was in a state of shock, unable to fully comprehend what had happened and felt trapped in a sense of guilt-ridden helplessness. He recalled the events of a fateful night in 2021, when he and his relatives and other villagers tried to escape a military raid by crossing the river to a small sandy island just off the shore. Note that the recollection of traumatic events is often chaotic and disjointed (Brewin, 2025):

> I live in fear. Sometimes I can't feel safe anymore, and I can't make others feel safe either. What kind of life is this? I can't even save my parents. In the end, we are just specks of dust [begins to cry]. What happened was that [...] they [soldiers] assaulted my relatives, my sister, my cousin, and another young man. When we tried to retaliate, I couldn't do anything. I was helpless, I couldn't speak, I couldn't move. What kind of a person is it who cannot even save their own sister or protect their own parents. So much happened, they arrested [many people] and burned [houses]. I still see ghosts on that island. I still have such a wound in my heart, I still have those nightmares. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

This young man's fear resulting from the experience described above was not simply limited to external raids by junta troops. In his large village, armed actors aligned with the resistance operated in a context where junta-allied informers also operated, creating an atmosphere of tension and suspicion. Those identified by the informers as being resistance actors could be targeted in the next raid; those suspected of being informers were liable to be dealt with by resistance actors:

> It has gotten worse [...] I am so careful about what I say now. We are afraid—if I say it wrong, will they shoot me? If I speak out,

> will they kill me? Even though there are things that have been done which are unacceptable, we can't speak out against them. It is like walking on a knife blade, you have to balance, like walking in the middle, not support[ing] this side or that side too much. Honestly, this is a kind of fear they create, and maybe they don't even know it. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

This young man's inability to act to save his own family, and the resulting pervasive fear, effectively paralyzed him for months. However, his fears began to diminish when he was able to start engaging in village welfare activities, having been selected by his community to receive training as a village volunteer:

> At first, I was depressed. When I looked [back] at what had happened, I was hopeless. I had nothing left. But gradually, I read some things, especially [religious texts]. I started to engage in parahita [charitable works] in my village. My depression began to change. It was hard. When I first started the training, I was under so much pressure from all sides, like they all suspected me. They looked at me with smiles, but inside, it was like they were burning me with fire. It was hard. I no longer had the desire to move forward. But I also wanted to find a way out. How can I stand in life? Somehow, I had to try. So, what should I do well while I am alive? I will live a meaningful life, and I will do this charity work as much as I can. I will do as much as I can. Because, as we always say, there is always a last day. In the end, I will do only good things, and if I die, I will die doing good things, and if I am killed, I will be killed doing good things. After getting rid of that fear, now I will do only good things until the end. I was satisfied when I did what I wanted to do. I thought that I was suffering because of my karma [...] but now, I have gained more self-belief. My spirit has also become stronger than before. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

As Susan McManus (2011) notes,

> Contemporary politics [...] is shaped by the amplification of fearful affects, and the multiplication of sites at which fearful agential orientations and futures are produced. The political landscape is scarred by the cultivation, intensification, mobilization and calibration of fear, in response to risks and threats [...] that tend toward the erasure of spaces without or beyond fear. (p. 63)

Whilst some scholars posit hope and hopefulness as the opposite corollary of fear, McManus (2011) suggests that this oppositional understanding of fear and hope is "misconstrued and unhelpful." Instead, "the circulation of fears must be mined and harnessed for critical ends such as the enhancement of potentially transformative agency" (p. 63).

This is precisely what we see in the communities included in this study. Fear is not negated or banished by hope; in fact, fear coexists alongside hope, often as a driver of both essentialist survival and futurist aspirations. It is a fear of returning to an old order, and fear of falling back into authoritarian oppression, that motivates forward movement:

> In the past when the conflict started, our administrative system collapsed. In the early days of that collapse, there was, how can I put it, a lack of governance [...] well, really there was no governance at all. People in our village were very anxious and afraid. We were afraid of this kind of oppression by armed groups. So, we knew we needed to act, to set up our own administration to prevent that from happening. Because of that, we are less afraid now than we were three years ago. (MYA23 villager, personal communication, 2024)

The function of fear as an affect shaping the relationship between different elements in a governance assemblage—and thus producing different forms—is expressed most clearly in the production of two other affective flows: revolutionary fervor and reactionary urges. Fear itself is not simply a product of violence or threat; fear itself can be weaponized as a tool of control (see Huysmans, 2006). When considering the affective flows through pre-coup, military-dominated governance assemblages, fear can be identified as a powerful binding force: the fear of change resulting in a loss of control, a loss of cohesion, and a loss of status. Hence, one of the dominant narratives in the Myanmar military's discourse around the 2021 coup has been related to projected fears of foreign influence, disintegration of the union, and a breakdown in social order. Different expressions of fear shape the two key affective flows in post-coup, emergent local governance structures that run between the two opposite poles (or pulls) of revolutionary fervor and reactionary urges. One has moved toward uncertain, risky change; the other has either paralyzed communities into inertia, or, in other cases, empowered reactionary forces opposing change or opportunists capitalizing from the post-coup chaos.

## Fear, hope, and revolutionary fervor

> How can I have faith moving forward? I will not give up. I will not allow them [SAC] to win. There are homes being burned, there are no cattle for farming, no seeds for planting. It all got lost in the fire. When we experienced all this, sure, our hearts sank. But later, we thought "How shall we get through this?" We don't let up, we keep going with determination. (PL03 villager, personal communication, 2026)

The coup d'etat itself served to destabilize the generally upward trajectory established by the NLD administration of 2016-2021, plunging the nation into uncertainty. The rejection of the return of military rule

by the majority of the population represented a repudiation of the overwhelmingly reactionary, protectionist urges of the military elite who balked at the changes imminent with the newly reelected NLD. This is important, because the tendency of many commentators to lump together the patchwork of resistance actors tends also to conflate the various motivations, which often differ sharply. Whilst many EAOs engaged in anti-junta resistance are focused on specific territorial gains, for resistance supporters in Sagaing Region, revolutionary fervor is largely rooted in a rejection of a historical narrative centering on the primacy of the military elite. EAO discourse also rejects this narrative, but in many cases frames it in terms of rejecting Bamar-centric discourses. However, what both have in common is revolutionary fervor as a rejection of the status quo, an urgent resistance to return to authoritarianism. Hence, revolutionary fervor is not simply opposition to the army or SAC or a rejection of authoritarianism, but an embrace of change over the status quo, acknowledging the dangers and risks:

> Let me explain simply. The one who was the administrator, he had the power. He had money. For years he was the village head and nobody could challenge him. He controlled all the information and all the village affairs. Whatever was related to the government, he submits, he knows, he approves it. He has many relatives and associates. Because he is a wealthy farmer, a lot of people work for him, so they all owe [are indebted to] him. Since I was young, it was him. Back when the military were in charge, it was him. In 2010, the system changed a bit, and in 2015, there were elections for village head. Under the NLD, a lot of people who had been village heads for years suddenly had to face reelection.
>
> My uncle stood for election. He is very experienced, he is educated. Many in the village said they would support him. But then the old administrator, what does he do? He calls the

> people."Okay, if you vote for me, this is what I will do. If you don't vote for me, this is what I will do." He threatened them with what would happen if there was any change. So, in the end, he [the old administrator] got reelected. But now, it is really so different! It is transparent and fair and giving opportunities to everyone. He [my uncle] is not trying to make any profit. Even if you don't give him anything, he will still help. It is so different, we have real justice and equality. (MYA18 villager, personal communication, 2024)

The desire for change is rooted in both aspiration and fear—aspiration for something better and the fear of reverting to the old:

> I think that the local governance system needs good leaders with good ideas who have a vision for a system that is fair and impartial. Only then can we move forward. We need leaders with real leadership spirit who can show understanding and who don't abuse their power. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

Aspiration is more than a vague hope for the future; it is a "navigational capacity" that enables marginalized communities to navigate toward a different reality (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69). However, aspiration shaped by fear of failure, or fear of the consequences of failure, gives shape to a "hopefulness without optimism" where people are "trapped in an insecure present that is fraught with decline" (Raynor, 2001, p. 567). A community volunteer teacher from Myaung Township described her own perspective when asked whether she had belief that the revolution would prevail:

> Belief? I don't know. I'm not sure we can win. At the moment, it is like neither side is winning. But you do what you have to do, you make your own stand. You do what you have to do to the best of your ability. It's risky, to be honest, it's like I am risking

> my life for doing this [education system]. When I look at the big picture, it's hard to really think that [our side] can win. They [SAC] have more weapons, bigger weapons. But I can't afford to let all our efforts be for nothing. (MYA12 villager, personal communication, 2024)

For this respondent, hopefulness is founded not on the belief that a better future is coming, but rather on the necessity of acting now. As Raynor (2001) notes, this is the kind of "radical politics [that] can be found in the expression of hope [in] the absence of optimism" (p. 568). This links fear-driven aspiration to revolutionary fervor, which far from being misty-eyed wishful thinking, is directed towards the actualization of community forms which by their very nature repudiate the past. Hence, good governance is not simply a bureaucratic exercise—it is a performance of the change which the community craves, a collective aspiration for a system that is the antithesis of the opaque, coercive structures of the past. This "governance of hope" transforms the local institution into a vessel for collective aspirations. In the villages represented by respondents such as a villager from MYA17, we see this capacity in action:

> When the economy is good, we can participate in the village affairs. There is transparency in the meetings. If we want to do something, we call the whole village [together], and if we want to call the whole village, we call the whole village, and every household [or its representative] must attend. If we have a meeting that the committee members have to call, we call the committee members and hold meetings. If we have to clarify the financial situation, we explain it in those meetings. (MYA17 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The elemental affect of both revolutionary fervor and reactionary urges is fear. However, the nature and object of fear differ and produce different

results. Revolutionary fervor fears a slow death, fears the extinguishing of self-determined futures. Above all, there is a fear of the negative certainty—the perpetuation of an old, oppressive order. Another fear also animates the assemblage: the fear of the consequences of failure, as most resistance-held communities are well aware that they face almost certain annihilation if their security order crumbles. There is also a fear of pain, death, starvation, and torture. The fear of the unknown also coexists, but at the crux is this: the fear of a certain oppressive future outweighs the fear of an uncertain, dangerous future which nonetheless holds some possibility. This serves to bind people together in collective acts of cocreated order and a willingness to tolerate a lack of efficiency for the sake of innovation and self-determination. In other words, "It may be messy, it may be precarious, but it is ours":

> At the moment, we do have a governance system, but it is built on anxiety. We have been doing [this] a year already, but we don't have much time. (MYA20 villager, personal communication, 2025)

This dynamic of different types of fear infuses emergent governance efforts with an urgency driven by both the need to establish meaningful order in the face of threats and rapidly establish a newly-entrenched legitimacy. It tends to produce governance forms with greater involvement of younger people, and which tend to have a higher degree of innovation and public involvement, but with a lower operational and bureaucratic capacity. At present, within the newly emergent systems, this revolutionary fervor serves to offset demands for more institutional capacity, at least temporarily. Weaknesses in technical capacity that have weakened but not undermined legitimacy were frequently reported by those we interviewed. The legitimacy of these insurgent structures lies not in their technical expertise, but in their transparency and their identity as deriving from the community they serve. However, this will be a challenge in the long term as the flow of revolutionary fervor

shifts and as the demands for more systematic, impactful delivery of public service increase. This places an urgency on the NUG's task of strengthening the technical capacity of the 3P system—and in doing so, it needs to harness, and not compete with, the aspirational and ideological demands of the revolution.

## Weaponizing fear: Survivalists, reactionaries, and opportunists

Revolutionary fervor driven by the fear of the consequences of non-change is counterbalanced by other affective flows. In some villages, particularly those close to army camps or junta-aligned Phyu Saw Htee villages, the fear of betrayal and reprisal leads to a survivalist logic whereby overt expressions of change are avoided. Amongst others, there is a reactionary logic: a fear of the unknown, a fear of uncertainty, and a fear of a loss of power, status, or control. This reactionary tendency yearns for predictability and stability in the face of chaos and is willing to trade the hopes of the future for limited certitudes today. In some cases, fear is weaponized by opportunists who exploit the broader conflict for their own gain, using fear as a tool of coercion and control. Hence, in contexts of state fragility or authoritarian overlap, fear is not merely an individual psychological reaction to violence; it is a systemic affective flow which shapes the boundaries of political participation. As communities navigate the vacuum between the state and emerging revolutionary authorities, "fear of the center" or "fear of the neighbor" often necessitates the creation of "defensive regimes," local structures designed primarily to mitigate risk and ensure survival rather than to promote the expansion of power. As one respondent (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2025) noted, the political reality is often reduced to a visceral physical response:

> Some things are just like being afraid and hiding in the moment […] You can tell just by looking at their behavior [referring to village authorities who are afraid of the local armed groups].

The flow of fear towards reactionary logic is particularly pronounced in contexts where opposing armed actors are in close proximity:

> We do it ourselves. We are in the more developed part of Pale, and our village is like Phyu Saw Htee-style. We can't stay over there, and on this side, it's like an interim period. So we do it as our own village, not under any side's authority. We have people coming and saying "Hey, if you do it like this, it will be great!" They come and try and persuade us. But we don't implement it like that. We're still in the interim period, so we just do it our own way. We don't organize much, but everyone in the village knows, if there is a problem, they can call us. (PLO7 villager, personal communication, 2026)

In some cases, fear leads to revolutionary inertia:

> In the community, there are mediators who mediate between the perpetrator and the organization, and there are monks, elders, and so on. But right now, no one is taking the lead. Because this is an interim period, some people don't want to be held accountable for what they say. Because they don't get involved, cases go unsolved. I don't really like that kind of thing. (MYA17 villager, personal communication, 2025)

The phrase "interim period" recurred again and again in interviews, and tended to serve two purposes. Firstly, it was deployed as a way of excusing a lack of systematic professionalism in the local governance structures, often accompanied by references to the charitable spirit of those involved, or to positive traits such as transparency and inclusivity. However, it was also used to excuse or justify a lack of progressive action, often areas where territorial control remained highly contested. In that sense, the fear and subsequent revolutionary inertia reflect a defensive, survivalist tendency:

> If you get entangled in that side, you'll get hurt. If you get entangled with this side, you'll get hurt. So it's better to walk in the middle. You could support them, donate to their work, but if you don't understand what they are doing, later on you will get trouble. Some people have gotten involved in unnecessary trouble. How do we live in times like this? Everyone, all the people, live in fear, like it is flowing everywhere. (MYA03 villager, personal communication, 2024)

The silence that emerges in response to pervasive fear is not empty; it is a heavy, guarded silence. It is a "fear of being overwhelmed" where individuals feel that any single word or action could potentially tip the balance and lead to their metaphorical or literal annihilation. Consequently, the public sphere shrinks as private lives become increasingly insular. People support where they can through donations and quiet compliance, but they avoid any visible involvement that could be interpreted as a betrayal of either side. The fear of reprisals turns political participation into a performance of silence where the goal is to remain invisible to power.

This "middle road" or "modesty" is not a sign of political apathy but rather a tactical retreat—a particularly sophisticated survival mechanism. When fear is the dominant affect, the shape of governance becomes clandestine or in some cases hyperformalized. Rules are followed with a performative exactitude—what James C. Scott (1990, p. 120) describes as "public transcripts"—to avoid drawing the ire of powerful actors, while the underlying social contract remains hollow.

In some cases, particularly in larger villages nearer to urban centers, the fear of spies or informers (*dalan*) betraying the village has resulted in village authorities opposing a community-based welfare initiative led by the local parahita organization. Their fear was mainly that informers

would pass on information about relief or development activities to the military, who would then come and apprehend those involved:

> We had this situation where we wanted to do a project there. We explained everything, and the village volunteers were very enthusiastic. The village also wanted to do it. But the village authorities called the volunteers to stop them [from doing the project]. They were afraid of this kind of project. (CSO volunteer, Monywa, personal communication, 2024)

In this village, whilst the NUG-led 3P structures are present, the governance style remains deeply conservative, influenced by a small elite who have limited a more transparent and participatory approach. Here, the hyperformalized approach has resulted in the governance actors demanding a process of formal application by the village parahita organization to the township to undertake a humanitarian project. This was then referred to state-level NUG departments for approval, echoing the vertical, bureaucratic tendencies of the pre-coup regime. Where fear acts as a reactionary force, the produced "affective infrastructure" is more likely to be led by older administrators, often those who led under the previous military regime (pre-NLD, 2011-2016).

The transition of fear into silence is a symptom of being overwhelmed by the proximity of violence (Green, 1994). However, political literature also suggests a dual nature to this effect. While fear can paralyze, a shared fear of an external threat can also serve as a powerful unifying force. Stathis Kalyvas (2006, p. 102) notes that such pressures can drive communities to consolidate local power and develop autonomous self-defense and administrative units. In this sense, the "defensive regimes" built by these villagers are not failures of revolution, but rather the early—albeit scarred—foundations of local resilience. While the threat of violence remains close, structures have been created out of fear, whether they be the "necessary" wealthy leader or the 3P system,

representing a community's attempt to institutionalize survival in an era where the middle path is the only safe place to walk.

At times, the juxtaposition of revolutionary fervor and reactionary urges even plays out at village level, where people who previously supported the military-backed USDP, and then the military takeover (referred to as the "green side"), have opposed the changes led by those supporting the revolution, who were largely also those who had supported the previous NLD government (called the "red side"):

> Our village is divided in two. There is a green side and a red side. If we do village development, for example, repairing a road which we need to use to escape raids by SAC soldiers, that side [green] doesn't agree. They don't contribute any money; they don't get involved. For a water project, one side does the work, the other side protests. Even in education, we have an NUG-run school. But they [green side] opened their own school to connect with the SAC authorities. (BDL21 villager, personal communication, 2026)

This polarization of two groups—one motivated by a fear of the status quo, and another by the fear of losing it—coexisting in the same village, results in a messy, compromised governance architecture in which revolutionary and reactionary impulses are systematically codified into party allegiances symbolized by colors and flags. This illustrates the intersection of wider national narratives with local ones, pitting the USDP/military discourse of resistance to change against the revolutionary impulse of the Spring Revolution. However, as Aung Ko Ko (2024) and others have noted, post-coup revolutionary urges have far exceeded the degree of change envisaged by the NLD. This takes us back to the function of fear as a driver of change: to what extent has the tangible fear engendered by the post-coup violence of the Myanmar military contributed to a far more profound and revolutionary

governance landscape than was ever envisaged by the elected democrats of the NLD?

## Localism, protectionism, and the other

Revolutionary change, institutional inertia, and reactionary conservatism are not the only ways in which fear operates as a powerful affect. The manipulation and mobilization of fear by powerful actors serving their own interests was found to be a not uncommon situation in the villages we studied. Fear was mobilized towards change, but the change was not of substance, but rather a simple reconcentration of power. Where, under the previous regime, individuals were permitted by the state to concentrate power up to certain limits, the collapse or retreat of central control resulted in a vacuum. In some cases, rather than initiative being seized by the community, individual actors instead quickly monopolized control of the means of violence. This enabled them to control the flow of fear: by appealing to the fear of external threats, they promise protection. By showing a willingness to wield force against those who oppose them, they also use fear as a coercive tool to consolidate their power. Here, a resident of one village describes a nearby village that resisted broader change and quickly came to be controlled by a powerful elite who have used their monopoly of the armed groups to establish an insular, authoritarian regime:

> There is a village called [redacted] which did not join us because of the problems which happened before. But the leadership in their village is not good. They [administrators] just look out for their own families. There is a lot of discrimination between those who have money and those who don't. For example, when they fine people, it's the ones who are poor who pay the most, and the ones with more money pay less. They abuse their power because they have weapons in their hands. Because of that, the people in that village are really afraid of them. Even though the leaders do things that the villagers don't like, they are afraid

> because of the guns. They know that the political situation will stabilize at some point, so they do what they can now. Whatever project comes to their village, they don't implement it for the benefit of the people. They just eat it themselves. (MYA08 villager, personal communication, 2024)

As Hannah Arendt (1963) noted, the "revolutionary flow" can create rigid exclusionary boundaries; those perceived as "uncommitted" or ideologically suspect may find themselves marginalized within these horizontal structures. This points to the connection between fear and localism, where fear of uncertainty, and fear of the "other" can cause a retreat to known social affinities. The relative ethnic homogeneity of the Anyar region masks a strident localism where the primacy of one's own village is a key identity and social boundary marker. This does not necessarily translate into exclusionary behavior: as the next chapter reveals, one of the defining characteristics of post-coup social dynamics has been reliance on mutual aid during periods of displacement as, for example, entire villages have been forced to decamp to neighboring communities. However, underlying political differences have continued to challenge the extent of mutualism. One village in Myaung Township received a large number of people displaced from the opposite bank of the Ayeyarwady River, from communities known to have significant numbers of junta-sympathetic households:

> Some of the ones who came across [from the other side] were green for sure. What can we do? We can't refuse them, but we can't let them stay long. (CSO volunteer, Myaung Township, personal communication, 2025)

The fear of either being infiltrated by junta-allied informers, or of being overwhelmed by IDPs, even those of the same ethnicity and religion, placed a strain on the willingness of residents to open their village to others.

Local pride is also linked to a fear of—and resistance to—central control. The desire to remain autonomous and to be able to practice one's own form of governance was a commonly repeated sentiment in interviews, and represents a counterweight to the goal of the NUG to establish a more uniform, hierarchical system. Localism prioritizes local identity and local autonomy as a key affinity driver, and this is linked to systems of governance which, whilst not rejecting the authority of central actors, nonetheless maintain sufficient distance:

> We have the NUG, and [then] we have our own system. (MYA47 villager, personal communication, 2025)

> It's our village, so we do it our own way. The village approves the chairman and the system. If someone comes, we point that out to them. The people in our village, we do it with our own standing, with our own script. We want to live freely like that so we can determine our own way as a village. (MYA34 villager, personal communication, 2025)

Localism represents a deep strand of resistance in the Anyar region. Rather than being driven by ethnic or religious affinities, it is instead a strong place identity, where the village is the key. This is mainly due to the relative homogeneity of ethnicity (Bamar) and religion (Buddhist) in Myanmar's CDZ, such that tangibly different "others" are rarely proximate. Pre-coup, this did not prevent the mobilization of ethnonationalist sentiment in the area, often by groups affiliated with *Ma Ba Tha* (an extreme ethnonationalist Buddhist organization). However, post-coup, such sentiments have declined in the rural areas, in part due to the more overt alignment of Ma Ba Tha with the junta. Conversely, local identity shaped around the village has been accentuated by the constraints on movement due to conflict and the highly localized nature of territorial control by multiple armed groups often formed and identified with specific villages.

The sheer diversity can be seen when traveling along the road from Sagaing to Monywa through an area which borders Myaung, Myinmu, and Ayadaw Townships. For a short stretch of road, probably less than one kilometer between the closest SAC-manned checkpoints, PDF volunteers emerge from the undergrowth to collect donations from passing vehicles. These "donation checkpoints," manned by armed volunteers soliciting contributions for the provision of security, number several dozen—all from different village groups. Localism can be problematic, particularly when villages disagree over land, resources, and/or jurisdiction. This is accentuated in a context of sustained, and at times extreme, humanitarian need. Scarce resources, repeatedly displaced populations, fragmented authority, and often disjointed relief efforts stretch the limits of humanitarian assistance.

Localism is a powerful driver for the remarkable emergent, village-led efforts which have been at the vanguard of post-coup humanitarian assistance. Their role in helping shape local governance is also critical, as the next chapter shows. But their essential localism also represents a challenge to establishing a broader governance architecture—because one's own village is always primary. This raises the concern for post-conflict scenarios where competition for scarce resources risks becoming deadly rivalries, rather than the necessary collaborative efforts to rebuild shattered communities following years of traumatic exposure. The reimagining must move beyond the local toward new affinities which convert the fears of the other into radical solutions for a shared future. Such a reimaging in the relatively homogenous Anyar region may well provide resources for more challenging, ethnically and religiously diverse areas. For this, the civic space of humanitarianism may be the key resource.

Chapter 7

# Future Trajectories: Humanitarianism and Local Governance

*Education is the key. In our village, nobody was teaching the young people, so I started to take the lead in that, despite many challenges. Doing this builds trust in the village leaders. Only when the children's future is bright will our village and country's future be bright.*
—Villager in Myaung Township, 2024

*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, and Alloosh,
*Do no harm: The role of humanitarian aid and neutrality in protracting civil wars,* 2023, p. 341

Five years on from Myanmar's 2021 coup, the experiment in emergent local governance is still in its early stages. In the years since the coup, various scholars have attempted to predict likely scenarios for the Spring Revolution, with a more recent tendency toward "hedging" (Insight Myanmar, 2025). The likely trajectories of the emergent governance structures and practices described in preceding chapters are deeply

intertwined with the broader progressions of the resistance. As scholars of rebel governance have noted, military success and the establishment of meaningful social order are mutually dependent. Long-term military success requires public support, including funds, information, and volunteers, and this is contingent upon the delivery by an armed group of a credible form of local governance. Likewise, the establishment of effective local governance is dependent on the maintenance of security.

Myanmar's experiment in local governance faces significant challenges. Firstly, there is an urgent need to deliver key public goods in the face of mounting needs. Aside from the needs of IDPs, the destruction of livelihoods, economic blockades, and the breakdown of wider civic services such as health and education have left critical gaps in public services, all of which are critical for maintaining not only the means of life, but the momentum of the resistance. As noted in previous chapters, the delivery of goods is not enough: there is an expectation regarding the manner of delivery to embody characteristics which represent positive change, such as transparency, participation, and equity.

Secondly, the legitimacy of emergent systems is potentially undermined by weak systems. Whilst lauding the greater degree of autonomy of new village administrations, many respondents drew attention to a lack of bureaucratic competence, and this was often cited as undermining the credibility of emergent systems. The degree of institutionalization is varied, and as noted above, there remains a strong public resistance to top-down, imposed solutions. This suggests a need for approaches to strengthening the bureaucratic and operational capacity of local governance systems in ways that are seen as collaborative rather than as top-down impositions.

Thirdly, whilst many villages in the Anyar region do currently have reasonably well-functioning governance, intervillage cooperation is weak. Internal processes, based on village tradition and non-formal

methods of justice, function well at the individual village level, but become challenging when issues involving more than one community arise. An example of this is resource extraction: one village may agree to the issuance of permits for gold mining, but the runoff and environmental degradation affect another nearby village that is not included in profit-sharing arrangements. Fragmented sovereignty makes such issues more difficult to resolve. Again, the NUG has established higher-level mechanisms to address common issues, but data from this study points to a relatively low level of public confidence in the capacity of these institutions to resolve issues. Fragmentation also affects relations between local armed groups, who whilst being aligned with the NUG, maintain primary allegiance to their own village or locale. Thus, fragmentation makes domination by armed actors more likely, as it weakens the role of a central, civilian arbiter such as the NUG.

Fourthly, the capacity of civilian actors to effectively counterbalance the hegemony of armed actors is challenged by the effects of the prolonged conflict and sustained pressure from the Myanmar military. The protracted, relentless conflict has made the delivery of public security the principle public good, which entrenches the role of armed actors. As their role and performance become habituated, it becomes both more important and increasingly difficult to achieve effective and appropriate counterbalance by civilian actors. These challenges, overlaid and overlapping onto already complex local geographies, result in a fluid, volatile local governance map.

As these problematic issues continue against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict, there are four possible trajectories for local governance in Myanmar's CDZ and beyond that can be analyzed in terms of their trends across two axes. Firstly, the extent to which governance practices are established under a coherent, unified institution, or are autonomous and fragmented, and secondly, the extent to which authority is vested

in either civilian or military actors (Bellina, 2009). Within this are thus degrees of unity, consistency, and civilian control on one hand, versus autonomy, fragmentation, and armed hegemony on the other.

The goal of the NUG is to establish a coordinated, uniform governance system across the areas under its control, which, whilst linked to the armed actors under the NUG's command structure, seeks to function as a civilian authority. Likewise, the goal of the Myanmar military-backed administration is to reestablish territorial control and governance in the Anyar region. However, unlike the NUG, attempts by the junta authorities to reestablish institutional dominance would be derived from a military rather than a civilian basis of authority. Given the current dynamics, any attempts to reestablish local governance by the Myanmar military-aligned authorities would require sustained coercion by force (Crisis Group, 2026).

As the previous chapters have shown, the local governance landscape is characterized by both fragmentation and localism. Current structures resist the imposition of top-down order from both the Myanmar military and the NUG with local authority being derived largely from control of the means of violence, meaning that armed actors have a relative hegemony of power. The result can be described as fragmented warlordism—of which several examples, such as the BNRA, exist in the Anyar region. On a smaller scale, villages largely governed directly by PDFs may also be categorized in this way, and this represents an ongoing source of tension. However, our study has also highlighted a fourth trajectory whereby local governance resists institutionalization by an external agent, but also develops strong internal capacities for civilian governance and is thus able to successfully counterbalance the hegemony of armed actors. Here, civilian governance actors develop systems and deliver a credible performance of governance which satisfies the longing for order, whilst cooperating with, but not submitting to, external institutions such as the NUG.

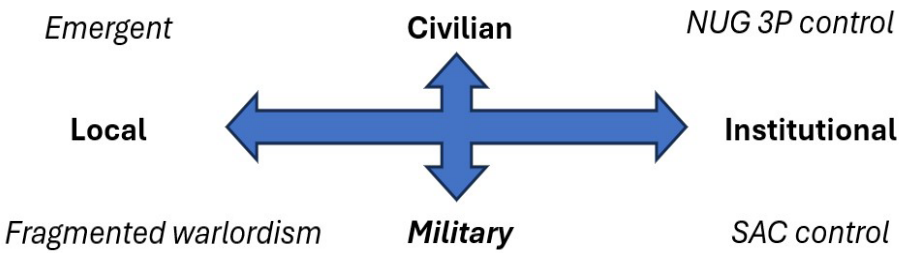


**Fig. 12** *Trends of post-coup local governance (axes)*

This analysis points to the key source of emergent governance as local agency rather than external intervention. This does not diminish the role of formal institution building by the NUG, but instead places the effort in a wider context. Stated succinctly, the key determinant of successful, civilian-led local governance is the agency of local communities themselves and the extent to which they are able to generate the kind of credible performances of public service which generate legitimacy.

Our analysis of the trajectories of over 100 communities in this study has highlighted the latent potential of the civilian-local confluence in which communities have implemented aspects of the 3P system, but have simultaneously engaged in broader, localized governance capacity -building which has established a legitimacy based on their own performance, not conferred by an external body. This has largely been in the space where humanitarian assistance, community development, and local governance intersect. It is in this nexus of demands that the aforementioned "credible performances of public service" have been the most compelling source of wider legitimacy.

## Humanitarians in the warscape

Prior to the coup, the Anyar region, whilst experiencing considerable climate-related shocks and stresses, nonetheless had relatively low levels of poverty and vulnerability compared to other regions in Myanmar (Boughton, 2023). However, post-coup conflict has resulted in large-

scale destruction of livelihoods, homes, and infrastructure, with over half of all IDPs being from areas in the CDZ (ReliefWeb, 2026). In the four townships included in this study, fully 40 percent of the population had been displaced at least once between February 2025 and March 2026. Over the course of the previous year, a quarter of households in the study area had been displaced multiple times, and over 15 percent had experienced arson, robbery, injury, or death of a household member as a result of military raids. Nearly one-in-five were living in temporary accommodation (such as a tent, a camp, or a monastery), and 13 percent had experienced severe food insecurity at least once.

**Table 16.** Frequency of occurrence of displacement and livelihood challenges among households in Budalin, Myaung, Monywa, and Pale Townships (February 2025-March 2026, n=827)

| | |
|---|---|
| displaced at least once in previous 12 months | 40% |
| living in temporary accommodation | 19% |
| food insecurity in previous 12 months | 13% |
| livelihood destroyed by Myanmar military | 6.3% |
| difficulties in finding work | 43% |
| difficulties in obtaining credit for livelihood development | 76% |
| completely unable to borrow at all, for any reason | 8% |

The combined effects of displacement, destruction of livelihoods, blockades, food inflation, and constraints on access to finance have resulted in a significant and sustained requirement for humanitarian assistance. However, restrictions placed by the Myanmar military authorities on aid providers—including UN agencies and international

non-governmental organizations—has meant that the delivery of humanitarian aid by external actors to conflict-affected areas has been severely constrained. The majority of aid has been delivered by local CSOs or community social welfare organizations (Harvey et al., 2023).

In 2023, over 100 villages in the four townships included in this study were recruited by a local NGO into a long-term action research project studying the impact of community-led humanitarian projects in conflict areas. Action research was chosen in order to embed learning into the implementation of village-led humanitarian activities, meaning that implementation and research were conducted simultaneously within the same project. Starting in 2024, the methodology entailed recruiting participating villages to nominate social volunteers who then underwent a three-month training course on community development, social protection, disaster management, public communication, and project learning and management. The training, rather than aiming to simply replicate standard humanitarian models, provided a theoretical and practical foundation for volunteers to mobilize community members to develop their own humanitarian and development initiatives, typically building on existing activities and capacities. Upon graduation, the volunteers served as facilitators for village-based welfare (parahita) organizations, undertaking needs assessments and developing proposals for humanitarian or development activities. These were then funded by the local NGO, with a typical grant amount of 15 million kyat (approximately US$3,500) each. Implementation was undertaken by each village's social welfare organization, supported by the trained volunteers, and overseen by a village committee. Upon completion of a cycle of implementation, monitoring, reporting, and learning (typically three months), the community was eligible to apply for a second grant.

The choice of interventions and implementation design were developed by the community themselves with technical support from the local NGO. The process encouraged the development of long-term

systems of accountability, including record keeping and reporting to the community, as well as coordination with and advocacy to local governance actors. This meant that although the initial funding was external, the subsequent implementation and reporting were directly owned and undertaken by community organizations. The majority of those who underwent training as volunteers were female, and included former government staff who had participated in the CDM. However, a key requirement for volunteers was that they were not active members of a standing militia (such as a PDF or LPDF) or formal members of governance bodies, such as village heads, or officeholders in the 3P structures. The village welfare organizations were various forms of traditional parahita organizations, often long-established to support community activities such as funerals and festivals. Oversight of the organization was by committee, typically composed of older village members.

There were four main types of interventions undertaken by the community organizations. Surprisingly, given the scale of humanitarian needs, by far the most frequent utilization of funding was as seed capital to establish community-based revolving funds. These function as local microfinance suppliers, with accrued interest frequently used by the community organizations for social expenditures, such as welfare payments to vulnerable households or victims of arson attacks by the military, infrastructure projects such as repairing evacuation routes, or health and education support. By mid-2026, after two years of operations, these funds had redistributed over $60,000 worth of accrued interest. Decisions on interest rates, loan sizes, and use of accrued interest were all made at the local level.

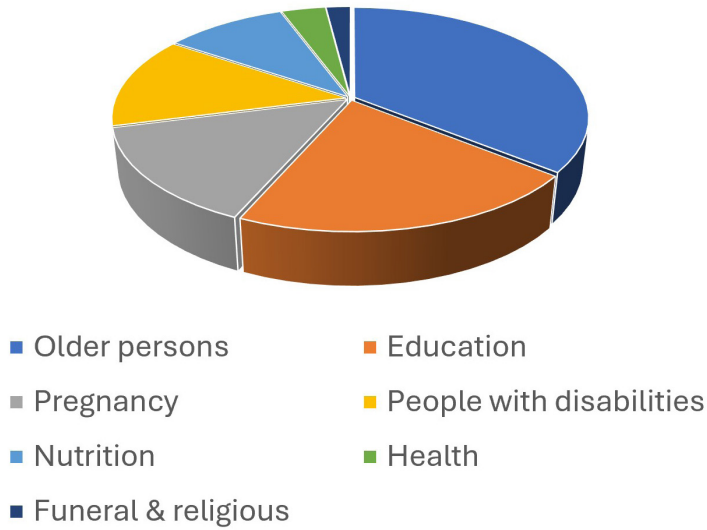


**Fig. 13** *Priorities of redistributed welfare funds, 2024-2026*

Although the external funding was also used by community organizations to make direct cash payments to vulnerable households, this was less frequent, and by mid-2026, over 3,500 households had received support using funds which were locally generated. This enabled locally established welfare systems to be sustainable, as they did not need to rely on continual external funding. Communities valued the two-pronged approach, whereby the microfinance loans could be leveraged not only to revive local livelihoods and markets, but to enable an indigenous, self-managed, and self-funded social safety net. As the analysis in the next section shows, enabling local actors to consistently deliver public goods in effective, equitable, and accountable ways in turn strengthens local governance.

The second most frequent intervention was a collaborative mode of disaster response called humanitarian help hubs, colloquially known as "H3" or "hubs" where several villages combined to receive training, undertake needs assessments, and develop joint response plans for

various hazards and threats. Most such threats were related to conflict risks, such as upgrading evacuation routes or establishing secure shelters, building capacity for first aid response to common injuries, or mine clearance operations. Some established emergency food, shelter, and medicine supplies, with systems to resell and renew resources if unused, and to maintain a working balance of funds for emergencies. The intersection of climate and conflict risk also resulted in a number of flood risk mitigation activities, such as repairing or strengthening dams, or setting up solar-powered drinking water supplies to cope with both water shortages and increased demands due to locally displaced persons. By July 2026, these hubs had been established in over 100 villages, with many of the villages in the original cohort recruiting nearby communities into their cooperative.

One of the primary challenges of the hub initiative was intervillage cooperation. As noted earlier, strong intravillage cohesion and local pride have often led to self-interested—if not exclusionary—behavior. Previous intervillage governance mechanisms had weakened post-coup, resulting in less cooperation. The hub process, however, provided a platform for intervillage assessment, planning, implementation, and oversight, thus reestablishing a critical element of the local governance architecture. By July 2026, over 6,000 people had benefited from food supplies, emergency healthcare, prioritized evaluation, and shelter or livelihood mitigation delivered through these hubs.

## Performing public service

Between 2024 and 2026, community parahita organizations in participating villages provided assistance such as cash transfers, low-cost loans, and emergency health or shelter assistance to over 20,000 people. The majority of loans were given to smallholders or low-income households, who used the funds to strengthen or establish small-scale livelihoods. Hundreds more benefited from community-funded programs to provide clean water, navigable roads, and bomb shelters.

However, this was not the only humanitarian assistance being provided to villages in this area. The Civic Monitoring Study included a sample of communities from the same area, but where assistance was provided by a CSO or local NGO based outside of the village. Both cohorts had similar levels of exposure to threats, although those in the community-led project areas were more likely to experience displacement. Both groups were equally likely to receive humanitarian assistance, and there were no significant differences in the type or amount of assistance. However, there were measurable differences in outcomes. Households in villages where aid was delivered by community-led organizations were significantly less likely to experience deteriorations in food security and overall economic vulnerability than those receiving assistance directly from external organizations such as CSOs and local NGOs. This was attributed to three factors: the superior ability of village-based organizations to match resources to needs, the integration of direct assistance with wider community activities such as disaster management, and the way that community-led programs were able to generate a greater degree of hopefulness and motivation amongst displaced and fearful populations.

This was evidenced in a photoethnographic study conducted by our research team in late 2025, where the researchers who conducted interviews with community members also provided training in photoethnographic methods to the abovementioned community welfare volunteers. Over the period of a month, volunteers took hundreds of photographs of aspects of community life which exhibited some noteworthy change—either positive or negative. Analysis of these photographs uncovered three dominant themes. Firstly, a celebration of the resumption of the agricultural cycle, despite the constant threat of raids and airstrikes and the crippling effects of junta blockades. Images of ploughing, planting, and harvesting, all under duress, conveyed a sense of defiant hopefulness, but a hopefulness that was fuelled by the capacity of community organizations to restore livelihoods through

microfinance. Words such as "green dreams" and "rays of light" were used by volunteers to describe the sense of hopefulness they felt.

**Fig. 14** "*Reclaiming Green Dreams*"
*(photo copyright Htanaung Collective)*

The second theme illustrated solidarity and collective action, such as the widescale feeding of displaced persons. The pictures conveyed an enormous sense of pride in being able to help others, particularly when the assistance was provided by funds participants had generated themselves. There was a desire to illustrate both the unity of the community, but also the practical altruism and the solidarity with those who were displaced.

**Fig. 15** "*Reaching Out a Helping Hand*"—*feeding newly-arrived IDPs in a village (photo copyright Htanaung Collective)*

Finally, a number of images illustrated different types of changes in the villages—not only the ubiquitous presence of bomb shelters and makeshift IDP camps, but also changes in roles, as women have become more prominent and active in village affairs. These were largely perceived as positive changes, even when driven by negative factors such as threats of violence. Volunteers were eager to represent examples of their innovative defiance in the face of military oppression, such as the construction of safe structures to continue education whilst the risk of air strikes remained, or the building of new escape routes. Drawn together, these images illustrate a defiant hopefulness that has been expressed in concrete action. Those concrete actions themselves have become visual symbols of possibility in the community, generating and sustaining hopefulness in the face of an uncertain and often hostile future. As Lwin Lwin (2025) notes, this kind of hopefulness that has the potential to thrive in the absence of optimism is rooted not in a sense

of a "possible, better future; [...] the primary driver for behaviour in relation to the future is a commitment to the present, in new modes of cooperation and solidarity with others" (p. 200).

This is hopefulness strongly linked to agency where people at the grassroots are enabled to participate in their own survival, resistance, and rebuilding, and to renewed—and sometimes radical—solidarities that not only provide a source of collective strength, but enable participation in an alternative performance of survival and resistance characterized by motion, rather than stasis; by innovation, rather than paralysis; and by risk, rather than retreat. Drawing on theoretical work by Arjun Appadurai (2004) and Bloem et al. (2018), this analysis highlights three elements which contribute to hopefulness: cultural and social embeddedness, a capacity for repeated performance, and access to alternative pathways for survival or advancement. Cultural and social embeddedness refers to the way in which hope is derived from a place of solidarity, belonging, or attachment. The capacity for repeated performance refers to how hopefulness is not just imagined, but enacted through daily actions, whether individual or corporate. When a community chooses to set up a welfare system, and the system consistently acts to support the vulnerable, this provides a tangible future-orientated performance, as well as confirming the sense that "we can do it." Access to alternative pathways refers to the availability of ideas, resources, and strategies outside of the normal framework. Together, these explain the power of religious rituals in sustaining hope: these tend to be culturally rooted, feature a repeated performance, and point to the possibility of supernatural intervention as a source outside of the normal framework.

In terms of project impact, the above framework is also useful in analyzing why the project has been associated with improved outcomes. In both project and non-project villages, households were exposed to assistance and loans, but the modality of delivery differed. In project

villages, assistance and loans were provided by programs designed, owned, and operated by the villagers themselves. Rather than forming new organizations, interventions were delivered through existing village social organizations. This enabled the interventions to be socially and culturally embedded. A strong emphasis of the training of village volunteers focused on the establishment of systems which would enable sustainable interventions to be repeated. This enabled potential for the repeated performance of the delivery of public goods, which in turn provides a positive model for other governance actors. Finally, the training and provision of initial resources enabled access to alternative pathways, both in terms of technical and financial resources.

This broader generation of hopefulness is translated into positive perspectives on various local governance indicators. Data collected between February 2025 and March 2026 as part of the Civic Monitoring Study asked village respondents to reflect on changes in their communities and whether issues such as drug problems and crime, governance, disaster management, village unity, and women's participation remained the same or worsened over the previous six months. Figure 16 shows the net percentage of participants who felt things had improved. In every metric, respondents in villages where the project was community-led had a far more favorable view of changes in their community.

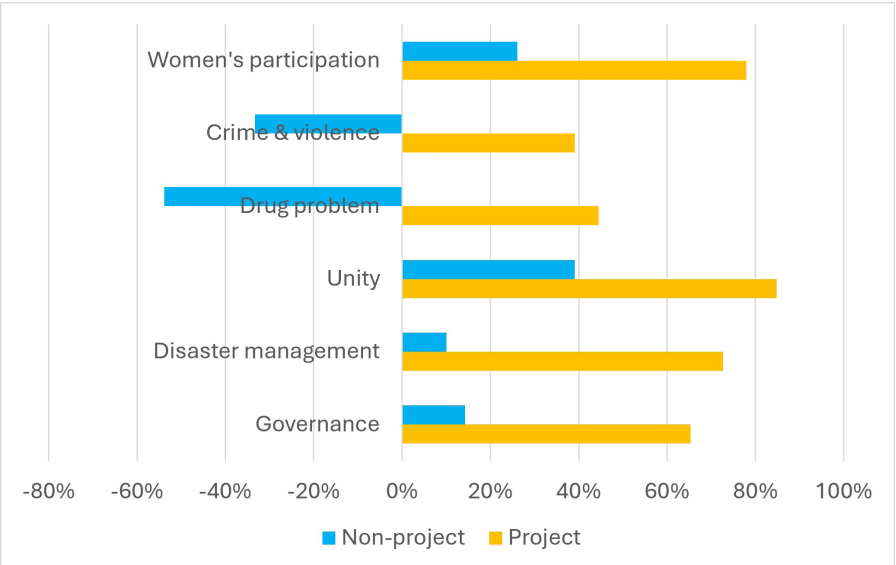


**Fig. 16** *Perspectives on changes in local governance during previous six months, comparing respondents in villages with community-led projects and respondents in villages with external CSO- or NGO-provided assistance*

The likelihood of positive perspectives on changes in governance was highest in villages which were part of the H3 activities, and were also strongly associated with perceived increases in women's participation. In communities where women were perceived to have greater involvement in public life, nearly twice as many respondents felt that governance had improved. This points to a measurable effect on local governance, despite the fact that the welfare organizations were not part of village governance organizations. This suggests that strengthening humanitarian and civic space can have a positive influence on the wider governance architecture. The next section considers specific pathways by which this may happen, drawing on case studies from villages involved in the above-described community-led welfare project.

## Pathways of change: The power of solidarity

Between 2024 and 2026, twenty case studies from villages engaged in the community-led H3 humanitarian hub project were collected and analyzed. Analysis was done not simply by the research team, but at peer co-learning events attended by village volunteers themselves. Here, key lessons from the case studies could be identified collaboratively, enabling a coproduction of knowledge. The case studies demonstrate three key outcomes of the influence of humanitarian actors on local governance, as well as five pathways by which this happens, representing "sites of opportunity": specific areas where donors may interact with community organizations to seek to support the kinds of changes described here.

### *Unifying previously divided villages*

Five of the case studies highlighted the way in which the community-led humanitarian actors, both volunteers and committee members, often resolving long-running conflicts, including some caused by pre-coup development issues (such as the Mya Sein Yaung loan project undertaken by the Department of Rural Development pre-coup) and others resulting from post-coup tensions.

**CASE STUDY: Village MYA31: Reuniting north and south**

In MYA031village, the 600 households were divided into two parts, north and south. The reason for this division is that after the coup, a person from the south was appointed as the village administrator but he subsequently died. For a while, there was no one governing the village. At that time, the villagers in the south could not accept the new northern village administrator, and the northern people could not accept the southern village administrator, so the village divided. After a while, the NUG selected a village administrator. Despite being chosen by an election, the divisions remained. When the project

started, because it concerned the entire village, a meeting for the whole village was called. At that first meeting, only 100 people attended, but the volunteers persevered. When the next meeting was called to form a social welfare committee, the entire village came and formed the committee at once, electing people regardless of south, central, and north affiliations. Because of this arrangement, the other local governance and administration committees of the village have become united and are now working together.

***Transparent governance leading to systematic justice and reduced crime***

Several case studies described the process by which the community humanitarian actors engaged with both community members and governance actors to strengthen local governance. Typically, this involved three stages: *initial mobilization of the wider community* in pursuit of broader development goals; the *demonstration of effective, transparent, and accountable service delivery* as a model for what good governance could—and should—look like; and *proactive engagement* with governance actors to collaborate on transferring skills and knowledge from the development sector to the governance sector. In the case of village BDL09, the humanitarian committee provided a site of capacity building for younger leaders who were then chosen as members for the village administration committee at subsequent elections.

**CASE STUDY: Village BDL09: Strengthening capacity of governance actors**

BDL09, with over 500 households, is situated on a route commonly used by junta troops conducting raids into another township. As a result, residents have experienced repeated murder, arson, looting, and displacement by raiding soldiers.

> Governance has been a challenge since the coup. Because it is a large village with many households, there has been little unity, and the governance and administration groups that have been formed rarely lasted more than a few months. The groups were often violent and the perpetrators could not be punished. There was no strong governance. However, after the project started, a strong committee was formed with all the elders and youths from the village. The younger adults who were involved in the village's governance and protection committee took on responsibility and accountability. The project was able to directly distribute benefits to the beneficiaries, which strengthened the trust of the community and enabled them to follow the rules and regulations set by the committee. The committee is working with the village's governance actors to establish rules and regulations. It is also now possible to connect with external donors and provide support to the beneficiaries, and because of the increased capacity for data collection and reporting, the village can also gain the trust of donors. Being able to present the project openly has also led to cooperation from the community. For example, by establishing a village fund with monthly savings from village households, the money can be used for community clinics. Each household in the community has also participated in the construction of bomb shelters for education. Drunkenness and violence in the community have decreased, and the administrative bodies have been able to work together to reduce crime.

***Relativization of armed hegemony***

Three case studies described a key effect of the influence of civilian actors on local governance as a relativization of the control of the means of violence as they key legitimizer of authority. In the qualitative interviews conducted over the project period of two years, the role of armed groups in local governance has been described as fluid and often

highly localized. Whilst in most cases, the relevant armed group (usually PDF) is seen as the final arbiter, the role of armed factions in more everyday governance issues varies. In some villages, the armed group undertakes most of the local governance duties as a group. In others, members of armed groups also function as members of administrative bodies. In a small minority, armed groups assume a more indirect role as the de facto final arbiter while leaving day-to-day governance functions to civilian actors. Several case studies report on how this has shifted, largely due to the emergence of a credible and competent civilian body. The process is not always smooth, and two case studies describe how humanitarian actors demonstrated considerable skill and patience to overcome suspicion and initial opposition from local armed groups.

**CASE STUDY: Village MYW01**

MYW01 village, close to a major town, is also close to several military checkpoints. After the coup, it was regularly hit by military incursions and artillery shelling, causing many casualties, including 68 houses destroyed by arson. The first project was to support the elderly and disabled, and the second was to implement a revolving fund program. The humanitarian committee was able to build trust with the village by informing the community, presenting the work in a transparent manner, and accepting the decisions of the community. The humanitarian committee also organized and convened meetings to involve all the community in the implementation of social welfare projects such as road repairs. As the village community members gained confidence in the work of the humanitarian committee, they also began to bring complaints about their social problems to the committee. As the humanitarian committee was increasingly able to resolve civil issues such as marital disputes, investigating thoroughly and dealing impartially, this relieved the burden on local governance actors, who could then focus on their core

> responsibilities of defense and criminal justice. One armed group leader commented, "Now that you manage the social issues, we can focus on our main duties."

These case studies illustrate the powerful influence of civilian actors on local governance. Analyzing these, our research has identified five pathways (described in the following section) by which the performance of public service in the civic space influences local governance.

## Pathways: How changes have come about

The influencing of local governance actors by humanitarians in the project villages was largely achieved through five change pathways, each of which is linked with specific capacity building provided to humanitarian volunteers during their initial training and subsequent mentoring:

**1.** ***Capacity for mobilization, coordination, and networking:*** In all the cases studies, a key determinant was found to be the ability of the humanitarian volunteers to mobilize the community—usually more successfully than local governance actors. The project provided specific training on participatory processes, advocacy, and communication skills, and these were clearly identified by volunteers as a key enabler. The project emphasis on establishing welfare and disaster management systems, as opposed to one-off delivery of aid, requires considerable negotiating and communication skills:

> Since the establishment of the intervillage humanitarian hub group, administration in each village has become more and more integrated. Previously, the administration of each village was divided among the villagers, but now, under the hub process, each village has become more united and consulted. The hub member villages have been able to work together in harmony to help displaced people, to help and support those who have been

> displaced by war, and to provide relief services. (MYW05 village volunteer, personal communication, 2026)

In numerous interviews with volunteers, when asked about which aspects of the training were the most useful, most referred to the modules on social communication skills. A key element of the training focused on trust-building communication, empathy, and awareness of the impact of exposure to violence and psychological trauma.

2. ***Knowledge and capacity transfer and spillover:*** In numerous cases, volunteers immediately shared or passed on their newly-attained knowledge to village administration and governance committees, including armed groups. In several villages, volunteers who had increased capacity through involvement in the project are also active members of governance committees, and so bring that knowledge into the governance sector:

> Previously, the two volunteers were not familiar with the methods of collecting data and calculating interest rates for loans. But now, after the training and setting up of the project systems, they are now providing support to the village administration in preparing their monthly reports and things like calculating the water meter rates. Previously, the PDF and PAF [People's Administration Force] did not have unity in their work, but they have provided good support for the project. Now, not only do we provide financial support to them, but we also teach good methods, so the village has not only achieved progress, but it now has sustainable and self-reliant systems for things like welfare and development. (BDL11 village welfare organization committee member, personal communication, 2026)

3. ***Empowerment of youth and female leaders:*** Volunteers who demonstrate implementation capacity were given more responsibility in

village affairs. A key finding from the interviews, quantitative data, and case studies is the almost ubiquitous increase in the role of women in community affairs. Whilst some of this is attributed to the constraints on men imposed by junta threats of violence, one of the key findings from the visual ethnographic study was the change in gender roles and increased leadership roles for younger community members. The training included elements of critical power analysis, including gender and power lenses, but allied with practical skills to enable negotiation and cooperation. Of note, 56 percent of all community volunteers were female, and 40 percent of the parahita committee members were women. In parahita committees with a higher ratio of female members, there was a higher likelihood that locally generated income would be spent on welfare (such as older persons, persons with disabilities, and nutrition) as opposed to development projects such as roads.

4. ***Modeling of good practice to governance actors:*** Transparent, accountable, inclusive, and sustainable social development enables visible demonstration of good practice which is then adopted by local governance. One of the training modules was specifically focused on using data for accountability and learning, encouraging village organizations to set up and manage their own monitoring and evaluation systems. This was intended to enable humanitarian actors to demonstrate a practice of transparency and accountability in the use of public funds, not only showing what was spent, but reports regarding whether the expenditure was effective in achieving its stated aims. This is in effect a "performance" of public-facing accountability. The focus of the training and subsequent project activities on establishing systems rather than a one-off distribution was key. Systems included accountability mechanisms, including procedures for receiving and responding to complaints from the public, the use of data to demonstrate transparency, and a focus on sustainability rather than reliance on external funding.

**Fig. 17 and Fig. 18** *Before (left) and during (right) photos of repair work to the main exit road from a village using funds raised through revolving fund interest, making it easier for residents to flee raids and artillery strikes. Activities such as this enabled the humanitarian committee to build public trust. (photos by Htanaung Collective)*

5. ***Raising public expectations of governance:*** As good practices in the social development sector were visibly modeled to villagers, they came to expect this standard of practice in local governance as well. The effect was threefold: expectations of better governance were also accompanied by an increased availability of skills, knowledge, and capacity engendered by the training and mentoring, as well as experience gained through the practice of project activities. As the processes themselves work by mobilizing community engagement, there was also a greater interface between community members and governance actors, as well as a greater willingness on the part of local people to participate in community governance and not simply remain passive observers:

> After the coup, administrative mechanisms collapsed. Subsequently, NUG-facilitated processes resulted in a local

> administrative body together with local PDF. However, these were perceived to be relatively ineffective by the community. When the community-led project started, the local governance actors were initially suspicious of the parahita organization, and provided little support. However, the community volunteers patiently engaged with the governance actors, and over time, built up trust. The community organization demonstrated a high level of competency, transparency, and public accountability, resulting in a high level of public trust. This meant that when the organization organized village meetings, all the village would attend. This was in contrast to the local governance actors, who struggled to mobilize village participation. As a result, those actors now ask the community organization for assistance in organizing village meetings and for resolving common civic disputes. (Community volunteer, BDL07, personal communication, 2024)

A common thread throughout the case studies—as well as the pathways to change—is the role of civic space in shaping governance. The performance of public service by civilian actors embodies the characteristics of people's expectations for local governance: efficiency, transparency, accountability, inclusion, participation, and equity. This enables the primary participants (parahita volunteers and committee members) to develop and hone skills which can then be transferred and incorporated into local governance practices; it enables existing local governance actors to see contextually-embedded expressions of the kind of local governance to which they, and their communities, aspire; and it enables those who are beneficiaries to participate in that performance—not simply as recipients, but as active contributors to a shared future. This particular characteristic is recognized as significant by Lwin Lwin and Aung Naing (2025):

> 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. It 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. (p. 211)

Our research argues that the humanitarian space is a critical entry point to influence the shape and trajectory of local governance. This is an often-overlooked aspect of scholarship on so-called "rebel governance" and also highlights the tensions in the humanitarian discourse around neutrality. However, the following section argues that external actors seeking to provide humanitarian assistance need to recognize the inherent political nature of aid—less in terms of partisanship, but in relation to local power dynamics. Once this ambiguity is embraced, a focus on process, whereby the method of assistance is shaped around genuine empowerment of local communities, can nudge emergent local governance toward forms that feature more accountable, inclusive practices.

## Shaping the assemblage: Funding imagination

In the early days of post-coup resistance, public demonstrations in cities, towns, and villages featured signboards pleading for international intervention, often referencing the United Nations' Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine. Despite the usual statements of solidarity, both the UN and other international bodies such as ASEAN have done little,

if anything, to provide any protection for ordinary people in Myanmar against the violence of the junta. Larger donor, UN, and international NGO agencies have faced a conundrum. Permission to operate inside the country, supplied by the junta authorities, is largely contingent on avoiding overt support for populations in areas not under junta control. This has resulted in either a full-scale withdrawal from Myanmar, or a refusal to provide aid to areas where the junta prohibits access, which also allows the military to control aid provision. This itself has deeply politicized aid, as Wells and Aung Naing (2024) point out:

> international cooperation [in Myanmar] needs to recognise [that] humanitarian aid is not 'neutral' or 'apolitical'; to the contrary, it either explicitly or implicitly contributes to the enabling or constraining of alternative visions of society. (p. 293)

This has, unsurprisingly, led to a renewed focus on localization, which in practice usually resembles an arrangement where both the work and the risk related to humanitarian aid are subcontracted by larger agencies to smaller local organizations. What our analysis argues for here is an understanding of localization that is understood simply as service delivery by local agents, but also that localization is a way of life for people who are suffering from the pincer effects of junta blockades, constriction of movement, and the threat of airstrikes. All life becomes local due to a political process of repression. To do anything other than simply submit to the demands of violence in such a context also represents a political act of resistance. To seek to revive livelihoods, to build community life, and to establish order in the face of ongoing threats of violence are in themselves inherently political acts. In that sense, any provision of assistance is complicit.

However, the process of engagement by external actors is critical. Attempts to deny the inherently political nature of humanitarian aid

using technocratic language as fig leaves of neutrality not only represent a tacit submission to junta restrictions, but also employ methods which largely deny active involvement in the process by recipient communities. In some cases, the requirement for "local actors" has resulted in junta-linked business tycoons securing lucrative aid distribution contracts (Progressive Voice, 2025)—a very real effect on the local political economy.[9] This calls for a recognition that localization is a fundamentally political process rather than a technical approach or strategy. This does not mean that specific technical elements are unimportant; rather, it is a call for explicit acknowledgement that the engagement by an external actor will have an impact on the local political economy, either transformative or reactionary. Localization needs to incorporate a critical analysis of the local political economy that can inform the approach toward its desired impact. This does not require external actors to simply accept the status quo in relation to social and political hierarchies. Localization does not mean that all things "local" are inherently good and right; instead, it simply refers to the primacy of local actors and local knowledge in the humanitarian process. Termed "critical localism" by MacGinty (2018), this approach, whilst remaining committed to the local in terms of empowerment, views the local in terms of a network of relationships which itself sustains particular arrangements of power and privilege.

However, paying attention to the local political economy does not necessarily entail outright partisanship. Critics have rightly cautioned against attempts by external actors to impose forms of local governance which are unsuited to the local context (Fowler, 1991; Simpson, 2024).

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9 Distribution of dried food aid in 2025 and 2026 to IDPs in Sagaing Region, funded by a large UN agency, used third-party agents, most of whom were linked to agencies established by local junta-allied businessmen and senior officials. These agencies channeled funds to local officials, required a proportion of food aid to be diverted to military and civilian staff, and employed family members as staff to manage distribution (personal communication, 2026).

The local governance-building industry is nonetheless alive and well, with a host of foreign experts advising a variety of resistance actors (Lintner, 2024). This is institutionally and operationally divorced from humanitarian efforts, which continue largely in the delusion of neutrality (Aung Naing, 2025). Attention to the local political economy, however, acknowledges that different approaches to delivering humanitarian aid will enable or constrain certain futures of the people the aid is purporting to help.

What the experience of the community-led humanitarian project demonstrates is that process is more important than the actual material goods themselves. In other words, the *how* of humanitarianism is far more important than the *what*. However, this approach also identifies a pathway for external actors to contribute to the emergence of more inclusive and fair societies, whilst eschewing explicit, partisan engagement in local governance building. The approach seeks to empower and inform the emergence of citizenship at a local level, whereby community members themselves are the key contributors to building the kind of society which they want to live in:

> [...] in areas where welfare is more explicitly linked to political power, they are the state, and that their practice is expressing what the states failed to do: build trust, distribute resources, and adequately protect the most vulnerable. Emergent welfare should be rightly seen as expressions of citizenship whereby people actively belong to an identifiable unit of political community. Rather than presuming that a new national-level state structure will supersede these local expressions, the focus instead should be on building sufficiently common 'DNA' so that future state structure can be built from those efforts. (Aung Naing, 2024, p. 128)

An approach to humanitarianism that intentionally seeks to build local capacity with elements that enable the emergence of better governance is not so much partisan as people-centered, placing the aspirations and demands of people above the concerns and reputational risks to the donor. For those keen to embrace the idea, this kind of "humanitarian activism" can be a way of "doing local governance" indirectly:

> International actors have a significant role to play. [They can] recognise and support emergent efforts, directing the state building objectives of social protection towards multiple sites and actors [...] Far from compromising principles of humanitarian neutrality (Slim, 2022), this represents a pragmatic approach not only to enable the effective delivery of much-needed assistance, but to do so in ways which enable the development of inclusive, transparent, and accountable local governance. (Aung Naing, 2024, p. 9)

If there is a clear demand from the multitude of voices and sources that have contributed to this research, it is this: *Help us to build our own future, for ourselves and our children*. It is a simple but particular demand of people whose future is threatened by military forces and climate-related threats. The plea is firstly to avoid actions which would enhance the capabilities of opposing forces: *Our future is precarious, but we are willing to take risks. That future is clear in our eyes, but as yet not fully visible. That future is contingent on the repudiation of the ghosts of the past: authoritarianism, sectarianism, and elite hegemony—so please do not try to "help" us by colluding with the old. That future will not be built through technical solutions or clever constitutions written by elites and handed down to us. It will come not through writing, but through a performance of citizenship which will, through its own charismatic appeal, attract and build local coalitions.* It will involve "specific acts, whether overt or covert [...] to push back against hegemonic claims by armed authorities" (Thinzar et al., 2025, p. 196). This may still resemble

partisan politics to some. But our hope is that the voices of ordinary citizens, as they reimagine communities in the face of relentless violence, will at least convince some that it is partisanship worth the risk.

Chapter 8

# A Different Path: Local Governance in New Wa-Administered Territories

*It can be said that people have no right to speak at all. In most cases, decisions are made only by those at the top. When the authorities do not provide satisfactory responses, people do not dare to express their dissatisfaction; otherwise, they may end up in handcuffs.*
—Wa villager, Hopang Township, eastern Shan State, 2025

*When the Wa came in, people say law and order was established. But in reality, [their] power is at the barrel of a gun. They present it as rule of law to make it sound acceptable, but because they are armed, people live in fear.*
—Kachin villager, Hopang Township, eastern Shan State, 2025

Our study has had a primary focus on emergent local governance in areas largely controlled by newly formed post-coup militias (PDFs) whose identity and legitimacy are derived from three sources: their control of the means of violence, their localness, and their ability to render public service in contrast to the SAC. However, the discourse of non-state governance in Myanmar is both rich and storied, featuring

a cast of actors whose identity and claims to legitimacy are rooted in ethnic affiliation. This includes Rakhine and Chin groups in the west; Kachin in the northeast; Shan, Pa-O, Danu, Ta-ang, Kokang (ethnic Chinese), and Wa in Shan State; and Karenni, Karen, and Mon in the southeast (Buchanan, 2016; Thawnghmung & Furnari, 2019). Prior to the 2021 coup, a number of these groups had established either official or de facto territorial control over certain territories, primarily in border areas. This includes areas designated as semi-autonomous regions by the 2008 Constitution (Nixon, 2015), such as the Wa, Danu, Pa-O, Kokang, Naga, and Palaung (Ta-ang) Self-Administered Zones, with the Wa territory uniquely designated as a division to represent a larger area of control.

However, pre-coup, a number of other ethnic groups maintained de facto control over particular territories, subject either to peace agreements with the then-government or through sustained armed presence, often stretching back for decades. This included, amongst others, areas controlled by the KIO, the political wing of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and areas controlled by armed actors affiliated with the KNU. In these areas, ethnic affiliation was used as the primary appeal to legitimacy, but armed actors also undertook considerable parallel state-building projects, including health, education, and governance systems for populations under their control (Joliffe, 2014; Lall & South, 2014). The existence of territories under both official and de facto control, coupled with an often sophisticated level of institutional development, provided the basis for appeals for a more genuine expression of federalism in Myanmar—calls for which only became louder following the 2021 coup (South, 2021). However, whilst more recent calls for federalism have called for a "bottom-up" approach, emphasizing the role of federal units to shape the nature of the federal structure rather than simply reverting to an elite-level, top-down model. This has drawn attention to the nature of governance within the territories controlled by potential federal units. According to Ashley South (2021),

> renewed attention must be paid to building up EAO's governance and administrative capacities as well as their political credibility. For many EAOs, consolidating control over and ensuring the efficient administration of their areas of authority and adjacent areas of mixed administration are equally, if not more, important than overthrowing the SAC. The EAOs generally derive their legitimacy not only from their long-running struggles for self-determination, but also the successful provision of essential public services to their communities. [They] must establish their political credibility [...] as responsible governance actors. (p. 454)

Whilst much has been written regarding state-building efforts and governance systems in various EAO-controlled areas in Myanmar such as Kayah (Karenni) State (Buscemi, 2025) and Rakhine State (Aung Thura Ko Ko, 2025), one of the key challenges of EAO governance in post-coup Myanmar is the establishment of effective governance in newly acquired territories, particularly where the population may not all have the same ethnic affiliation as the controlling EAO. This has been a particular issue for EAOs in Shan State, particularly after the territorial expansions of 2023 and 2024:

> Many armed ethnic groups in Northern Shan State today claim territories beyond their historical autonomous regions [...] As ethnic armed groups gain power, they often disrupt multi-ethnic local communities, increasing tensions. (Sai Tun Aung Lwin & Aung Naing, 2025, p. 49)

Where ethnic diversity means that appeals to ethnonationalism are insufficient to generate legitimacy, groups must use other means. For some, coercion, suppression or even expulsion of minorities has been undertaken (Latif, 2025; Shwe Pee Myay, 2024). Sai Tun Aung Lwin

and Aung Naing (2025), amongst others, urge groups to follow more constructive paths, including:

> Strengthening of inclusive governance structures beyond military control [...] to reduce ethnic tensions and increase legitimacy [and] public service-based legitimacy, [such as] improving the delivery of public services and economic opportunities [and reducing] dependency on illicit or extractive activities dominated by armed groups or elites. (p. 62)

Our study here looks at the establishment of governance in two areas of Shan State that came under the control of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in early 2024, having been initially taken over by militia groups belonging to the Three Brotherhood Alliance in 2023. As with the townships in Sagaing Region, these townships were previously ostensibly under the control of the Myanmar government, albeit with a high degree of ongoing contestation. As later sections explain in more detail, the UWSA had established a vertically integrated governance system in its territories, maintaining tight, top-down control by a small elite. This had been extended to areas of defector control in the southern areas—but how would governance be established in the townships newly acquired by the UWSA? And how did the models and methods differ from those in the Anyar region? Contrasting this case study of another variation of emergent post-coup governance with the experience in Sagaing Region enables us to draw a number of conclusions on the potential trajectories of local governance in Myanmar. The next section provides a brief background of both the UWSA and the Wa territories, as well as a summary of the events of 2023 and 2024 resulting in the acquisition of new territories by certain EAOs.

## Ambiguity and autocracy: The Wa in Myanmar

The Wa are estimated to number around one million (Minority Rights, 2026) and are designated as an officially-recognized ethnic group in

both China and Myanmar. Most live along the China-Myanmar border, primarily in southwestern Yunnan Province, China, and northeastern Shan State in Myanmar (Fiskesjö, 2024). A common misconception is that the Wa are solely a Chinese ethnic group. In reality, the Wa possess a distinct cultural identity, characterized by their own Austroasiatic-derived language, which was later standardized with the assistance of Christian missionaries (Liu, 2013). The Wa refer to themselves by various names such as Va, Parauk, and Lawa, all of which translate to "people of the cave," reflecting their ancestral heritage (Fiskesjö, 2021). In northeastern Myanmar, what is colloquially referred to as "Wa State" operates with significant autonomy, featuring its own administrative institutions, education systems, and legal mechanisms under the political leadership of the UWSA (Fiskesjö, 2024; Lintner, 2019). Mandarin Chinese and the Wa language are the most commonly used languages in the region, while the Chinese yuan functions as the primary currency, reflecting strong cross-border economic ties with China (Asia Times, 2019). In many ways, Wa State exists in a highly liminal form, with deep ties with China and unavoidable relations with Myanmar while resisting being fully incorporated into either, and thus retaining an ambiguous, but fairly robust autonomy, with limited integration with Myanmar's central governance (Fiskesjö, 2024).

Crucial to maintaining Wa autonomy is the UWSA, considered the largest and best-equipped of all the non-state militias operating within Myanmar. Established in April 1989 with its headquarters in Pangsang (Panghkam), the UWSA has played a central role as both a military and governing authority in Wa-controlled areas of northern and eastern Shan State for several decades. Before the establishment of the UWSA, Wa commanders Zhao Nyi-Lai and Bao Youxiang were officers in the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) in Pangsang. Growing dissatisfaction among Wa commanders with the CPB's Bamar-dominated, authoritarian leadership ended in a coup against the CPB headquarters in Pangsang. This event marked the collapse of CPB authority in Wa areas and the

emergence of the UWSA as an independent Wa-led armed organization (Steinberg, 2013).

Following formation of the UWSA, Wa leaders signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar military authorities of the time, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), which resulted in the junta designating UWSA-controlled territory as Shan State Special Region-2 (Steinberg, 2010). This agreement marked a critical turning point, allowing the UWSA to consolidate territorial control and establish an autonomous regional administration largely free from interference by the central government. This arrangement was further validated by the 2008 Constitution (Myanmar Law Library, 2009), where, in Chapter 2, Section 56(f), Shan State's Hopang, Panlong, Mongmao, Pangwaun, Narphan, Matman, and Pangsang Townships were formally designated as the Wa Self-Administered Division, although Hopang, Panlong, and Matman remained under the direct control of the Myanmar military until January 2024.

Administratively, Wa State is divided into two main regions, northern and southern. The Northern Wa Region is administratively organized into districts. Initially, it consisted of three districts. However, in 2024, the UWSA gained full control over Hopang and Panlong. As a result, Hopang was designated as a new district, expanding the number of Wa-administered districts in the northern region from three to four. Currently, the four districts in the Northern Wa Region are Meung Pawk, Meung Linn, Meung Mao, and Hopang. The UWSA also exerts de facto control over several territories in Mong Hsat district, eastern Shan State that are not named in the constitutional agreement. Within the areas, the UWSA has functioned not only as an armed organization but also as a de facto governing authority, exercising control over administration, security, and local governance (Kyi Thar, 2020). The Southern Wa Region is not organized by districts but is administered through a military brigade structure, primarily under the UWSA's

171 Brigade, which functions as the main administrative and military authority in the southern area.

**Fig. 19** *Map of northern and southern Wa-administered territories (in green) in eastern Shan State (adapted from MIMU)*

The United Wa State Party (UWSP) serves as the central political authority in the Wa Self-Administered Division, operating alongside the UWSA to govern the region. It directs administrative structures, issues policies and orders, and enforces compliance, shaping the daily lives of citizens under a system of strict oversight. The UWSP regulates economic activity, including commercial enterprises such as casinos and

karaoke bars (locally known as "KTV bars"), and oversees security and social control, often limiting local participation and public input. The UWSA functions as a powerful political, military, and administrative actor that has shaped governance, autonomy, and border relations in the Wa areas. Its continued influence underscores the limits of Myanmar's constitutional arrangements in fully resolving questions of ethnic self-determination and state formation (Kyi Thar, 2020; Steinberg, 2013).

The UWSA and UWSP have maintained an ambiguous stance with relation to the post-2021 Spring Revolution. Whilst they have consistently made statements affirming their neutrality and maintained cordial relationships with the junta (including participation in various dialogue initiatives facilitated by SAC) there have been well-founded suspicions of the UWSA/UWSP's tacit support for EAOs in northern Shan State based on their active role in facilitating trade and weapons procurement on behalf of EAOs. This activity is closely monitored by China, which acts as a powerful de facto patron of the Wa (Ong, 2023). China's role is complex, driven by both the strategic interests of the Belt-Road Initiative (ISP, 2025), by lucrative border trade, and by longstanding Chinese policy preferences for buffer zones between itself and Myanmar. China's relationship with Myanmar and its EAOs is best described as complex, albeit strategically unambiguous. As Tang (2025) points out, whilst China serves as a key partner and supporter of the Myanmar junta, "opposing ethnic armed groups are fighting the regime using Chinese-sourced weaponry [...] the UWSA [...] operates using Chinese military equipment and has supplied weapons to other ethnic groups" (p. 493). The critical role of the UWSA as a trade facilitator gives China leverage over both the junta and other EAOs. After the spectacular success of the operations in late 2023 (see following section), China exerted incremental pressure on both the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) to halt onward expansion, and in 2025, to return key territory back to the junta (The Irrawaddy,

2025). A key element of incremental pressure was the closure of key border trading posts, restricting the import of essential items including medicines, fuel, and weapons by EAOs. The UWSA have often acted as hosts or brokers for China or junta-mediated negotiations (Yalong Xian, 2026). China's role is a critical element in the events of October 2023, termed "Operation 1027," whereby an alliance of three EAOs made rapid territorial gains from the Myanmar military junta through a surprise campaign.

## The real winners of Operation 1027

In October 2023, the Three Brotherhood Alliance of EAOs, comprising the Kokang MNDAA, the TNLA, and the Arakan Army (AA), launched a coordinated offensive against junta positions in northern Shan State. Such was the element of surprise that junta positions were rapidly overrun in a matter of days, including the urban center of Lashio, home to the main junta military command for the region (Sin, 2024). Fearing broader instability, a ceasefire was brokered by China before the alliance could reach Mandalay—although by then, other campaigns, including those in nearby Karenni State, were also seizing territory from the junta.

Part of the territory gained by the Three Brotherhood Alliance included two townships, Hopang and Panlong, which were nominally part of the special administrative district of Wa State, but at that time still under the control of the Myanmar military. During Operation 1027, the MNDAA took control of the Kokang capital city of Laukkai (Laukkaing), which is near Hopang Township. In order to secure its territorial gains, it also took military control of Hopang and Panlong from the Myanmar military. However, on January 10, 2024, with tacit agreement from the Myanmar military, a formal ceremony marked the transfer of administrative authority from the central government to the UWSA. From the junta's point of view, this replaced governance under a hostile actor (the MNDAA) with a neutral one, as the UWSA had maintained a neutral stance in the conflict between EAOs, resistance organizations,

and the military junta. During the event, Hopang was designated as a district-level administrative unit under UWSA governance structures (Radio Free Asia, 2024).

The expansion and consolidation of administrative authority in Hopang and Panlong Townships after Operation 1027 was achieved without any combat action from the UWSA. Since this transition, the UWSA has assumed responsibility for local administration, security, and governance in both townships. The transfer has introduced new administrative practices, including changes in local governance arrangements, language use in administration, economic activities, and security policies. As a result, local residents have experienced noticeable shifts in governance structures and everyday life. The incorporation of the townships of Hopang and Panlong carries strategic implications. Geographically, Hopang was located along a key transit route connecting Wa-administered areas with Chinese border crossings, enhancing the UWSA's logistical depth and economic leverage. Our study analyzes how governance was established as a lived experience for residents of these two townships and how the transition to UWSA administration has reshaped local governance, civic space, and the everyday lives of communities now fully incorporated into the Wa Self-Administered Division.

This research employed a narrative research approach to understand the experiences and perspectives of people living in these areas. Aside from data obtained from media reports from Wa outlets, we also collected data through narrative interviews from people living in these townships. Narrative research focuses on collecting personal stories and experiences in order to better understand social realities and community conditions. Thirteen respondents from Hopang and Panlong Townships were selected using purposive sampling, with interviews conducted between August 2025 and September 2026. Interviews were conducted in Burmese language, usually online due to difficulties in accessing

these areas. The analysis was conducted principally by a local researcher who is ethnically Wa and has spent most of their life in territories administered by Wa authorities or those adjacent to them. This allowed for an approach that was sensitive to the nuances of discourse around Wa issues, as well as an intimate and deeply personal understanding of Wa culture and politics.

Analysis of the data points to four main themes which describe the currents influencing the nature of emergent governance: nationalization, colonization, privatization, and democratization. These terms represent four axes simultaneously exerting influence, where colonization describes the influence of external cultural-political forces (in this case, primarily Chinese) in opposition to nationalization, which describes a predominantly ethno-nationalist influence (in this case, Wa identity). The other axis is the tension between privatization (where public property is owned and operated by private entities, and public goods such as electricity and internet are controlled by private interests) versus democratization, which describes the placing into public hands the control of key aspects of governance, including control over resources and information. Our analysis looks at how the tensions or imbalances between these different poles shape the nature of local governance for those governed in Hopang and Panlong Townships. This provides a useful contrast to the dynamics of emergent local governance in the Anyar region, which we will return to in the final section.

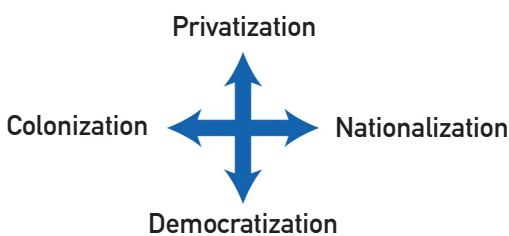


**Fig. 20** *Schematic of local governance dynamics in Hopang and Panlong*

## Nationalization: Asserting Wa identity

After Hopang and Panlong were handed over by the MNDAA and its allies to the UWSA and its political wing, the UWSP began overseeing administrative functions such as the provision of public services, local ward administration, police department, judicial system, and taxes. As a consequence of coming under the effective control of the UWSA there has been a significant shift in governance structures and public administration in the areas from the previous form under the Myanmar military authorities. This is less prominent in some aspects of public service delivery, such as healthcare and education, but more noticeable in security, justice, access to information, and control over civic space.

In other Wa-controlled areas, residents are issued with health booklets so that every Wa resident can access free medical services. However, health services in the new territories operate under a dual system with high fees payable only in Chinese currency:

> Under the previous government, healthcare was somewhat more affordable; getting medical treatment offered at least some financial relief. Now, under the Wa administration, only Chinese currency is used, and with all the various taxes and fees, access to healthcare has become difficult for everyone, and people are suffering losses. (A 41-year-old Wa language teacher, Panlong Township, personal communication, 2026)

> The consequences of the political situation are placing a heavy burden on ordinary people. Seeking medical treatment in other towns is difficult because many people lack the financial resources and transportation is challenging. Even a visit to a basic clinic in Hopang can cost between 70 and 100 yuan [approximately US$10-15]. Healthcare has become increasingly difficult to access for ordinary residents. (45-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, 2026)

One significant change has been the increased involvement of CDM staff in service provision. Whilst outlawed by the military junta, CDM staff were tacitly welcomed by the Wa authorities to fill much-needed human resource gaps, particularly those in health and education. However, services are limited, partly due to lack of manpower, but also due to restrictions by the Wa on NGOs and difficulties in accessing essential medications. Costs have increased due to the switch to collecting treatment fees in Chinese yuan.

> Basic health services are still not fully available, and there is no government support for medicines and vaccines. Since there are no social organizations, so health-related assistance is being provided only by each other. (55-year-old Wa female CDM teacher, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)

In the education sector, the UWSA has allowed the functioning of government schools as usual, with teacher salaries still provided by the Myanmar military authorities. The pre-coup government schools remain operational and continue teaching using a curriculum provided by the central government. However, students who seek to take the Grade 12 examination validated by Myanmar authorities must travel to another township to sit for the exam. Most of the youth in these areas do not fully complete their education, typically leaving school around the age of 14 or 15 to seek employment, often low-skilled work in China. The UWSA authorities do not appear to place a strong priority on bolstering the education sector compared with their focus on strengthening economic and military capacity. Where teachers are recruited by UWSA, the emphasis is on strengthening Wa and Chinese literacy:

> Due to those participating in the CDM, some teachers are weak in providing educational services, and government support is

> still insufficient. (55-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)
>
> When the area came under the Wa Administration in 2023, Chinese language education was given priority. As a result, concerns among parents and the community have increased regarding the future of their children. (45-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2026)

Wa administration is characterized by a highly centralized authority system with limited civic participation and rather weak institutional accountability. Civil society space is extremely restricted. Prior to COVID-19, there were only two community-based charity organizations active in the area: Future Light, formed by civilians, and Simaari, which was formed by a Wa Christian Church. After Wa administration came to the area, these organizations' operations were suspended as charitable activities were prohibited:

> Charitable organizations are not allowed to operate independently in Wa State. Regardless of the sector receiving support, donations are reportedly required to go through the Wa State government fund, and assistance is then distributed under the government's name. As a result, the two existing charity organizations eventually became inactive. (45-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2026)

CSOs, NGOs, and charitable organizations are prohibited from operating in social or humanitarian sectors, with the sole exception of religious groups. These, however, are also tightly controlled with their activities limited to social events, such as funerals and religious ceremonies. This restriction has effectively eliminated non-state social support mechanisms and community-based service delivery, consolidating all civic activity under one controlling authority. This has in effect stifled

all humanitarian activities, as not only has the UWSA prohibited the intervention of humanitarian actors, the UWSA themselves have failed to implement any social or humanitarian services. It restricted the two townships from directly engaging with external organizations, allowing only its own authority to govern and operate. A 30-year-old Wa female printing shop owner from Panlong (personal communication, 2026) explained:

> In some cases, it is stated that instead of engaging with independent organizations, everything should be managed under the Wa administration. People are instructed to go directly to the district authorities for discussions or complaints and they are discouraged from seeking external assistance or involving any outside organizations.

The operation of an insular, top-down approach seeks to impose Wa identity and authority over the townships, excluding influences from other ethnic sources. A 55-year-old CDM teacher (personal communication, 2025) noted:

> Civil society organizations are not permitted to operate, and there is simply no space or opportunity to express opinions.

Under Wa administration, a women's affairs organization has been established. However, its activities are largely focused on managing practical arrangements for visiting Wa officials. It has been given authority to handle cases of domestic violence and divorce, but to date has directed little focus to women's empowerment:

> It is heard that under Wa administration, there are no visible women's empowerment or livelihood training programs. Most of the activities under the women's affairs sector appear to be limited to supporting official visits and events, such as preparing

> food and assisting with catering during meetings and office functions. (45-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)

The consequences of this approach are significant. First, communities are deprived of access to technical expertise, financial resources, and capacity-building programs that external organizations could potentially provide. Second, the absence of independent actors reduces transparency and weakens accountability mechanisms, increasing the risk of mismanagement or abuse of power. Third, development initiatives and welfare services such as those related to healthcare, education, and livelihood programs remain underdeveloped. Despite the existence of a women's department in the UWSA, it is limited to involvement in cultural affairs:

> It can be observed that the role of Wa women within the administrative system is limited and marginalized, with little to no opportunity for participation, and that they are often overlooked or excluded. (55-year-old female CDM teacher, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)

One of the most significant features of the local Wa administrative system is the control of security at the township level by militias approved by the UWSA. Although community administrators are given uniforms, they are not allowed to carry weapons. The militias, however, have more authority to exercise power and perform duties compared to ward or village administrators, and are allowed to carry weapons. The role of the militias is to protect their own communities and to ensure local security, prevent theft, and maintain order within their respective area. They are also expected to provide security during community events and to act as guards when necessary. However, despite the official differentiation between security and administrative roles, in practice, militias have increasingly become involved in administrative affairs, as noted by all

respondents from both townships who were interviewed for this study. In this situation, the rule of law has been weakened because security and conflict problems are often solved by militia leaders using threats of force instead of courts or legal systems. Stability may exist, but it is typically based on fear rather than trust. Real power is often held by armed groups, which in turn primarily serve to establish and enforce Wa dominance. A 45-year-old female resident from Hopang (personal communication, 2026) explained the role of emergent militia under Wa administration:

> In terms of changes in village administration, young people in each ward and village who meet the required qualifications are recruited and formed into militia groups after receiving training. These militia units are established in every village, usually consisting of about four-to-10 members, and are assigned to carry out regular patrols as part of the local security arrangements.

Information control is strictly enforced. Only a limited number of centrally-approved media outlets such as Wa News Land and Wa State TV are permitted to operate and report on administrative affairs, including coverage related to Hopang and Panlong. Media organizations are allowed to publish and share information only if they closely adhere to official guidance. Furthermore, residents are prohibited from sharing or posting any news related to the two townships online, with punitive measures imposed for non-compliance. Restricting media access can affect the availability of accurate information and undermine a transparent governance system. In addition, it can make it difficult to receive external assistance. Furthermore, limitations on media outlets can reduce public awareness, weaken accountability mechanisms, and allow misinformation to spread more easily. They can also limit the ability of communities to voice their concerns, reduce humanitarian and development support, and weaken trust between authorities and

the public. The UWSA/UWSP system reflects a highly centralized and restrictive model of information governance, which significantly limits transparency and restricts public access to independent and alternative sources of information. The same 45-year-old female respondent in Hopang (personal communication, 2025) expressed her frustration regarding the restrictions on social media usage:

> There are strict restrictions on public expression and social media use. People are not allowed to post or criticize government actions, and complaints are often not accepted. Overall, the public experiences strong control over freedom of expression.

The UWSA enforces a strict conscription policy with mandatory service as a requirement for household members in the state. Their military service law requires one male member from each household to serve in the military. There is no specific fixed period for how long a person must serve. If someone who is already serving wants to leave, another person must be provided to replace them. If a replacement cannot be found, then the person is not allowed to leave service.

When Hopang was first brought under its administration, it was announced that the military service requirement would not be immediately implemented in the same way as in other parts of Wa State, but would instead be introduced only after five years. However, toward the end of 2025, rumors began to circulate that recruitment in Hopang and Panlong Townships may begin earlier, causing considerable anxiety amongst people in the eligible age range. The forcible recruitment of men into newly established militias in the two townships appears to the public as part of the UWSA's conscription policy (Hein Htoo Zan, 2024). Regarding the conscription law, a 68-year-old Wa man who was formerly a chief in Panlong (personal communication, 2025) said:

> When they started calling up militias and soldiers later, the public really did not like it. There is now an order that people must serve in the military. In the past, there was no such requirement. That is why the public strongly dislikes it.

There are also reports that some individuals under the age of 18 are being recruited (Debnath, 2024). Adding to the confusion, the UWSA has stated that young people who are not attending school are being called to camps, where they receive education in a military camp-style system, which, although being framed as education, appears to be a thinly disguised conscription effort. Although Wa civilians may not agree with or support military conscription, they are unable to resist the orders of the authorities.

The justice and security sectors in the Wa-administered area exhibit a lack of transparency and consistency with a high degree of informality and arbitrariness. While public jurisdiction is practiced, including the application of the death penalty for severe cases, there is no presence of licensed attorneys or legal mediators to ensure due process between complainants and accused individuals. Major crimes such as drunkenness, drug use, violence, murder, theft, and rape are immediately managed by local security personnel and the police, with punishments applied depending on the severity of the crime, such as fines, imprisonment, or even public execution (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2025). The management of cases rarely involves consistent legal process, as the judiciary and police have insufficient capacity and authority. Despite the heavy-handed approach to law and order, there is no evidence that drug- or theft-related crime levels have decreased in the townships.

In terms of public assets and administration, the Wa authority has taken over former government buildings and offices, many of which have reportedly been transferred or partially sold to Chinese business

investors. Some buildings have also been converted into construction company offices and entertainment venues, such as KTV bars. These activities primarily serve to benefit business cronies rather than the local public. Despite this, taxes have been collected at higher rates compared to the previous military government period. A 33-year-old Wa male who is a local official in Hopang Township (personal communication, 2025) noted:

> Some administrative offices, including electricity meter offices and other government departments, have been converted into shop-like units and rented out. Currently, there are no functioning Myanmar government electricity or administrative offices in place.

The 41-year-old male Wa language teacher in Panlong Township (personal communication, 2026) explained:

> All the buildings associated with the previous government have either become privately owned or have been taken over by the Wa administration. Some of the vacant buildings are available to rent as dormitories; people have to pay rent for them, which then flows back as tax revenue.

After the townships came fully under Wa administration in 2024, identity cards, household registration documents, and vehicle registration documents issued under the Myanmar government were required to be replaced with Wa registration documents:

> When the Wa administration came in, remaining households were required to reregister and obtain Wa household registration and identification documents again. The intention is to formally recognize them as people under the Wa administration and as

> Wa households. (56-year-old Wa official, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2026)

Overall, local governance in Hopang and Panlong Townships is characterized by strong central control, with decision making concentrated at the highest levels of the Wa authority. Local administrative bodies possess minimal autonomy, limiting participatory governance and localized problem solving. Under Wa governance, civilians do not have to flee from armed conflict as there is no active fighting, which makes living conditions relatively stable and secure. However, there is general dissatisfaction with the strict regulations, limited freedom of expression and criticism, and the inadequate provision of basic public services. Even compared to the previous military junta regime, the Wa authorities implement a highly centralized, security-oriented administrative model with constrained civic space, limited rule-of-law safeguards, and restricted public accountability.

## Colonization: A new province of China?

In this study, colonization refers to the way in which a territory, whilst technically still part of Myanmar, has had its economy, language, and cultural identity subsumed by external influences, leaving the local population with little autonomy or connection to their original identity. As noted earlier, geopolitical factors have resulted in a deeply intertwined relationship between Wa State and China. As Hopang and Panlong Townships have come under more direct control by the Wa, the influence of China has increased at the expense of Myanmar:

> Mostly, Chinese language is used. Among the village heads, not only the Wa people, but [also] ethnic Chinese and Kokang people are involved [as officials]. Many of them cannot speak Burmese and communicate only in Chinese. Locally, if people know Chinese, they tend to use Chinese as well. (36-year-old female, Panlong Township, personal communication, 2026)

Chinese influence is also reflected in the local economic system, particularly the use of Chinese currency for market transactions:

> One consequence of the use of Chinese currency is that it has become clearly reflected in market prices. The value of money is determined in terms of Chinese yuan, and the prices of goods are also calculated based on it. As a result, many people find the situation difficult and inconvenient. (33-year-old Wa official, personal communication, 2025)

This is in effect a colonization, both economically and culturally. The widespread use of Chinese currency has effectively displaced the Myanmar kyat as local livelihoods are increasingly tied to China-oriented trade networks. This generally benefits Chinese traders and business elites. Before the UWSA gained control in these two regions, most of the local people were engaged in agriculture, livestock, and rubber. However, under the control of the UWSA, there has been a rapid expansion of Chinese investment as the former government offices and buildings were taken over by the UWSA and then sold to Chinese business investors. Many of these were then converted into casinos, KTV bars, and other entertainment sites, or turned over for new construction. As a result, new employment opportunities have emerged in the local hospitality/entertainment industry and construction sites:

> In recent years, there have been more job sites, especially construction sites such as masonry work. It is largely because Chinese companies have become more prevalent. There has been an increase in building construction and expansion of new businesses, so jobs were available. (25-year-old Wa male, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)

In addition to the construction sector, work opportunities that arise tend to be in new, marginal industries such as gambling venues:

> One of the major changes and challenges for both local residents and young people is the rapid increase in gambling venues. While they are presented as casinos or gambling establishments, some are reportedly involved in online scam operations and other illicit activities behind the scenes. (55-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2026)

**Fig. 21** *Newly-opened businesses with Chinese owners or investors in Wa-administered Hopang Township (photo courtesy of Shan Herald Agency for News, December 2024)*

These new opportunities represent a double-edged sword. Whilst providing work and income, there are significant social consequences related to the growth of gambling-related industries, including social breakdown, increased alcohol- and drug-related issues, and a deterioration in social cohesion and community stability. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of massage parlors throughout the area has led to an increase in sex work, resulting in a range of negative consequences, including widespread sexual health issues and exploitation by employers. A 55-year-old female teacher in Hopang (personal communication,

2025) described the ambivalence of Wa authorities to the risks of these new ventures:

> [The number of] Massage parlors [has] increased, and there are also [new] gambling centers and other illicit establishments. In the past, there were very few of them, but now gambling operations are increasing and being set up openly. These are reportedly run by Chinese operators, including the gambling and other related venues. Without permission from the Wa authorities, they would not be able to operate here, so it is said that they may be working in collaboration with each other.

Due to the significant amount of official and unofficial tax revenue generated from these economies, the Wa authorities take little action to regulate gambling or nightlife, despite the concurrent flourishing of related criminal activities such as fraud, money laundering, and scam centers. Cultural and administrative privilege are clearly visible in the official language hierarchy, with Chinese being given priority, Wa being given second place, and Burmese being marginalized. Notably, despite these townships being situated in Shan State, the Shan language is minimally used, if at all. After the Wa took over, previous administrators, such as ward or community leaders, were removed or stepped down, being replaced by those who can speak and understand Mandarin Chinese. This creates significant challenges and disadvantages for non-Chinese residents, who previously engaged with local governance actors in Burmese, such as this 55-year-old of Kachin ethnicity (personal communication, 2025) who resides in Hopang:

> When they use the Chinese language and [local] people do not understand their language, it creates problems. Here, the Burmese language was the one commonly used, so when Chinese is suddenly used and spoken, it does not work well at all.

**Fig. 22** *Chinese-language advertisements and billboards in Wa-administered Hopang Township (photo courtesy of Shan Herald Agency for News, February 2025)*

Most laws and official orders are issued now in the Chinese language, which creates difficulties for the public in understanding and complying with them:

> Many people do not understand the laws because they are issued mainly in Chinese and are not widely shared with the public. Since most official documents and administrative procedures are also conducted in Chinese, people face difficulties understanding regulations and accessing services. (male teacher in Panlong Township, personal communication, 2026)

This linguistic practice reduces access to national institutions, weakens national identity, and normalizes external administrative practices in daily governance, education, and business. Together, these conditions resemble a form of colonization where economic systems, cultural

norms, and governance structures are shaped by an external power, leaving local communities with limited control over resources, decision-making processes, and long-term development.

### Privatization

After the Wa authorities took over these two townships, a number of public services increasingly came to be held in private hands. Electricity is currently being supplied by a private provider (Sein Pan Company) owned by Chinese investors. Generation, distribution, and billing are often controlled by selected private or business-linked actors, limiting public oversight and accountability. The system operates on a prepaid basis, similar to prepaid mobile phone and internet services. Consumers are required to top up their electricity credit in advance, using Chinese currency. For example, if a household adds 100 yuan to their account, the electricity they consume is deducted from that amount. Once the credit is exhausted, additional payments are required to continue using electricity. Whilst more expensive, this system is reported to provide more stable electricity compared to the previous, junta-led service.

In terms of water supply, private ownership is largely vested with larger, external investors—again, mainly Chinese:

> It is unclear which Chinese investor is involved, but it is said they coordinate with Wa authorities through a tender process. However, water supply has not yet started. People are not allowed to dig private wells without permission, and decisions are made internally by the authorities. (30-year-old Wa female, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2026)

Communication networks and internet access are also largely maintained through private or external providers. Again, apart from the Myanmar military-owned Mytel, internet connectivity in the area is largely reliant on Chinese networks:

> After the conflict [Operation 1027], only the Mytel operator was available. Later, Telenor came back, but the lines were out several times. For electricity, people are using the Chinese line. For the main Wi-Fi here, none of the Myanmar operators work; you can only access it through this Chinese Wi-Fi. (25-year-old Wa male, Hopang Township, personal communication, 2025)

Due to the restrictions on civil society put in place by the UWSA/UWSP, as well as the lack of capacity in public healthcare, there has been an expansion in private clinics and hospitals. This, however, has come with a high cost to local residents, especially as fees must be paid in yuan. The privatization of essential services has contributed to growing inequality in access to healthcare. As regulation and oversight remain limited, healthcare provision becomes uneven, reinforcing social stratification and mirroring colonial patterns where quality services are concentrated among economically privileged groups:

> The things that were lost after the Wa [administration] came in are education and healthcare. It has become a bit difficult regarding those sectors. (41-year-old Wa male, Panlong Township, personal communication, 2026)

In essence, the overarching purpose of Wa governance is to maintain the conditions conducive to capitalist activity, with the local population essentially functioning as either units of consumption or compliance to enable profit extraction. This may seem a somewhat harsh critique, but provides some explanation for the two-tiered system of justice, which on the one hand provides swift punishment to individual offenders whilst largely protecting larger-scale illicit business provided that "dues" are paid.

## Democratization: stepping backwards

> It is not democratic, it is just power-based. Since it is only about authority, it could be described as something like communist. (36-year-old female Wa teacher, Panlong Township, personal communication, 2026)

The establishment of tight control over public life coupled with social stratification arising from Chinese colonization and privatization of public services has also resulted in a decline of already limited and weak civic space. With restrictions on information both in terms of distribution and language barriers, public participation in governance is almost nil. Likewise, the centralization of power away from local governance actors in favor of militias, businessmen, and elites, has undermined the authority of local administrators, according to a 25-year-old male in Hopang (personal communication, 2025):

> It feels like the administrators no longer have as much authority as before. The reason is that everything they say now seems to have limitations. In other words, their power has become restricted.

He further noted that,

> Compared to the past, they [locals] can no longer act freely. In the villages, there are not only administrators, but also militias present. If administrators want to say or report something, they often have to communicate through the militia.

This situation reflects a limited decentralization of power at the local level. Although village and ward administrators formally hold administrative positions, their authority appears to be constrained by the presence of militias serving as an intermediary function. This indicates that decision-making power is not fully vested in civilian

administrative structures, but is instead influenced or controlled by security actors. Community concerns may be filtered or altered before reaching higher authorities, restricting genuine representation. This system reflects a centralized and security-oriented governance model in which local administrators operate under surveillance and control rather than with autonomy. It demonstrates how formal administrative titles may exist, but real authority remains concentrated within armed or centralized power structures. Moreover, community members live in an environment of fear with no freedom of expression or speech as strict controls and severe consequences suppress public voices. The absence of the rule of law and accountable institutions has contributed to a rise in criminal activities such as gambling and other unlawful behavior while citizens lack legal protection or mechanisms to seek justice. In the absence of civic freedoms, transparency, and public participation, governance relies on coercion rather than consent, undermining democratic legitimacy and social trust.

For those living under the Wa administration, functionally an EAO with some support for federalism, the lived experience under this administration differs from that under the previous Myanmar government administration. Many people feel that human dignity and human rights are being disregarded, and that the administration has created a strong sense of alienation and distance, rather than local identity and belonging. A 45-year-old Wa female resident of Hopang Township (personal communication, 2026) shared her opinion:

> I feel that human rights are being violated and there is a lack of humanity. At the same time, I also see that people are being distracted and kept occupied with entertainment. [...] From my perspective, as someone who supports democracy, the Wa administration's communist-oriented ideology is completely different and does not align with my beliefs.

Public participation by those living in Hopang and Panlong Townships under the governance of the UWSA is very limited. Most decisions are made by the central Wa authorities, with the public expected to follow these orders without question. As a result, people act more as followers of administrative orders rather than active participants in governance. Our interviews reveal a high level of resentment at this high-handed and controlling approach, but also a high level of fear at the consequences of speaking out. People tolerate the lack of freedom because they have very limited options to challenge the UWSA's authority. Stability in the area is therefore maintained more through control and fear than through public agreement or participation. For those living in these two townships, there is little to choose between the old administration and the new. A 41-year-old male Wa language teacher in Panlong (personal communication, 2026) expressed his observations:

> Human rights have become more restricted. For example, while people may still have the freedom to think, they do not feel they have the freedom to speak openly. As a result, many are afraid to express what they truly think.

## Certitude and hopefulness: Comparing Wa State and the Anyar region

Table 17 compares a number of dimensions of governance in the Anyar region with those of the two townships in Wa-administered areas of Shan State explored in this chapter. In both, a new framework of authority has replaced the previous Myanmar government structure. However, whilst in the Anyar region the previous government system had deep penetration into an ethnically homogenous population, in the new Wa areas, the pre-coup governance structure had mixed penetration in a more ethnically heterogeneous (Wa, Chinese, Burmese, Shan, Kachin, etc.) population. Pre-coup, formal governance in the Anyar region had been more or less unchallenged for decades, in contrast with the situation in Hopang and Panlong, where territorial control was to some

extent shared even before the events of Operation 1027 (2023-2024). This makes a significant difference: a more diverse population in the Wa areas has more experience of ambiguous, overlapping authority, making the changes post-1027 less novel. The impetus for change was also different; in the case of Anyar, the drive for replacing the old came from the public themselves, largely supportive of the armed resistance efforts which drove out junta authority. In Hopang and Panlong Townships, however, public support is at best ambiguous with new governance largely foisted upon the population from above through elite-level agreements. This also is significant, with the changes in governance in Anyar largely aligned with public involvement in anti-junta resistance. In that sense, local governance emerged because the people had rejected and evicted junta authority. By contrast, in the townships, public involvement in the initial takeover and eventual handover of the two townships appears minimal. Based on our interviews, most perceive the change to simply be an assertion and expansion of claims by the UWSA rather than a specific repudiation of the Myanmar military.

The new Wa administration has continued to deliver at least one public service: security, especially from junta retaliation. Unlike other territories seized by EAOs or PDFs, elite-level agreements between the UWSA and the Myanmar military—with the explicit involvement of China—have ensured that these areas were exempted from SAC airstrikes and attempts to regain territorial control, either by the SAC or other EAOs. This means that the main security focus of the Wa authorities in these townships is internal security, in contrast to governance actors in Anyar, who exert most of their efforts toward repelling the advances of SAC troops.

**Table 17.** Comparison of governance dynamics in Anyar Region and Hopang/Panlong Townships, eastern Shan State

| | **Anyar region** | **Hopang and Panlong** |
|---|---|---|
| **pre-change governance** | uncontested | contested, ambiguous |
| **population** | homogenous | diverse ethnic groups |
| **institutional penetration** | strong | mixed |
| **impetus for change** | grassroots resistance | elite-level agreements |
| **security post-coup** | insecure, continual risk | secure, but not certain |
| **security focus post-coup** | local ("my village") | ethnic (Wa) |
| **external influence** | NUG | China |
| **public services** | local, patchy, locally funded but well-staffed | patchy, privatized, understaffed, expensive |
| **civic space** | thriving | restricted |
| **governance demands and burdens** | informal taxes, demands for participation and public service | formal and informal taxes, conscription |
| **economy** | constrained due to security risks, blockades, and limited capital | boom in illicit economies (gambling, sex work, substances) |

When we return to the four axes of analysis (see Figure 20), these can be adapted to allow for meaningful comparison between the two areas. In the Wa regions, the principle organizing force is that of Wa

identity and authority, with the overarching aim of fully integrating these townships into wider Wa governance. Whether the population is ethnically Wa or not (and the majority in these townships are not, in fact, ethnically Wa), the social and political fabric will be shaped to fit into the existing Wa state. As such, it represents less of a specific affinity that can act as a unifying flag as a predetermined frame within which residents will be forced to fit. By contrast, Anyar villages, at this stage, have not expressed much in the way of ethnonationalist affinity models; the main unifying factor is a strong sense of the "local," whether that be the village itself or the wider CDZ region. Village identity and unity represent one of the strongest affinity bonds in the area, often making intervillage cooperation challenging. Appeals to Burman and Buddhist ethnonationalism by groups such as Ma Ba Tha have mainly been found in Phyu Saw Htee villages, where the junta has used the discourse of protection of race and religion as a rallying call to Anyar villagers to join them. This has in some ways, as Lwin Lwin (2025) discusses in her work, rendered the Burmese Buddhist ethnonationalist movement somewhat toxic in the eyes of a younger generation of revolutionaries who appear to eschew older racial prejudices in favor of new crossethnic alliances (Chew, 2023).

Whilst the rapid and pervasive growth of Chinese influence in the newly-designated Wa townships is both easily identified and labeled as a form of colonization, a parallel equivalent in the Anyar region is difficult to find. This is perhaps the point: unlike the Wa areas, Anyar is not a border area, and the closest center of power is the Myanmar authority in Naypyidaw. However, at a micro-level, we can argue for an attempt by an external player (in this case, the NUG) to exert influence over local communities in the form of the establishment of the 3P system and support for local education and health services. However, the NUG's external influence is hardly foreign: the majority of those involved in NUG-led administration in the Anyar region are from the community and the broader tenets of the influence are rooted in local

ideas, values, and aspirations. However, the tensions between what are sometimes seen as NUG-imposed systems and local autonomy are very real and expressed in the majority of villages where there was a reasonable penetration of the 3P system.

A more nuanced argument could also be made that both the Spring Revolution and subsequent emergent local governance efforts are acts of decolonization by which authoritarian, militarized rule is framed as a colonial usurper. This, however, does not simply consider the job complete once the Myanmar military has been evicted. As one of the leading exponents of the Spring Revolution, Dr. Tayzar San (see The Irrawaddy, 2024) has frequently noted that the objective of the revolution is not simply the defeat of the Myanmar military, but the uprooting of authoritarian rule. This explains the deeply conditional support of the ordinary public for the resistance and the NUG—support is conditional upon the delivery of key public goods and services, central of which is a repudiation of authoritarianism.

Public service provision illustrates another key difference between the two areas, and this is largely linked to differences in the role of civil society. In Hopang and Panlong, health and education system gaps are partially bridged by CDM staff, but primarily by private providers. Key utilities are privately provided by capital-controlling (usually Chinese) elites. In contrast, the patchwork of health and education services in Anyar is mainly serviced by CDM staff. Equipment and medicine shortages resulting from blockades have pushed up prices and limited healthcare capacity, but services remain highly localized and locally embedded, often run by community groups. Education services have received more support from the NUG, mainly in the form of textbooks and training. Utilities, such as water and electricity, often exhibit a kind of community capitalism approach, where a community organization establishes a small grid, or drinking water supply, which generates profits that are in turn plowed back into community services.

This highlights a key difference in democratization, where again local governance in the Anyar region relies on active public participation. This is not unfettered: a minority of villages have continued to note the undue influence of armed groups, creating a climate of fear and unchallenged elite dominance. However, this has been the exception compared with the normal status quo in Wa regions.

What kind of citizen is produced in these differing governance contexts? In the Anyar region, citizenship is in many ways being shaped "on the run." If the governance is emergent, so is the citizenship which is building it. As a number of the research participants alluded to, the situation is still transitional—the kind of messy and, at times, horrifying "interregnum" which Gramsci (1971, p. 275) spoke of.

However, citizenship in the Anyar region has three defining characteristics. Firstly, the social contract between the governors and the governed is deeply relational, and not merely a transactional arrangement. Where the boundaries between the governed and the governors are blurred, the expectations on each are also more nuanced. The contrast with the old—where power was exerted by a distant ruler through local vassals—is stark: now, power is much closer to home and more diffuse. Secondly, the objective remains undetermined, often shaped around a short horizon of survival and reemergence. Unlike the clear-eyed goals for territorial domination by EAOs, few of the village governance entities have articulated a clear, large-scale endgame. This does not imply a lack of ambition; rather, that the process of emergence is still in its early stages, but lies somewhere between misty-eyed idealism and hard-baked cynicism. Thirdly, a defining feature of Anyar governance in contrast to that in new Wa-administered areas is innovation, inclusion, and the involvement of women and youth. The absence of guaranteed order and safe spaces has often upended social norms, including gender roles; what this has accomplished in Anyar villages, however, is to also transform the idea of what is possible and permissible. The flourishing

of the local includes a multitude of initiatives, often at village level, but sometimes extending to broader networks that harness latent talent to overcome blockades and challenges. Throughout the CDZ, there has been a proliferation of Starlink hubs, dense commercial networks that facilitate trade in everything from medicines to weapons, and complex information systems to warn of airstrikes or ground raids. This means that public services, trade, governance, and security in the Anyar region all overlap in a messy and deeply localized yet effective ecosystem. As our study shows, each village has its own peculiarities of governance, welfare systems, and commerce.

In the Wa areas, the implicit social contract between the governors and the governed rests on three key pillars. Firstly, the overarching rights of the elite to determine the future of the governed, with the governed viewed largely as being at the disposal of the elite. To put in another way, Wa authorities assume that they have the absolute right to determine the future of those living in townships which are under their control, and that the primary role of those living there is to support the area's integration into Wa territory. Secondly, the delivery of broader security as the key public good, which in turn negates all demands for private freedoms. The Wa authorities have, through elite agreements, prevented the kind of incessant exposure to conflict violence that the Anyar populations have experienced. However, the price for this is total submission, a complete renunciation of personal or private freedoms, including free speech, and the acceptance of high and arbitrary taxes, authoritarian rule, and conscription. Thirdly, the Wa governance model firmly entrenches the primary role of foreign capital into a locality. Governance exists primarily to facilitate the entry and engagement of foreign capital, for the profit of elites. Thus, security and law and order are focused mainly on maintaining the conditions for capital extraction rather than on the broader public good. This results in an efficient but uneven application of justice, a toleration of illicit commerce provided key economic interests are not threatened, and the maintenance of

two-tiered systems of authority. Whilst on the one hand, Hopang and Panlong have been moved out from beneath Myanmar military control and into the Wa orbit, this represents something of a reactionary move, insulating these townships from the risk of a more revolutionary, people-centered future. The future in areas under Wa administration is more certain—but with a certainty that precludes hopefulness for the majority.

Epilogue

# Funding Imagination

*Taking seriously the many faces of uncertainty—in relation to knowledge, materiality, experience, embodiment and practice—highlights the multi-dimensionality of the concept. Opening up prefigurative spaces for innovation and experimentation, creating a politics of hope, offers a way forward. Yet this requires a form of politics that is rooted in mutuality, conviviality and collective solidarity in order to ensure that such spaces do not exclude the marginalised and are not captured by regressive, authoritarian players.*

—Ian Scoones and Andy Stirling, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Challenges of Transformation* (2020, p.xvi)

*The primary message we want the entire village to understand is the importance of self-reliance—realizing that we can no longer depend on others. Self-reliance means sharing what is available and working together. In contrast, external organizations operate under specific mandates. They might come to work for a three-month period, but they will eventually leave. While they may be present when there is a specific need, we must ultimately rebuild and operate based on a system of self-reliance. The more sustainable the approach, the greater the benefit.*

—Villager in Pale Township, 2025

At the heart of the analysis in this book is imagination—both the generative power of imagination, and the ways in which fear influences our ability to imagine. Imagination is both a producer and a product of different assemblages of local governance. Local governance assemblages come into being because people first imagine them possible. Likewise, the existence of local governance assemblages affirms and encourages continued acts of imagination—not in terms of wishful thinking, but in terms of producing meaningful life. Local reimagining is informed by the continued efforts of the NUG to support the establishment of effective governance. Reimagination is expressed on a larger scale through efforts to codify a new order, such as the Sagaing Federal Unit Interim Constitution (Mizzima, 2025). These efforts by the NUG are most effective when they are animated by a sense of what is possible, and in mutual solidarity with communities, rather than by attempting simply to reimpose old modes of bureaucracy and centralized control.

However, what is striking, and perhaps shocking, is the contracts between the bold imagination of communities under fire, representing an act of resistance, and what can only be termed as imaginative resistance from external agents, such as governments and donors. Imagination is defined as an "attitude with which we think about possibilities, reason counterfactually, construct [...] scenarios, and engage with stories" (Miyazono, 2016, p. 233). Imaginative resistance, however, is "the phenomenon in which we, who are otherwise competent imaginers, experience a constraint in taking part in an imaginative activity" (Miyazono, 2016, p. 233). The inability, or unwillingness of key external actors to move beyond conventional, state-centric thinking and engage with the kind of radical imagining which under-fire communities are producing represents both a missed opportunity and a grave threat to the future of Myanmar's peoples. The argument of this book, based on the overwhelming views of more than one hundred residents of conflict-affected villages in Sagaing Region, is that the daring, imaginative acts of civilians demand to be recognized by external actors who will stand in

solidarity with them. Funding imagination costs little to external donors and governments in financial terms; the capacity of communities to leverage healthy public good from meager resources is well documented (Aung Naing, 2025). What it may cost those governments and donors is the relinquishment of old certainties and the willingness to risk losing an already eroded status quo for the possibility of a better future.

## Of neighbors and donors: Imaginative resistance

The complexities of emergent local governance in the context of civil war are by no means unique to Myanmar. Protracted crises in Somalia, Yemen, and Syria are amongst dozens of cases, generating a rich but tragic strand in the wider discourse of state failure (Berti, 2023). A significant criticism of much of the literature on state failure has been its overwhelmingly state-centric nature, with analysis and interventions oriented almost exclusively towards the restoration of the unitary state and its functions, with little attention paid to smaller-scale state making (Dingli, 2013; Hill, 2009). Where state failure has resulted from, or led to, civil war, much of the focus of analysis of local governance has been on the role of armed actors. Termed "rebel governance," this pays little attention to the more subtle forms of resistance and agency of ordinary people and communities. Even the terms "rebel" and "insurgent" are themselves freighted with illegitimacy, with a default setting of labeling all resistance to state hegemony as rebellious. This again risks the marginalization of grassroots actors who often play a more prominent role in establishing local institutions. For example, Peclard (2015) largely frames civilians as those with whom "rebel leaders must negotiate [...] in exchange for their loyalty" through the provision of services in response to public demands. What is missing is the role of civilians in generating not only demand for services, but the means and systems of providing them, thereby coproducing local governance together with armed actors. This generative capacity is critical:

> [C]ivil wars generate within themselves bureaucratic and institutional capacity—through how armed groups govern territories and civilians within them—that may be harnessed in the post-war period to build states (more or less) capable of governing. The characteristics and durability of those forms of wartime governance shape, in turn, the type of state-building and political regime trajectories that emerge in the post-war period. (Justino, 2022, p. 2)

What the research described in this book has revealed is the importance of that generative capacity and where it is located. If the focus remains solely on armed actors and their political proxies, the vast potential of civilian agency is sidelined, constraining the ability of civic space to curb the hegemony of armed actors. This book has argued that the lack of emphasis on civilian agency represents a failure of imagination, where external actors persist in convenient but outdated truths instead of embracing new but risky alternatives. What is tragic is the contrast between the lack of imagination amongst stakeholders largely removed from the daily realities of violence on one hand, and the prolific, daring creativity of communities who are daily caught in the crossfire on the other. Again, Myanmar is no exception. Seth Kaplan (2010), writing on the Somalian context, highlights the fundamental flaws inherent in state-centric formulations, describing a context eerily similar to that of present-day Myanmar:

> Life for ordinary Somalis will grow even worse. Already, they are among the world's poorest and hungriest people [...] Much of the blame for this deepening nightmare can be placed on the international community. Its unimaginative approach to state-building seriously misreads the Somali sociopolitical context, showing little understanding for how a top-down strategy impacts the state's fluid, fragmented, and decentralized clan structures. To make matters worse, the mistakes of the past are

> constantly being repeated, thanks to weak institutional memory [...] an unimaginative, uncritical, and template-driven approach to state-building; and a lack of accountability on the part of external donors, defence agencies, and aid organizations for the consequences of their failed policies. (p. 89)

This lack of imagination has fueled an international response to the Myanmar crisis shaped by a "toxic mixture of vested interests and learned helplessness" (Aung Naing, 2025, p. 141), and best described as somewhere between feckless and delusional. Aside from a small minority, with aspirant ASEAN member Timor-Leste being a shining example (The Irrawaddy, 2026), most governments and UN agencies have limited themselves to regular statements of "concern" in response to junta atrocities, only elevated to "deep concern" if the body count is particularly high or includes young children (Lilly, 2022). The clinging to a rigid, state-centric model of engagement by international agencies results in the propping up of a regime which they know is not only deeply unpopular, but is actively persecuting the majority of its population. This runs counter to the principles of ASEAN's charter, which professes to be "people centered" and consensus-based (Sani, 2013). What is ironic here is that the only consensus which appears to count is that of an elite group of policymakers. The consensus of the actual citizens, or even those representing them, such as the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (2026), are largely ignored by governments, who instead continue to issue repeated statements of concern and propose ameliorative measures such as humanitarian safe spaces, speciously avoiding any meaningful action. Long-term activist and commentator Igor Blazevic (2025) responded to a recent ASEAN-issued statement of concern regarding Myanmar in withering terms:

> In a situation where the military junta has been waging a full-scale war of terror against the civilian population across the entire country for nearly four years, how can anyone pretend that

> granting "humanitarian access" to a few "safe areas" will solve anything? It would be a mere drop in the ocean of catastrophe and ever-growing need caused by the junta's atrocities and destruction. For God's sake, the junta must be stopped by cutting off its access to money, diplomatic recognition, and weapons, while finally providing concrete and meaningful assistance to the people of Myanmar, who are successfully defending themselves and liberating their communities from the junta's terror. [...] Should we be grateful that the EU and the governments of the US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, South Korea, Switzerland, Timor-Leste and the UK are still "concerned"? Is being "concerned" better than doing nothing? Honestly, I no longer know.

Humanitarian actors, particularly larger UN agencies and donors, do little better. Stella Naw et al. (2025) add to the chorus of criticism of UN and international NGOs' responses to the Myanmar crisis, arguing that "United Nations (UN) agencies have, with some exceptions, consistently proven unable and unwilling to navigate Myanmar's contested governance realities" (p. 8). This is rooted in a modus operandi tethered to conventional, state-centric modes (Aung Naing & Wells, 2024) which "disproportionately focus on engaging the junta" (Stella Naw, 2025, p. 8). This is by no means unique to Myanmar: Van Leeuwen & Verkoren (2012, p. 85) note donors' emphasis on "service delivery rather than solidarity and the strengthening of emancipatory social movements," noting that donors are "reluctant to support more politically oriented activities, which might jeopardise their 'neutrality' and their relations with host governments." If the international aid architecture is viewed as an assemblage, the dominant affective flow appears to be a confluence of fear resulting in reactionary tendencies, clinging to false hopes that a status quo may return, or the meek acceptance of a new status quo defined by the constraints imposed by the military rulers. Either way, imagination is conspicuously lacking, as pointed out by former

UN Myanmar Country head Charles Petrie in an interview with *The Irrawaddy* in 2024:

> [T]here's an old way of thinking and old structures still in place at international organizations including the UN [...] everybody accuses the UN of being in bed with the regime [...] For me, that's not the problem. The problem isn't the fact that the UN is engaging with the regime. The problem is they're not doing anything else. [...] we're stuck with a UN system that lacks imagination and that lacks courage. (quoted in Aung Zaw, 2024)

A case in point: the humanitarian project on which the research in this book is based, despite generating a strong, empirical evidence base to demonstrate the efficacy of community-led interventions, was in June 2026 denied continued funding by the very same agency that had originally commissioned it three years earlier. Various reasons are given for avoiding transformative approaches, commonly framed around issues of humanitarian neutrality, most of which have been largely debunked by scholars such as Hugo Slim (2022). Other cited constraints include the restrictions of organizational mandates or the technical requirements of institutional donors. The risk appetite amongst UN agencies and institutional donors remains low, and whatever risks are entailed are usually subcontracted to the local non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations in the name of localization (Décobert & Wells, 2025). However, what is clear is that this "imaginative resistance" not only constrains the actions of donors, but results in the continued flow of resources towards status quo solutions and away from the kind of radical localization that conflict-affected communities in Myanmar desperately need (Development Initiatives, 2024).

What this lack of imagination may cost communities in Myanmar is the chance for a peaceful and prosperous future. From the first days of renewed armed resistance in Myanmar, commentators and analysts

have repeatedly drawn attention to the plurality of resistance actors, their lack of unity, and the risk of anarchy should a fractured resistance prevail (Security Risks Asia, 2026). Alongside efforts at promoting unity between different ethnic armed organizations and larger PDF units, a crucial step is the relativization of the hegemony of armed authority at local levels. In practice, this means civilian-led governance with sufficient authority to exert control over armed elements. Research for this book encountered numerous instances of total dominance by local armed groups, but also examples of appropriately balanced power arrangements between armed and non-armed governance elements. Such balance is possible only when civilian elements are sufficiently empowered through legitimacy based on local support and participation. This points to the urgent task of emergent local governance: the strengthening of civic space and civilian-led governance processes, which, as the examples from Chapter 7 illustrate, often overlaps with efforts to provide key public goods and services such as welfare, access to finance, and disaster management.

## Funding hopefulness

> Imagination is not a luxury or a pastime; it is a practice, a position, a proud defiance. In times when the known world is shattered, and when old certainties have failed, and when the new, promised future has failed to emerge, and when the mere act of staying alive is both startling and subversive, imagining is the ultimate act of resistance. Daring to imagine, and daring to imagine that the terror does not last, that destruction does not annihilate, and that violence is not the ultimate power. And daring to imagine, not just in daydreams, but in acts of daring reciprocity, of planting and reaping, of lending and borrowing, of caring for the weakest, of building schools and roads under the threat of raids and bombs. Of imagining society, community, order, and justice. (researcher's field notes, 2026)

In October 2025, nearly 100 volunteers and local governance actors from the humanitarian project villages in Sagaing Region assembled at a secure location to participate in a workshop where they would present their community humanitarian efforts and outcomes to an audience of peers. Aside from gaining valuable technical knowledge on how to undertake different relief, welfare, and development-related activities, participants also gained a crucial component necessary for survival and resilience: hope. One of the exercises during the workshop involved drawing maps and pictures of how participants envisaged their communities in the future. Most featured orderly roads, busy markets, and schools and playgrounds filled with happy children no longer afraid of airstrikes or raids:

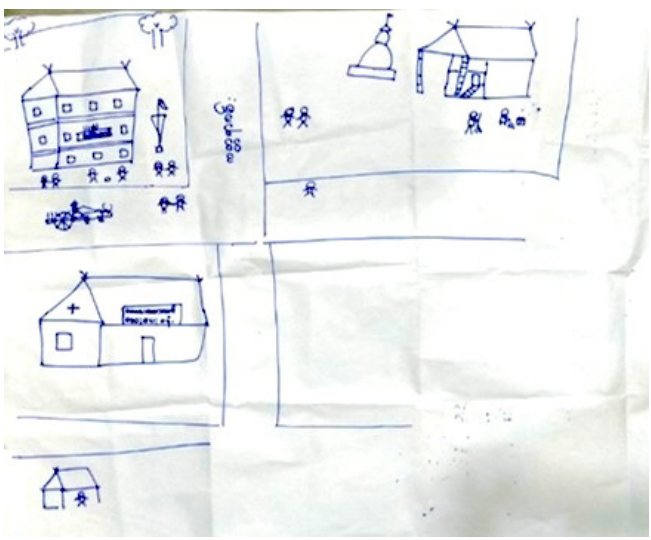

**Fig. 23** *Imaginative map of a future community, Sagaing Region (copyright Htanaung Collective, 2025)*

Such inventive and creative endeavors represent daring acts of imagination, as the everyday reality of these communities remains filled with precarity, violence, and chaos. Three critical elements enabled them to engage in such acts of imaginative hopefulness. Firstly,

solidarity with each other. Bringing representatives of different villages together enabled each to see what had already been achieved, under great pressure, by others. This sharing of multiple examples of the possible, coupled with very tangible cooperative structures, allowed those from beleaguered, isolated communities to see that alternative futures are possible. Secondly, hope and imagination need to take on tangible, visible forms. Crucial to this is the capacity for repeated acts which demonstrate that ordered life is possible. An example of this is the practice of village-based revolving funds. Despite experiencing repeated forced displacement, a number of the villages in the project areas had successfully managed several cycles of loans, which in turn facilitated ongoing local economic activity. Repayments of capital and the utilization of accrued interest to fund welfare support for older persons and persons with disabilities demonstrated a manifest system of welfare distribution. The building and maintenance of simple yet durable and visible systems provide a focal point for future-orientated activity amongst communities whose horizons have been shattered by post-coup conflict. Thirdly is the funding of imagination, in this case through the provision of technical and financial support from a donor-funded project. The transfer of skills in project design, communication, systems development, and disaster management enabled effective use of modest investment funds. Beyond this, the long-term solidarity of the local NGO with communities provided a key element for building and sustaining hopefulness.

Building on work by Appadurai (2024) and Bloem (2018), Lwin Lwin and Aung Naing (2025) highlight three elements which contribute to hopefulness: "cultural and social embeddedness, a capacity for repeated performance, and access to alternative pathways for survival or advancement" (p. 207).

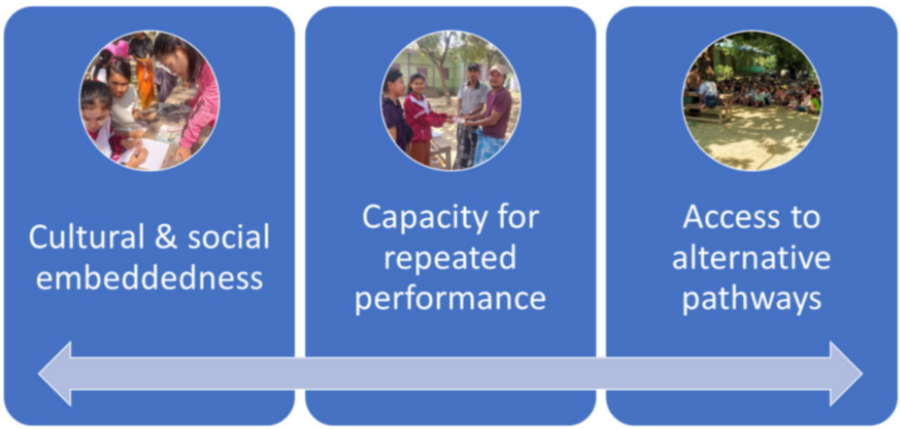


**Fig. 24** *Components of aspiration and hopefulness (adapted from Appadurai [2004]; reproduced from Lwin Lwin & Aung Naing [2025])*

Cultural and social embeddedness refers to the way in which hope is derived from a place of solidarity, belonging, or attachment. In the case of the village volunteers (described in Chapter 7), this corresponds to the first ingredient: the sense of solidarity with each other. The capacity for repeated performance refers to how hopefulness is not just imagined, but enacted through daily actions, whether individual or collective. When a community chooses to set up a welfare system, and the system consistently acts to support the vulnerable, this provides a tangible performance of future orientation, as well as confirming a sense of competence and agency. Finally, access to alternative pathways refers to the availability of ideas, resources, and strategies outside of standard frameworks—in this case, through close collaboration with the local NGO. This enables the kind of hope that can thrive even when optimism is lacking, as it is rooted in solidarities, rather than guarantees of a better future. Raynor (2021) describes this as a kind of hope "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" (p. 568). The fuel for hopefulness is not a belief that a certain future is

possible, or even probable; but the opportunity, in spite of an absence of guarantees, to engage in acts which seek to rebuild a meaningful present. If hopefulness is critical for resilience, resistance and recovery, then these three elements—solidarity, visible agency, and access to alternative pathways and resources—are key elements for enabling such hopefulness. For humanitarians, donors, and governments seeking to support and contribute to positive futures, this demands a shift from passive statements of concern or reactive assistance to intentional and practical solidarity with conflict-affected communities, adapting funding structures and systems to focus on enabling communities to reshape their own futures. In this story, instead of being victims of war, community members are active participants in rebuilding their own lived worlds—reimagined communities which function as small but vital expressions of statehood in fractured warscapes. As Shona Loong (2023), writing on the experiences of Karen communities in western Myanmar, notes:

> Life during war [...] creates opportunities for communities [...] Hopeful and aspirational practices of community-building persist in and after wartime [that] inflect the politics of civil society and post-war development (p. 3).

In this sense, following Zizek's (2010) paraphrasing of Gramsci, the interregnum is not only the time of monsters, but also of angels. This does not require a romanticization of all that is emergent or local (Nadarajah & Rampton, 2015), but rather an intentional commitment to solidarity with communities seeking to establish the "islands of citizenship" from which future political communities are built (Aung Naing, 2025, p. 121).

This returns us to imagination, and the link between imagination, hopefulness, and emergent citizenship. The kind of imagination we speak of here is not simply a cognitive exercise. It is a deliberate choice

to act towards an alternative rendering of what is currently visible and possible. Naegler (2022) notes that a "fundamental necessity of successful resistance lies in the creation of alternatives and the emergence of a radical imagination that transcends the status quo" (p. 233). Resistance need not be defined solely with respect to a specific political struggle, but rather resistance directed against authoritarianism, armed hegemony, and the suppression of human rights. For conflict-affected communities—and for humanitarians who choose to stand in solidarity with them—this results in policies and everyday practices which do not simply assume that the future is determined by those who control the means of violence. It does not assume the inviolate primacy of the state, but chooses to validate diverse expressions of statehood and citizenship, however nascent and tentative they may be. Such validation is expressed in deeply practical ways: supporting and enabling communities in their acts of imagining, as they build healthcare, education, welfare, and governance systems from the ground up.

# HTANAUNG COLLECTIVE: RESEARCHERS' BIOS

**Aung Naing** is an independent researcher with over two decades of experience in Myanmar. He has written or edited a number of publications on Myanmar, including *Land, Violence and Subjugation in Myanmar* and *Assemblages and Myanmar*, both published by Chiang Mai University's Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) in 2024 and 2025, respectively. He coordinates the Htanaung Collective, which is made up of graduates and tutors from the Development Studies and Social Research course taught through RCSD.

**Lwin Lwin** is an anthropologist from the Anyar region. Her recent publications include "The Fifth Cut: Undermining Moral and Spiritual Capital in the Myanmar Military's Drive for Hegemony" and "Assemblage in Action: Funding Hopefulness in Conflict Zones," both included in the volume *Assemblages and Myanmar* (2025), and "Coping Under Fire: Gender and Displacement in Sagaing," published in 2025 in the groundbreaking volume *Ethnography Thrice Under Fire*.

**May Naing** is an educationalist and researcher from the Ayeyarwady Region. She is one of the lead researchers for the Civic Monitoring Study, one of the largest continuous longitudinal studies in Myanmar, generating insights from over 3,000 households in 36 different townships in Myanmar.

**Pan** is an emerging researcher from Kachin State with a background in social sciences from Chiang Mai University. She is a regular contributor to the Development Studies and Social Research course taught through RCSD.

**Hsuwai** is a lawyer, researcher, civil society leader, and a graduate of the RCSD Development Studies and Social Research course. Her research focuses on issues of justice, human rights, and sustainable development.

**Cho Cho** is an anthropologist from the Anyar region. She recently published "English as the National Language: A Necessary Cultural Violence to Counter Burmanization?" in the proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies in 2025.

**Ei Thaw** is an emerging researcher from Yangon. In 2025, she was part of a research team that published a thought-provoking chapter on humanitarian ethics in the edited volume *Assemblages and Myanmar* entitled "Ethical Assemblages in Complex Emergencies."

**Ok** is a native of Hopang Township in Shan State with both personal and research experience of evolving governance arrangements in Wa territories. She is a regular contributor to the Development Studies and Social Research course taught through RCSD.

**Thelma Win** is a graduate of the Development Studies and Social Research Course and has pursued research interests in socioeconomic development and emergent local governance with a particular focus on quantitative methodologies.

**Arnold** is a researcher and development practitioner from the Anyar region with deep practical experience in community development in conflict-affected areas.

*For more information about the Htanaung Collective and its work supporting emerging researchers from Myanmar, please visit* **www.htanaungcollective.org**.

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# Reimagining Community

## Emergent Local Governance in Post-Coup Myanmar

edited by **Aung Naing**
foreword by **Chayan Vaddhanaphuti**

### How communities are forging their own citizenship amidst protracted armed conflict

What happens when the state becomes actively hostile or collapses entirely? In large swathes of post-coup Myanmar, conflict has transformed many previously peaceful areas into war zones where everyday life is scarred by violence. Yet in these warscapes, resistance persists and takes many forms. In the face of ongoing threats, new islands of citizenship are emerging: community-led welfare, education, healthcare, disaster management, and local governance. These forms of governance constitute acts of imagination in which solidarity, agency, and innovation sustain hopefulness in the absence of optimism.

This book documents this reimagining of local governance and community life through the experiences of community members, village leaders, and civic volunteers for whom this kind of reimagining is a daily necessity. Their stories call for international actors to stand with these communities in the process of reimagining, resisting the urge to passively accept the status quo, and instead channeling resources to emerging sites of possibility.

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