

Article

Local Governance in Non-Bamar Ethnic Areas in Myanmar: A Comparative Study of Local Governance between the National League of Democracy Government (2016-2020) and Post-Coup State Administration Council Regime

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Abstract

Local governance in Myanmar has undergone various reforms under successive administrations, fulfilling local needs to a certain extent while experiencing persistent challenges. This study analyzes the effectiveness of local governance mechanisms in non-Bamar ethnic areas in Myanmar in two governance periods of the National League for Democracy (NLD) government (2016-2020) and the post-coup State Administration Council (SAC) period (post-2021). Through decentralization and rebel governance theories, the study employs qualitative approaches, drawing semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with ethnic leaders and organizations in the Arakan and Mon states. The study reveals that weak state-led governance following the 2021 coup led to increasing reliance on ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) for local services. Findings suggest the potential and significance of EAO-led governance in shaping decentralized governance models for non-Bamar ethnic areas in the post-conflict period.

Given the collapse of centralized NLD and SAC governance, the study advocates for integrating EAO-led governance into local governance policymaking. It recommends establishing decentralized governance mechanisms and granting fiscal autonomy within Myanmar's federal frameworks to ensure inclusive, responsive, and sustainable local governance in non-Bamar ethnic areas.

Introduction

Myanmar, a diverse country dominated by a majority ethnic group, the Bamar, has struggled with questions of local governance since its independence from British colonization in 1948. Ethnic minority groups, which represent around 30 percent of the population, led by numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), have resisted centralization policies and demanded more autonomy from Myanmar's successive Bamar-dominated central governments (Aung 2016; Emah 2020). While the country has been under military rule for decades, the quasi-democratic period of the 2010s failed to satisfy these demands, even under the democratically-elected National League for Democracy (NLD) government.

Local governance refers to public service mechanisms in education, healthcare and infrastructure, and local administration measures led by local authorities, such as officials appointed by the central government, community-based organizations, and non-state actors. In Myanmar, it has evolved under various political regimes, shaped by changing policies and constitutional shifts, particularly in non-Bamar ethnic areas¹ where it has been historically influenced by both state and non-state actors.

Local issues were historically handled through both traditional and modern local governance structures. Starting from 1993, the military government

¹ In this study, non-Bamar ethnic areas can be understood as regions populated by native Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Chin, Mon, Arakan and Shan, excluding Bamar-populated regions such as Yangon, Ayeyawady, Sagaing, Magway, Tanintharyi, Bago, Mandalay and Naypyidaw where most population is Bamar majority.

enacted the 1993 Development Committees Law, which established development affairs organizations (DAOs) responsible for municipal affairs and delivery of social services in both urban and rural areas (Arnold et al. 2015). At the same time, community-based organizations (CBOs) played an important role in solving local problems in their own missions of healthcare, education, job opportunities, and vocational training (Martin 2021; Desaine 2011).

Over the years, the central government failed to fulfill local needs and resolve diverse ethnic issues, resulting in the expansion of many EAO activities beyond armed resistance to local governance functions. They developed parallel governance institutions in areas under their control or mixed control with the central government, offering public services such as education, healthcare, and local administration (Desaine 2011; Kyaw and Nwe 2019; South 2021). EAOs in ethnic states such as Arakan, Mon, Karen, and Kachin even formed their respective educational institutions to meet local demands based on ethnic languages and cultures, in parallel to the public education system under centralized state institutions. Beyond education, EAOs facilitated healthcare and local administration needs by establishing village clinics, provision of healthcare workers and medical supplies, and village administration networks. These decentralized efforts paved the way for EAOs to act as *de facto* local governance entities in their respective ethnic territories, often surpassing the central government in terms of effectiveness. (South 2021; Ong 2023).

The 2021 military coup brought about the rise of People's Defense Forces (PDFs) which were created by anti-coup democracy alliances and activists as an approach to put an end to the military dictatorship (Karinda and Rijal 2023). Different from EAOs with their respective territorial control and governance structures, PDFs depend on their collaboration with EAOs for military training, resources, and operational assistance (Matelski 2023). In many ethnic areas, both parties cooperate in joint resistance operations towards the military bases as a collective effort against the junta. PDFs are not entirely composed of NLD members; however, they are a broad coalition of pro-democracy activists and youths, acting as the armed wing of the National Unity Government (NUG) which has been a parallel revolutionary government to the SAC since the coup (Ministry of Defense 2021; Graceffo 2024).

In the post-coup period, which means the aftermath of the 2021 military coup on February 1 2021, local governance under state institutions was largely disrupted in ethnic regions due to the rise of resistance movements from revolutionary groups such as the PDFs and EAOs, working for the anti-coup resistance. The military government suppressed these resistance activities nationwide, leading to the collapse of state-led governance mechanisms. Moreover, many civil servants participated in Civil Disobedience Movements (CDM) and denied working under the SAC (Sun 2022; Kean 2022), weakening state-led local governance services. As a result, EAOs gained several opportunities to expand their governance functions, filling the void left by the SAC in areas such as education, healthcare, local administration, and security matters. Even though they try to re-function or scale up their local governance mechanisms for service delivery in their controlled ethnic areas, several challenges such as airstrikes, land mines, and unconditional armed clashes make it difficult for full operation (Sun 2022; Maizland 2022).

The objective of this study is to assess differences of local governance in non-Bamar ethnic areas during two governance periods of the NLD government (2016-2020) and the post-coup SAC period. It examines the role of EAOs in fulfilling governance voids left by these two governments and then discusses how they have become key actors in local governance in non-Bamar ethnic regions. Furthermore, it identifies major political and structural governance challenges faced by EAOs including financial limitations, legitimacy gaps, and jurisdictional conflicts. Ultimately, the paper argues that the level of local legitimacy achieved by the EAO-led governance underscores the importance of their role in shaping federal frameworks in post-conflict Myanmar. Through the contextualization of these governance models within broader debates on decentralization and rebel governance, the study contributes to discussions on federalism and local governance reforms in Myanmar.

Research Methodology

This research was carried out from June to November 2023 using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with local ethnic individuals and ethnic and civil society organizations in the Arakan² and Mon states in Myanmar. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and Signal telephone calls with 12 respondents from four townships in Arakan state (Sittwe, Rathedaung, Mrauk Oo and Taung-up), and 9 respondents from three townships in Mon State (Mudon, Ye and Thanbyuzayat). Selection was based strictly on respondents being at least 18 years old, currently living in their townships, lived there during the NLD government period (2016-2020), and at least one year post-coup. Most importantly, respondents are native Arakan and Mon ethnicities who can speak native ethnic languages. The interviews were completed in July through both Zoom and Telegram calls. Focus group discussions were done via Zoom with three ethnic leaders from ethnic and civil society organizations in two sample ethnic states such as Arakan and Mon who are from different organizations on gender-representative basis in August.

These two data collection methods were employed to delve deeper into local ethnic leaders and their voices over conditions of local governance in their own ethnic states, explore challenges and changes in two periods, and gather primary data for qualitative data analysis by understanding local governance challenges and the impact of the 2021 coup on service delivery in non-Bamar ethnic areas.

Arakan and Mon states were selected based on their significant historical and contemporary roles in local governance and the existence of active EAOs. They offered a critical lens to examine local governance in non-Bamar ethnic areas and the impact of EAOs in local governance structures. Moreover, given conflict sensitivity in the country, Arakan and Mon states were safer options for conducting direct fieldwork and interviews for gathering qualitative data.

2 Despite the term 'Rakhine' being the official term, this study refers to it as 'Arakan' to acknowledge its historical and cultural identity, favored by many Arakanese communities, including the ULA

Respectively the Arakan Army (AA), its political wing the United League of Arakan (ULA), and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) have established their own local governance mechanisms, offering services of education, healthcare, security, and local administration, which provided valuable insights into EAO-led governance study. Furthermore, these two states offered a comprehensive comparison study because the ULA in Arakan state increasingly assumes its state-like functions within the state while the NMSP operates like a parallel government in Mon state.

Sittwe, Rathedaung, Mrauk Oo, and Taung-up were purposely selected in Arakan State for data collection because these four townships are strategically geopolitical locations in northern and southern parts and conflicted regions where armed clashes between the AA and the Bamar military have been ongoing since pre-coup period. Most importantly, these townships are a great fit for collecting data in fulfilling research objectives and answering questions in terms of events that happened during two periods.

Mudon, Ye, and Thanbyuzayat were purposely chosen for being the most populated Mon ethnic townships where the NMSP, the Mon ethnic armed organization, holds its presence widely with its local governance mechanisms, providing public service delivery towards ethnic Mon communities.

The data collected from the interviews and focus group discussions helped answer research questions through detailed and context-specific information about the effectiveness of local governance mechanisms in two periods, the impact of the coup, and the roles of different actors in local governance.

For the limitations of the study, while Kachin and Karen states do have significant EAO governance structures, challenges such as growing conflict intensity and limited access to data made in-depth qualitative research unfeasible at this stage. Further research should explore these ethnic regions in more detail. In addition, since this study concentrates only on non-Bamar ethnic areas because of their unique governance models led by EAOs, the central part of Myanmar is excluded from the research because local governance in central regions evolved without any influence of EAOs. And these governance structures are fundamentally different from decentralized EAO-led governance models seen only in non-Bamar ethnic states.

Given political sensitivity in Myanmar, participant confidentiality was strictly followed for safety reasons. Before the interviews and discussions, participants were verbally informed of the study's purpose, risks, and voluntary nature to gain their informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities and agreed that they had the right to withdraw any data collected from their participation at any stage without any consequences. They were informed that no video or audio recording was made and of written notes for paper writing purposes only. The research adhered to internationally recognized ethical standards, prioritizing participant well-being, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants were encouraged to use VPNs to protect their online privacy for online interviews in secure locations or via encrypted communication software such as Signal and Zoom to minimize risks. These precautions were taken for the safety of participants while also maintaining research integrity.

Historical Development of Local Governance in Myanmar and Its Impact on Ethnic Areas

Due to several political regimes, local governance structures in Myanmar encountered significant transitions over the years, especially with struggles between the central government and decentralization efforts. These shifts affected not only local developments but also the lives of non-Bamar ethnic groups.

During British colonial rule, local governance was administered through a centralized system under the 1874 Burma Municipal Act and the colonial government exercised delegation of powers to municipal committees for municipal administration in major townships under the 1884 Burma Municipal Act and the 1884 Upper Burma Municipal Law (UNDP Myanmar 2015). This period laid the foundation for centralization that continued in post-independence.

In the post-independence period, Myanmar faced internal conflicts and political instability, with the emergence of EAOs establishing their own local governance mechanisms in their controlled areas. Following a coup in 1962, the country became a socialist state with a highly centralized governance

system from national to local levels (Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin 2012) which weakened local governance in non-Bamar ethnic areas. Under the State Law and Order Restoration Council in 1988, it saw a continuation of centralized local governance structures which established development affairs organizations (DAOs) under the 1993 Development Committees Law, dominated by Bamar officials with the lack of local representation by local ethnic groups (Arnold et. al. 2015).

Moreover, the 2008 constitution remained centralized despite its integration of a few federal features. It allowed the formation of state and regional governments, and even self-administered zones for particular ethnic groups (Ninh and Arnold 2016), but with the absence of decision-making autonomy. The central government controlled these government levels through ministries and key policies related to finance, security, and judicial appointments (Bertrand et. al. 2022). The constitutional framework did not allow decentralized authority at non-central government levels, restricting legislative, financial and security powers of state and regional governments. In contrast, it allowed centralized control over them through military-controlled ministries and central government in terms of key policy decisions, disrupting decentralization efforts (Bertrand et al., 2022).

In addition, U Thein Sein's government in 2011-2015 introduced a few local governance reforms leading to decentralization and allocation of certain administrative duties to local authorities themselves. However, local administrations were granted limited autonomy as DAOs continued to control local governance structures under central government (Nixon et. al. 2015; Bertrand et. al. 2022). Subsequently, in 2016-2020 the NLD government made more decentralized shifts such as the introduction of the ethnic-language education policy (Bertrand et. al. 2022). However, the NLD failed to appoint ethnic ministers in ethnic regions despite its electoral achievement. This decision resulted in public perceptions such that ethnic representation remained limited, and state and local governments were largely controlled by the central institutions (Zin et. al. 2024).

Furthermore, the failure of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and peace process contributed to increased intensification of ethnic conflicts within the country (Zin et. al. 2024). Despite its signatory success in 2015,

it excluded multiple key EAOs such as the AA and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). It was criticized for its lack of inclusivity and a comprehensive dialogue between the government and EAOs (Bertrand et. al. 2022). Ethnic groups were not given their rights to political concessions, causing rising distrust which escalated armed clashes in Arakan, Shan, and Kachin states later in 2018. Additionally, the 2021 coup even intensified these conflicts and provoked armed resistance nationwide, with PDFs and EAOs declaring war against the SAC regime (South 2021). This collaboration strengthened EAOs' role in both governance and resistance aspects.

Meanwhile, EAOs such as the AA, NMSP and, Karen National Union (KNU), started their own local governance mechanisms in their controlled ethnic areas since their founding, providing educational and healthcare services without any control of central government (UNDP Myanmar 2014; Kyaw and Nwe 2019; Pedersen 2024), which makes them important actors to be studied in local governance scenarios in non-Bamar ethnic areas in Myanmar.

In comparison to Bamar-majority regions, ethnic ones saw more challenges in developments due to centralized powers, undermining ethnic development. Non-Bamar ethnic affairs and their development were not just prioritized in development policies but also systematically neglected in education, healthcare, and infrastructure services. Big cities such as Yangon and Mandalay have become major economic centers where most economic and development projects are implemented, resulting in these urban cities receiving good services in education, healthcare, and infrastructure development in contrast with rural and ethnic areas (World Bank 2019; Biesty et. al. 2021).

Moreover, the 1874 and 1884 Burma Municipal Acts along with the 1989 Burma Municipal Law, historically driven by Bamar-led government and militaries, granted administrative roles only to Bamar literates which marginalized the role of non-Bamar ethnic leaders to participate in local governance mechanisms. Development was not prioritized in non-Bamar ethnic villages and townships, instead, development became focused on Bamar-majority cities (Arnold et. al. 2015; Progressive Voice 2020).

Additionally, the 1993 Development Committees Law under the 2008 Constitution provided DAOs limited funds for local development. Nevertheless

they could make funds from local taxes and revenues which is where ethnic communities, amidst low economic and job opportunities, cannot afford high taxes (UNDP Myanmar 2015). DAOs normally take advantage of this tax issue and do not support local developments which appears as a systematic marginalization policy by the central government to limit local development and public knowledge (Arnold et. al. 2015).

Theoretical Frameworks

In this study, two theoretical frameworks are applied in analyzing local governance structures in non-Bamar ethnic areas in Myanmar. Firstly, decentralization theory posits that devolution of powers from central government to local entities enhances efficiency, responsiveness, and accountability at local levels (Oates 1999). This can result in the development of effective local governance policies by local entities to meet grassroots community's needs (Rodden 2004; Schneider 2003). As will be discussed in the case studies, the NLD government saw decentralization attempts and maximized funding for state administrations. However, this did not result in meaningful local autonomy and failed to address diverse needs of ethnic communities (Zin 2020; Valley 2018). In contrast, EAOs largely addressed local challenges through their local governance mechanisms, providing services regarding education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This study applies decentralization theory to understand how EAO-led governance responded more effectively to local needs compared to centralized governance.

However, decentralization theory alone cannot completely explain governance structures in Myanmar's ethnic regions, as many regions are not under state control. This is where rebel governance theory acts as an important analytical lens. Rebel governance theory expresses how insurgent groups build their own governance systems in areas where state control is weak or absent, and challenges the traditional perspective that makes governance exclusive only to state actors . Florea and Malejacq (2023) and Spadaro (2023) argue that the theory explores how rebel organizations manage local affairs in conflict zones and administer their territories and even provide governance services to local communities. EAOs such as the ULA and NMSP establish their own governance institutions in their controlled territories, providing local services

from education to healthcare, filling gaps ignored by the central government. Applying rebel governance theory is helpful to understand how these EAOs achieve legitimacy at local levels and whether their governance structures should serve as governance models for Myanmar's future federal framework (Brenner 2019).

Both decentralization and rebel governance theories are applied in this study to critically evaluate why centralized local governance has proven less effective than decentralized EAO-led governance in non-Bamar ethnic regions, both before and after the coup. These theories help examine whether EAO-led governance should be taken into consideration as role models when developing federal governance frameworks in post-conflict Myanmar.

Despite extensive research on local governance in Myanmar, there is limited empirical evidence on governance in ethnic areas across different political periods—particularly under the NLD government and the SAC regime—while also accounting for the role of non-state actors. Building on discussions of the emergence of bottom-up federalism (South 2021), the qualitative examination of two case studies of non-Bamar local governance systems in Arakan and Mon states will provide a greater understanding of these dynamics, which is crucial to developing effective local governance policies promoting inclusive, responsive, and sustainable governance in Myanmar's ethnic regions.

The following sections present findings from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions conducted with respondents from Arakan and Mon state. It compares the effectiveness of local governance mechanisms under the NLD and post-coup SAC governances. The analysis concentrates on education, healthcare, and infrastructure—key areas where local governance functions have significantly evolved.

Case Study 1: Arakan State

The AA was established as an armed wing of the ULA in 2009, conducting resistance operations against the Myanmar military with the objective of achieving self-determination for Arakanese people (Jap and Courtin 2022). Despite its recent emergence, the ULA managed to expand its functions

quickly in 2019, offering administration, justice programs, and local taxation in controlled territories. Its evolving governance model functions alongside the state, even enforcing law and order and fulfilling local needs independent from the central government (Faisal 2020).

On the other hand, post-2018 saw the most intense period of severe conflicts between the AA and the military, resulting in mass displacement and internet blackouts. There were different conditions in northern and southern Arakan despite the declaration of a ceasefire in 2020. The north saw consolidated control under the AA's governance, while the south remained contested at the presence of state institutions (Kean 2022; Pedersen 2024).

Moreover, the most controversial issue, the Rohingya crisis, saw some significant progress under the ULA in these periods, gaining limited participation under its governance model in certain areas. Prior to this, the Rohingya communities experienced severe restrictions such as forced displacement, statelessness, and humanitarian disparities because of Rakhine nationalist activities within the state (Faisal 2020). Yet, this progress of inclusion remains unsure and contested with widespread ethnic and political tensions within the state and countrywide.

Effectiveness of NLD Local Governance Mechanisms in Arakan State

Findings revealed that the NLD government made notable progress in public service delivery through its governance mechanisms, with significant disparities remaining between urban and rural areas of Arakan state.

During NLD's governance, education in Arakan State saw many improvements, with free education that provided books, uniforms, and stationery to students. However, most rural schools often did not receive these benefits, forcing students to pay for their own supplies. In the north, most villages only had primary schools, with high schools scarce in rural areas, lacking proper infrastructure and adequate IT facilities. Even though more teachers were provided in schools, the lack of teachers remained a major challenge because teachers do not want to go to rural and remote schools where armed

conflicts between the military and the AA often break out while they face low pay (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023). However, the New Education Policy introduced ethnic education and Rakhine language classes in urban schools, excluding rural ones. Armed conflicts between the military and the AA in 2018-2020 in the north led to school closures and displacement, severely disrupting education (Personal communication July 8, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

In the south, educational support was more consistent under the NLD governance. Schools were free of charge and students received free uniforms, textbooks, and stationery, improving accessible education for residents. More teachers were added to southern schools, but rural schools faced the same shortage as in northern schools. In short, the NLD government made outstanding improvements in education in both urban and rural Arkan schools in the south, but still challenges in resource allocation and teacher distribution remained (Multiple interviews July 10, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

Concerning healthcare, in the north, public healthcare services, despite being available at hospitals in major cities, lack modern medical facilities and equipment, resulting in poor treatment quality. Ethnic locals in rural areas do not even have adequate healthcare facilities or staff. Even so, urban public hospitals offered affordable services while rural clinics were under-equipped and understaffed. Moreover, remote villages had to rely on time-consuming and expensive water transport in the Lemro river to reach urban hospitals, posing significant risks and access challenges (Personal communication July 9, 2023). In contrast, healthcare services were generally better in the south—public hospitals provided free services and regular healthcare services were made available in schools and villages, despite poor customer service from healthcare providers. Still, southern village clinics lacked 24-hour service, forcing rural residents to travel to larger cities such as Sittwe in the north, Thandwe in the south, and Yangon in Yangon region for better treatment, which was costly and difficult due to expensive air tickets and poor road conditions (Multiple interviews July 10, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

In terms of infrastructure provision, the NLD government made significant progress in telecommunication, internet, and electricity projects in the north. People could easily buy SIM cards at local stores at affordable prices and obtain Wi-Fi services, gaining access to the internet. Road projects increased and several highway projects were initiated such as Mrauk Oo-Sittwe and Rathedaung-Sittwe. Meanwhile, rural areas lacked significant improvements in transportation and road services (Focus group discussion August 20, 2023). Besides this, electricity was made available and even reached rural villages in Rathedaung and Maungdaw. Access to water remained a critical issue in the north with households relying on public wells and streams without proper hygiene procedures and buying often from private companies, causing inaccessibility to clean water resources (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023). However, in the south, infrastructure improvements were seen during the NLD government, as the internet and electricity gained more access, with the same water scarcity problem as in the north (Multiple interviews July 10, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

In addition, both focus group and northern participants pointed out that the northern part of Arakan faced year-long internet blackouts during the NLD governance in 2018-2019 by the time when armed conflicts broke out between the AA and the military. This blackout affected local communities' access to internet, information, and electricity to meet their daily needs. During this period, the AA managed to support these Arakan communities with basic needs such as water, rice, and shelter (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

Effectiveness of SAC-led Local Governance Mechanisms in Arakan State

Findings express that the SAC did not manage to sustain the previous government's progress in local service delivery and even escalated local conflicts in ethnic regions. After the 2021 coup, schools in northern townships such as Sittwe continued regular operations despite the CDM elsewhere in other ethnic regions. However, free educational resources available during the NLD's governance were no longer maintained and students had to pay for books and uniforms again (Personal communication July 9, 2023).

As explained below, teachers in Arakan State did not participate in the CDM, and many teachers from other ethnic regions relocated to Arakan State to avoid the CDM, slightly increasing teacher numbers. The New Education Policy, introduced by the NLD government, also continued and faced several challenges in implementation due to insufficient facilities and resources. Cyclone Mocha in 2023 further damaged schools and the SAC government not only failed to address these school damage problems but also restricted international aid in the north (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023). Southern schools operated normally but faced unfree educational problems, along with shortages of teachers and teaching facilities (Personal communication July 10, 2023). The coup disrupted educational support in the north significantly while the south experienced fewer changes.

In the healthcare aspect, Arakan State saw an influx of healthcare workers due to the CDM, but they did not want to go to rural and remote Arakan villages for security reasons. At the same time, the devaluation of Myanmar's currency and international sanctions made healthcare services more expensive and less accessible, particularly for rural and IDP communities. Despite the increased healthcare workers, the same problems such as lack of medical equipment grew worse due to inflation and legal restrictions (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023). In the south, the healthcare situation mirrored that of the north, with new rising problems of private clinics being more accessible to wealthy families and public hospitals with poor healthcare quality for poor populations (Personal communication July 10, 2023). The coup exacerbated existing healthcare challenges, making services more expensive and less affordable for rural and displaced populations.

The coup led to increased surveillance, higher telecommunication costs , halted infrastructure projects, and continued water and electricity issues in both the north and south (Multiple interviews July 8-10, 2023; Focus group discussion August 20, 2023).

Role of the United League Of Arakan (ULA) in Arakan State's Local Governance

Post-coup, the ULA expanded its influence and governance activities in the Arakan State because of the collapse of state-led governance within the region. ULA accelerated its efforts in education, healthcare, and administrative sectors in key northern townships, including Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Rathedaung, Mrauk Oo, Kyauk Taw, and Minbya.

While the ULA does not operate its own schools or universities, it provides scholarships for underprivileged students from Arakan ethnic communities. In 2016-2020, it played a prominent role in protecting schools and students from armed conflicts, supplemented the need for teachers, and aided in construction of new schools. Post-coup, it did not openly encourage participation in the CDM due to its lack of alternative educational provision. However, it still allowed prospective teachers to come and take teaching roles at local schools, providing security and incentives (Multiple interviews July 8-9, 2023). One interviewee from Rathedaung added, "The ULA provided protection and additional teachers during conflicts, such as Cyclone Mocha, and even helped rebuild homes and schools" (Personal communication, July 9, 2023).

Moreover, the ULA excelled in delivering free healthcare services to Arakan communities, particularly in war-torn areas like Rathedaung, Mrauk Oo, Maungdaw, Buthidaung, and Punnarkyun. It staffed village clinics with healthcare workers and doctors, providing enhanced access to advanced healthcare services and medicines (Focus group discussion August 20, 2023). Respondents from Mrauk Oo and Rathedaung claimed, "We had increased access to better healthcare services and medicines from ULA-appointed doctors and nurses, especially in our remote villages" (Multiple interviews, July 9-10, 2023). Consequently, rural communities had access to better healthcare services and medicines from ULA-appointed doctors and nurses, especially in rural and remote villages. This demonstrated the limitations of state-led governance and how the ULA stepped in to fill the gaps.

Besides education and healthcare, the ULA is notably more influential in local administration, especially in the post-coup period. Arakan residents prefer

reporting crimes to ULA-appointed lawyers and courts rather than the military government's judicial system (Center for Arakan Studies 2024). This indicates growing trust and reliance on ULA's legal and administrative governance after the coup. On the other hand, the ULA's influence in the south is generally weaker than in the north due to the strong presence and influence of the military. But southern communities reported the reception of less educational and healthcare support compared to the north. But the ULA extended its assistance in the north after the coup and nowadays, more armed conflicts are going on in Thandwe and Gwa townships between the Bamar military and the AA in its attempt to unite one Arakan State (Multiple interviews July 8-10, 2023). In this context, findings show local communities' growing confidence in ULA's governance. This means, the ULA's governance services in education, healthcare, and administration are somehow more satisfactory for ethnic groups.

In short, NLD governance showed some attempts of decentralizing responsibilities, but these efforts were quite limited and restricted financial and administrative autonomy at state and local levels due to its centralized policies. In contrast, the ULA's governance model demonstrated the effectiveness of its localized decision-making, which supports the theoretical claim that governance is more responsive and effective only when local entities have the authority to decide. Moreover, the fact that Arakan people prefer the ULA's governance and public service delivery conveys the relevance of rebel governance theory in a way that non-state actors like the ULA achieve legitimacy within local communities at the provision of successful services in areas neglected by the state.

Case Study 2: Mon State

The NMSP, since its founding in 1964, functioned both with resistance and governance responsibilities within the state. Its governance mechanisms through education, healthcare, and local administration positioned itself as a parallel government in the Mon ethnic communities. The extent of governance differs between its exclusively controlled areas and those with shared control with the central government (South 2003). Thus, the effectiveness of its governance relies on the degree of its authority and its cooperation with community groups.

Effectiveness of NLD's Local Governance Mechanisms in Mon State

Findings convey that NLD-led governance made progress in public service delivery in terms of education, healthcare, and local administration duties in ethnic areas of Mon state. However, this progress did not reach all villages and remote areas, leaving rural regions in need of more effective governance solutions.

During the NLD governance in 2016-2020, significant improvements were made in educational support in Mon State, providing free primary and secondary education, uniforms, books, and stationery to all students, including those in rural Mon villages. Still, there were many disparities between urban and rural areas in terms of access to quality education. Many new high schools were built in larger villages in Mudon, Thanbyuzayat, and Ye townships, but students from small villages had to travel long distances to other villages on foot or by their own transport. There was general increase in the number of teachers in schools, but this did not accommodate the growing student population, leading to the hiring of unqualified teachers, especially in rural and remote Mon villages. More school facilities were provided in urban areas but not in rural schools. Although the New Education system allowed Mon ethnic language classes in schools, this also created further strain on schools that struggled to keep up with increased classes and subjects with insufficient teachers and school capacities (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023).

In terms of the healthcare sector, the government increased the healthcare budget for improved access to public hospitals in urban areas, though they were not entirely free of charge. There was a significant gap between urban and rural access in healthcare services. Rural villages did not have any public clinics and existing clinics were understaffed and undersupplied with medicines. But public nurses and doctors paid visits to rural villages for regular healthcare services, but still emergency issues remained difficult to manage (Personal communication July 16, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023). In terms of healthcare infrastructure, public hospitals outside the capital Mawlamyine had limited medical equipment, forcing patients to travel to larger cities such as Yangon for better medical services. This was evident in the Covid-19 pandemic such that a high number of deaths were found due to

insufficient oxygen concentrators and limited capacity of hospitals and staff within the state (Personal communication July 17, 2023).

Furthermore, the NLD government gained several achievements in construction of basic infrastructure including roads, bridges, internet, telephone services, water, and electricity provision. Highway roads from Mawlamyine to Yangon, from Mawlamyine to Hpa-an, and from Mawlamyine to Dawei were upgraded, and new roads and streets were built across townships for accessible transport and reachability of electricity to rural townships, but only on limited basis. Besides these, rural villages gained access to not just electricity but also internet and telecommunication services, making SIM cards and Wi-Fi more accessible and affordable for rural communities. In terms of water access, despite government projects of free public water fountains and tap water, many villages still had to purchase drinking water from private companies (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023).

However, the controversy of naming the bridge connecting Mawlamyine and Bilukyun after General Aung San faced public criticism within the state. Local communities wanted a name reflecting Mon culture and historical identity, but these ethnic perspectives were ignored by the NLD government (Focus group discussion August 27, 2023). These proved the central government's failure to achieve ethnic representation and promote local autonomy, highlighting its centralized control over state and local matters.

Effectiveness of SAC-led Local Governance Mechanisms in Mon State

Like in Arakan state, findings demonstrate that, on one hand, the SAC-led local governance mechanisms were proven ineffective and unresponsive to addressing local needs in ethnic areas while, on the other, the military actively involved itself in brutal crackdowns towards resistance groups.

Following the 2021 coup, schools in Mon State closed for several months because of teachers not continuing their responsibilities under the military regime by participating in the CDM. This disrupted students' education. When

schools reopened, free educational resources were no longer provided and students had to pay for tuition fees, registration, uniforms, stationery, and books (Personal communication July 15, 2023).

Security concerns were also noted such that schools in Belin, Ye, and Thanbyuzayat townships were closed due to armed conflicts between PDFs and the military, while schools in non-conflicted areas continued operation regularly. Beside this, the CDM campaign largely affected education in Mon State, with the number of teachers significantly decreased when schools reopened and newly graduated teachers without proper teacher trainings were employed to fill the gaps. This resulted in students not effectively receiving teachings and lessons (Personal communication July 16, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023).

Post-coup, healthcare services faced many struggles, such as increasing medical costs due to high inflation rates and the loss of healthcare workers and staff in public hospitals due to CDM. While city-based services remained accessible, rural villages no longer received free medicines and treatments. Several clinics in villages since the coup were shut down and the shortage of healthcare workers and staff became a major challenge in Mon State, making rural communities lose access to even basic healthcare services (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023).

Apart from healthcare, internet and telecommunications accessibility, as in Arakan State, were limited by increased costs and high surveillance. Moreover, other infrastructure projects such as NLD-initiated roads and bridge projects were halted. At the same time, access to electricity was on a limited basis, with experiences of frequent outages. The 2021 coup disrupted local governance mechanisms in Mon State from urban to rural areas, with school closures, shortage of teachers and school capacities, new challenges in the healthcare sector, and infrastructure restrictions. As armed conflicts increase across the state between PDFs and the Bamar military, villages in war-torn areas lose services every day (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023).

Role of New Mon State Party in Mon State's Local Governance

The NMSP has been active in local governance since its founding in 1964, starting with its Central Education Department and later expanding to healthcare and local administration institutions. After the coup, its role became more significant in the lives of ethnic Mon communities, especially after public school closures. Mon National Schools, operated by the NMSP, were a significant option for Mon ethnic people to continue their education.

Mon National Schools were initially run at monasteries and later in separate village schools, offering primary and secondary education in ethnic Mon language as a medium of instruction and communication. Ethnic Mon families preferred sending their children to these schools rather than public schools. Moreover, these students can take mainstream public examinations. This parallel education has made it evident that the NMSP's education system is as important as centralized education (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023).

Mon national schools are situated in several villages, especially in Ye, Thanbyuzayat, Mudon, and Paung townships, making them accessible to both urban and rural villages. The influence of the NMSP's educational system has become stronger over ethnic Mon communities. In other words, its local governance efforts, through education towards ethnic Mon communities, have addressed the educational needs of local communities (Focus group discussion August 27, 2023). This highlights that the NMSP's educational governance is more effective and responsive to local demands than centralized ones. Moreover, this is further supported by interviews from Ye and Thanbyuzayat who said, "To date we do not want our children to go to mainstream schools because they do not have to speak Mon language and some of our children who went there already forgot how to speak Mon language" (Multiple interviews July 16-17, 2023).

In terms of local administration, NMSP is most influential in its controlled villages in its headquarters in Ye township and regionwide. Under its control, it established small clinics with Mon-speaking doctors and nurses for far-reaching Mon villages in southern townships such as Ye, Thanbyuzayat, and Mudon, even providing free healthcare services and addressing local

healthcare needs. Additionally, through its Mon cultural heritage projects and social services, the NMSP has gained a strong bond with local Mon ethnic communities, making itself a central figure in Mon politics. Compared to urban populations, rural communities seem to be more reliant and trust more on the NMSP and its local governance contributions as it is a stand-by governance option for them to receive alternative local services (Multiple interviews July 15-17, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023).

Additionally, the study also finds that the NMSP continued its educational programs while SAC-led education was deteriorating in post-coup, which infers that the NMSP could successfully reinforce its role as a more effective governance actor by sustaining its educational services. Moreover, in contrast to the state education, its educational system, based on ethnic language and cultures, exemplifies decentralization principles by stating that localized governance can perform more effectively and efficiently local service delivery by tailoring to community needs. Furthermore, the NMSP has managed to attain political legitimacy in Mon ethnic communities because of its substantial delivery of public services in education, healthcare, and administration, as rebel governance theory suggests (Personal communication July 15, 2023; Focus group discussion August 27, 2023).

Given these conditions, the NMSP has proved to be a key governance actor, even more effective than state-led governance, noting that EAOs like the NMSP have fulfilled local needs in ethnic regions beyond their resistance activities against the military. This underscores EAOs' potential role in facilitating federal frameworks in post-conflict Myanmar.

EAOs and their Potential Role in Development of Federal Governance Frameworks in Post-conflict Myanmar

The findings from case studies of Arakan and Mon states show that EAOs have become primary governance actors in ethnic regions because they managed to fulfil gaps left by state-led governance institutions under both the NLD government (2016-2020) and the SAC administration (post-2021 coup). Even though the NLD government began practicing decentralization principles,

state and local governance bodies remained financially and administratively controlled by central institutions and ministries. Post-2021 coup, the SAC did not manage to maintain these decentralization attempts, and its state-led institutions even collapsed, worsening local governance gaps in ethnic regions. This led to the increased dependence of ethnic communities on EAOs such as the ULA in Arakan and the NMSP in Mon for essential public services. Weak state governance allowed EAOs to expand their governance roles as a non-state governance actors, illustrating their greater institutional capabilities and responsiveness compared to state-led ones

The idea of EAOs playing a dual role as both resistance and governance actors can be best comprehended through the lens of decentralization and rebel governance theories. Since the central government has consecutively failed to decentralize its powers, this allowed EAOs to establish their own governance structures, operating in parallel with state-controlled institutions. Rebel governance theory posits that non-state actors often achieve and strengthen their legitimacy through their consistent public service delivery, which is evident in the ULA's and the NMSP's local governance mechanisms in post-coup Myanmar.

Before the coup, EAOs like the ULA and the NMSP had their own local governance functions, providing education, healthcare, and local administrative services in their controlled areas. They managed to handle local issues unsolved by the central government in such ways that additional ethnic-language-speaking teachers were employed if there was a need for more teachers at schools, scholarships for rural students were offered, schools built, and healthcare services delivered. The ULA has become a key actor in local administration, addressing local crime reports in controlled areas and providing security for local Arakan people amidst armed clashes. The NMSP similarly attained its local prominence through its educational efforts and ethnic language education, fulfilling local needs in ethnic Mon villages.

Given these pre-coup situations, it is evident that the ULA and the NMSP already positioned themselves as *de facto* local governments, fulfilling education, healthcare, and administrative services. They provided ethnic-based education and established collective community healthcare mechanisms, which earned them community trust, reinforcing their role

as legitimate governance actors, as explained in rebel governance theory where non-state armed groups may surpass state institutions in legitimacy when they can provide effective, responsive, and inclusive public services to communities (Spadaro 2023).

The post-coup even strengthened their roles and importance at local levels. With the collapse of the central government's local governance services such as education, health, infrastructure, and security, EAOs such as the ULA and the NMSP have stepped in to fill the void. The ULA, despite ongoing conflicts, is actively expanding its efforts in providing education, healthcare, and social services in displaced communities, strengthening its role in local governance and achieving trust and reliance. The NMSP also continued supporting ethnic education through Mon National Schools, making it the most reliant educational opportunity in the state.

Applying both decentralization (Oates 1999) and rebel governance (Brennar 2019) theoretical perspectives, the EAOs' expanding governance role at the time of weakening institutions of central government in the post-coup period benefited their legitimate governance so much through their decentralized and community-based services. This has reinforced the argument that EAOs could contribute largely towards developing Myanmar's future federal framework, given their long years of effective local governance experiences and knowledge.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This comparative study has revealed many differences in local governance mechanisms between these two periods of the NLD and SAC governments. The NLD's notable performance was observed in education, healthcare, and infrastructure services with remaining challenges in rural areas. The SAC government did not maintain these improvements and even exacerbated existing challenges, resulting in increased reliance of non-Bamar ethnic groups on their EAOs for essential services and security.

EAOs such as the ULA and NMSP have become crucial players in local governance, backed by their success in filling the gaps in local communities

amidst the central government's failures in policies. This has underscored the prominence of EAOs in the local governance sector with their centrality and significant role in developing future federal governance frameworks for non-Bamar ethnic regions. Their effectiveness in governance models also demonstrates the need for decentralization in shaping future governance frameworks in federal Myanmar.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations aim to build a comprehensive local governance framework for effectively addressing governance challenges in non-Bamar ethnic regions of Myanmar.

1. Institutionalize a decentralized local governance system

The study finds that the NLD's decentralization was still limited under centralized policies, restricting local autonomy, whilst EAOs like the ULA and the NMSP effectively governed local services in their ethnic areas. This shows the need for formal recognition of local governance bodies within a third-tier local government system to enable effective and responsive ethnic-led and localized service delivery.

2. Decentralize fiscal authorities to state and local governance bodies

Findings indicate that state governments did not have fiscal autonomy under NLD governance leading to limitations on local resolutions. However, EAOs such as the ULA and the NMSP managed to fill governance gaps by providing localized health and educational services through its decentralized decision-making principles. Therefore, granting fiscal autonomy to state and local entities would enable effective resource allocation and a comprehensive fiscal transfer system that directly funds localized decisions.

3. Integrate lessons from EAO-led governance into federal governance frameworks

Through study findings, EAO's governance mechanisms have proven to be more effective and responsive in problem-solving in contrast with centralized governance in terms of the provision of localized ethnic-based educational, healthcare, and administrative programs.

Incorporating EAOs along with their experiences and lessons in developing and designing effective federal governance policies in post-conflict Myanmar could secure tailored policy frameworks that effectively address ethnic and local issues and needs.

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