



***THE US CAN HELP MEET MYANMAR'S
NEW GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES***

BY MICHAEL MARTIN

Michael Martin is an adjunct fellow (non-resident) of the Southeast Asia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, DC.

An earlier version of this article appeared in [CSIS](#) on March 1.

In Myanmar, hardly a day passes without a report of another village, town, or township being “liberated” by one or more of the ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) or People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) fighting to overthrow the nation’s military junta, the State Administrative Council (SAC). While the news is generally viewed as a cause for celebration, it also creates a serious challenge: How will the newly liberated community be governed? In addition, the establishment of new local and state governments creates an opportunity for the US government to improve its damaged reputation among Myanmar’s pro-democracy resistance movement.

In November 2022, the author met with about 50 members of [Chin National Front \(CNF\)](#) and the [Chinland Defense Forces \(CDF\)](#), who described their struggles setting up new local governments in the villages and towns. Many of these CDF and CNF officers had been farmers and teachers before joining the armed struggle and had no experience in organizing a local government. They all shared, however, a desire to establish a democratic and inclusive government that reflected the hopes and desires of the local population.

A newly established research group, Chin Agency, has [released a study](#) of the emerging local governments in the areas of Chin State under CNF and/or CDF control. According to the report, most of the local governments are formed using a “bottom-up approach,” involving local leaders and representatives of the CDF and CNF. In many cases, the resulting governance system reflects customary practices of the Chin tribes in the region. Some of the new local governments use the boundaries established by the Myanmar’s military; some create new boundaries based on consolidated tribal communities.

The report notes a distinct aspect of the structure of the local governments. A majority of the local governments have three main bodies: an administrative body, a judicial body, and defense body. In many cases, the judicial body is a department that reports to administrative and military bodies.

Similar local governments are being set up in other parts of Myanmar after the EROs and PDFs have driven out the military junta’s troops and the SAC’s local administrators. The Arakan Army (AA) and the Karenni Army (KA) are expanding their emerging governance systems as they take control of more and more of the states of Rakhine and Karenni, respectively. The Kachin Independence Army and the Karen National Liberation Army are also extending their long-standing governments into new areas of the states of Kachin and Kayin (Karen), as well as portions of the neighboring divisions of Bago and Sagaing. In the state of Shan, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) are setting up local governments in areas the Kokang and Ta’ang consider their homelands.

The governance challenge is not only taking place at the local level. The AA has stated that its goal is to create an autonomous state-level

government for Rakhine State. The KA and its political arm, the Karenni National Progressive Party, have established an interim executive council to govern the state of Karenni. In the state of Chin, two different groups have announced the establishment of transitional governments for what they call “Chinland.” On Dec. 6, 2023, the CDF, CNF, and representatives of most of the Chin tribes released a [transitional Chinland Constitution](#) and formed the Chinland Council. Another group, led by the Chin Brotherhood Alliance, formed the [Chin People's Administrative Committee](#) on Jan. 27, 2024. Sources in the Chin community have told the author that the backers of both interim governments are attempting to resolve their differences over the formation of a state government for Chinland.

The emergence of interim autonomous state governments in Myanmar has implications for the possible future formation of a federal republic. Most of the EROs and the PDFs do not accept the legitimacy of the Federal Democracy Charter and the National Unity Government (NUG), announced by the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw on March 31, 2021. If the autonomous interim state governments expand and consolidate power in their respective territories, they will have to be included in negotiations over the terms for possibly forming a new federal republic in Myanmar.

This new reality was recognized in a [joint statement](#) issued by the CNF, the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), the Karen National Union (KNU), and the NUG on Jan. 31, 2024. The statement implicitly sets aside the Federal Democracy Charter, stating that “all relevant parties” will draft and promulgate “a new constitution that embodies federalism and democratic values.” It also includes in its action plan the establishment of a “Transitional National Unity Government,” that may be different from the current NUG.

Most of the major EROs and PDFs did not sign the joint statement. Of particular note is the absence of the AA, Kachin Independence Army, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and TNLA. Also missing are the Shan State Army—North, Shan State Army—South, and the United Wa State Army; all three EROs control significant portions of the state of Shan. It is unclear where the Mon National Liberation Army and its political arm, the New Mon State Party, stand regarding the possible formation of a new federal republic of Myanmar.

The Biden administration’s compliance with SAC restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian assistance has undermined the image of the US government within Myanmar’s resistance movement. If Congress and the Biden administration were to openly provide technical assistance and advice in the formation of local and state governments in Myanmar, it would enhance the reputation of the US government and possibly create a solid foundation for a future democratic nation.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.