



**GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN
RESISTANCE-CONTROLLED AREAS
AMID MYANMAR'S REVOLUTION**

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Myanmar's ongoing armed struggle against the military junta, or State Administrative Council, has seen significant territorial gains by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and People's Defense Forces (PDFs). These newly emerging territories "liberated" by resistance forces underscore the regime's weakening position in governance. The October recapture of the key Pinlebu township in Sagaing Region by joint forces of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and PDFs, following two months of fighting, along with the Arakan Army (AA)'s seizure of a strategic junta hilltop base in Mae Taung near the Western Military Command headquarters in Ann Township of Rakhine State, offers renewed hope to those resisting military rule.

However, these unprecedented military achievements and territorial gains bring new challenges to the resistance groups regarding how these newly liberated areas will be governed and how new governance systems can be established amid challenges of diversity, inclusivity, and inexperience.

New opportunities and challenges

While the liberation of territories from junta control is celebrated by Myanmar's pro-democracy movement, establishing functional governments in these liberated areas is important for maintaining stability and legitimizing the broader resistance movement. For

many EAOs and PDFs, setting up governance structures is a new and complex task.

In Chin State, members of the Chin National Front and Chinland Defense Forces lead the formation of local governments using a "bottom-up approach" reflecting tribal practices, involving tribal elders in the decision-making process at the township, sub-township, and village levels. However, some areas follow military-established boundaries, resulting in fragmented governance models. Further complicating matters, internal disagreements in early 2023 led to a split within the Chin opposition, with the creation of the rival Chinland Council, which has garnered greater public support than the Interim Chin National Consultative Council. The immediate challenge for these bodies is establishing functional state governance and essential public services.

Resistance governance in Sagaing adds another layer of complexity. Sagaing, a critical battleground in central Myanmar, has seen PDFs take control of rural areas. In these regions, People's Administrative Bodies, supported by local communities and welfare groups, along with Pa Ka Pha, which primarily functions as local defense militias, have emerged as key governance actors. These bodies coordinate the provision of education, health care, and justice, often in collaboration with striking civil servants involved in the civil disobedience movement. The PDFs in Sagaing have also developed taxation systems, collecting revenue through checkpoints on inter-town roads. While this practice has faced criticism for a lack of transparency, local governance has become more coordinated over time, with revenue supporting health care, education, and defense.

Similar developments are witnessed in other parts of Myanmar. The Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State and the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force, working with the Karenni Army in Karenni (Kayah) State, are extending their administrative reach as they take control of new areas. Meanwhile, the Kachin Independence Army and Karen National Liberation Army are expanding governance systems into liberated territories in Kachin, Karen, Bago, and Sagaing. In Shan State, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Ta'ang

National Liberation Army (TNLA) are also establishing local governance structures within their territories.

Inclusivity and accountability in emerging local governments

Establishing inclusive and accountable governance in Myanmar's liberated areas presents a significant challenge, especially in regions marked by deep ethnic diversity. Many of these areas have long histories of ethnic tension, making it imperative that new governance systems reflect the interests and rights of all ethnic groups. For instance, the Arakan Army (AA)'s past treatment of the Rohingya community in Rakhine State has drawn significant criticism. Reports of anti-Rohingya rhetoric and alleged attacks on Rohingya civilians have fueled fears that the AA's governance might marginalize them.

Despite these concerns, some initiatives led by the United League of Arakan, the political wing of the AA indicate a potential shift. The ULA has begun efforts to incorporate Rohingya representation within its administrative structures in Rakhine State. While this is a positive step toward inclusivity, the challenge remains in ensuring that these efforts lead to meaningful participation and protection of the Rohingya community's rights within AA-administered areas. It is a critical test for the AA's ability to transition from the armed resistance organization to a more accountable governing body to realize their goal of achieving the "Arakan Dream."

In other regions, there are encouraging examples of inclusivity and accountability. The KNU and the KIO have long engaged with civil society to foster inclusive governance, particularly in education and health sectors. Both operate non-state education systems that emphasize mother-tongue instruction while also striving to include other ethnic and religious groups in heterogeneous communities and provide essential health care services within their communities. Recently, the KIO supported the establishment of private schools for minority groups within its territory, demonstrating a commitment to diverse governance.

However, the road to fully inclusive governance remains challenging, particularly in areas where ethnic tensions have persisted for decades. As new governance structures continue to form, resistance leaders face the critical task of ensuring these systems not only function effectively but also represent the diverse populations they govern.

The role of the United States

The emergence of local and state governments in Myanmar's liberated areas presents a unique opportunity for the US to foster trust with the pro-democracy movement. While the BURMA Act of 2022 allowed for non-lethal support to resistance actors, further concrete action is needed. The newly formed Congressional Burma Caucus, co-chaired by Bill Huizenga (R-Michigan) and Betty McCollum (D-Minnesota), is positioned to rally bipartisan support in addressing Myanmar's crisis.

US support could help professionalize and stabilize these emerging governments, ensuring that they are better equipped to meet the needs of their populations and foster inclusive, democratic governance. This could include support for strengthening governance structures in areas such as education, health care, justice, and land rights—critical services that many EAOs and PDFs are already providing to varying degrees.

Congressional leaders can amplify the call for increased US assistance, including the formation of an advisory group to determine how to allocate approximately \$1 billion in frozen Myanmar assets held at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York since shortly after the coup. This funding could support resistance governance efforts in education, health care, and justice in liberated areas, helping stabilize these regions. By offering technical assistance and engaging with resistance actors and local civil society, the US can promote transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in these new governance structures, reinforcing its commitment to Myanmar's democratic future.

The path to inclusive governance

As Myanmar's resistance forces continue to liberate territory from military regime's control, they face the monumental task of building governance systems that are inclusive, accountable, and functional. As the emerging autonomous state/local governments consolidate power in their territories, they will play a critical role in shaping the future of Myanmar's federal system, which the NUG and various EAOs are determined to establish. However, this effort remains incomplete without the participation of some major EAOs, including the AA, TNLA, MNDAA, among others. They control significant portions of Myanmar and will need to be included in any negotiations over the formation of a new federal democratic nation. The current fragmentation among the resistance forces highlights the challenges ahead in creating a unified political structure and the needs of a political pact among these diverse groups through meaningful dialogue.

The US has an opportunity to support this process by providing technical assistance and advice, in helping to lay the groundwork for a future democratic Myanmar. However, the path to a new federal democratic Myanmar will require cooperation among all resistance actors, the resolution of ethnic tensions, and a commitment to inclusive governance. Only by addressing these challenges can Myanmar's resistance forces hope to build a democratic future for the country.

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