



# Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts

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*Preventing War. Shaping Peace.*

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# Principal Findings

**What's new?** The 1 February 2021 coup d'état has intensified deadly conflict and ended Myanmar's decade-old peace process involving its many ethnic armed groups. The Tatmadaw now faces a mix of new and reinvigorated adversaries, some of whom have begun to unite behind a collective vision for a genuine federal state.

**Why does it matter?** With the moribund peace process now over, the junta will try to dissuade ethnic armed groups from siding with the opposition. Neither the Tatmadaw nor the opposition appears likely to prevail anytime soon; the ensuing rise in conflict will have significant humanitarian consequences.

**What should be done?** Donors should shift focus from supporting the peace process to assisting people in conflict-affected areas. International actors should avoid pressuring ethnic armed groups into new ceasefires, engage with the parallel government and other opposition representatives, and work with local civil society organisations to address humanitarian needs.

## *Executive Summary*

The Myanmar military's 1 February 2021 coup d'état has dramatically reshaped the country's conflict landscape, killing off the decade-old peace process and sparking a new wave of violence. New forces have emerged, long-established ethnic armed groups have recommitted to insurgency and heavy clashes have erupted in areas that had not seen significant fighting in decades. The opposition National Unity Government (NUG) has sought to rally non-state forces – both old and new – to its side in order to topple the junta, with mixed results. Most ethnic armed groups are hostile to the military regime, but they also see little prospect of it collapsing and until now have been reluctant to cement alliances with the opposition. With the multiplication of new fronts stretching its capacities, the military is likely to seek bilateral deals with some groups to free up troops, as it has done in the past. As Myanmar appears headed for protracted conflict, international donors that supported the now failed peace process should shift their focus to alleviating the impact of renewed fighting on local populations.

From the first weeks after the coup, ethnic armed groups have been important players in the battle between the regime and its political opponents. They have adopted a wide range of responses, based on their history, geographic location and strategic objectives: some have sat on the fence or distanced themselves from the resistance movement entirely, while others have sheltered dissidents fleeing the regime, provided some with military training and engaged politically with the NUG. Several are struggling to balance public pressure to cooperate with the NUG with their own hard-headed assessments of the conflict's likely trajectory, leading to internal divisions and contradictory messaging.

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which was established shortly after the coup by deposed lawmakers, who had been elected in November 2020, and its parallel administration, the NUG, have sought to build political and military alliances with ethnic armed groups. They have made a number of important concessions, including appointing an ethnically diverse cabinet, repealing the military-drafted 2008 constitution and announcing plans for a new federal charter, in an effort to convince ethnic armed groups that they have a historic opportunity to build the federal system they have long fought for. Perhaps most importantly, the coup has prompted a shift in how much of the Burman majority views ethnic armed groups and minorities' demands for a fairer distribution of political power. Decades of propaganda had castigated minorities as the cause of Myanmar's political problems, but Burmans angry at the regime now view ethnic grievances much more empathetically.

A significant amount of political and military cooperation against the regime is taking place. A united front comprising all of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups joining the NUG in taking the fight to the military regime is not a realistic prospect, given their diversity and the historical rivalries among them. But at least four groups have emerged as important partners of the parallel government, and another half-dozen or so have engaged with the NUG to some degree. In doing so, they have taken a significant risk, motivated largely by the need to respond to public sentiment but also to some degree by the opportunity to establish a genuinely federal state. Even among

those groups more inclined to side with opposition forces, however, the CRPH/NUG has struggled to overcome a legacy of mistrust. As a result, even armed groups that have offered important support to the opposition movement have mostly kept relations informal.

The State Administration Council, as the junta refers to itself, has also sought to engage ethnic armed groups, but with a much more limited goal: it wants to keep them off the battlefield as much as possible and stop them from establishing formal alliances with the NUG. If the regime can thus curb the military threat these groups pose, it can train its attention on the dozens, possibly hundreds, of new anti-regime militias that have formed since the coup in majority-Burman areas and are mostly loyal to the NUG. The regime has already announced a five-month unilateral cease-fire pitched at ethnic armed groups and met some of them for talks.

The junta has little to offer ethnic armed groups in terms of meaningful political reform, as the coup has brought an end to negotiations over a formal peace settlement that began in 2016. Ethnic leaders are well aware that Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing is very unlikely to accept a genuine federal system, but the regime has other inducements it can offer, such as promises of de facto autonomy and economic concessions, as well as threats of force. The military has used the inducement tactic many times in the past to divide its opponents, particularly in the 1990s. It will be trickier to pull off today, however, since the ethnic armed groups will face public backlash if they negotiate with the regime.

Myanmar likely faces a protracted period of increased conflict, as neither the Tatmadaw nor the opposition appears likely to prevail. Still, despite some hiccups, the opposition movement is gradually building strength. Even those ethnic armed groups that are unsympathetic to the NUG are seeking to take advantage of the fact the military is stretched, creating opportunities for them to seize new territory or expand their influence. If the anti-regime movement gains further momentum, groups that are sitting on the fence may be enticed into engaging with the CRPH/NUG, thus further bolstering the opposition.

While, in this environment, opportunities for international actors to reduce conflict are limited, there are things they can usefully do to reduce suffering that might also contribute to transforming relations between the majority Burmans and ethnic minorities. A first step should be to recognise that the peace process established a decade ago is dead. Donors that have supported it should shift focus to shielding people in conflict-affected areas from war's effects through rapid disbursement of emergency funding. As access to many areas is difficult, donors will need to work closely with local implementing partners; to avoid overburdening these groups, they should show flexibility, particularly by keeping administrative requirements to a bare minimum. They should also recognise the significance of political negotiations between the CRPH/NUG and ethnic armed groups, and support cooperation where the two sides have found ways to work together in areas such as health and humanitarian aid.

**Yangon/Bangkok/Brussels, 12 January 2022**

# Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts

## I. Introduction

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The 1 February 2021 coup marks the biggest shakeup of Myanmar's conflict landscape since August 2011, when then-President Thein Sein launched a new peace process.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the military takeover, the country had around two dozen ethnic armed groups, as well as hundreds of militias of varying sizes mostly aligned with the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw. After decades of fighting for greater autonomy, most of these ethnic armed groups had either signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), enabling them to participate in political talks with the central government, or negotiated bilateral ceasefires with the military; clashes with the Tatmadaw were confined to a few areas, mostly in northern Shan, Kachin and Rakhine States. Only three major armed groups – the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – had recently been engaged in major conflict with the military.<sup>2</sup>

There was little prospect, however, of a peace settlement that would end these conflicts for good. Myanmar's peace process had been moribund for several years before the coup: only ten armed groups had signed the NCA, and talks with signatories toward a Union Peace Accord aimed at establishing a federal political system had stalled.<sup>3</sup>

The coup has killed off any remaining hope of peace talks moving ahead. Although the regime and the signatories still sometimes refer to the NCA in public statements, its main selling point was the possibility, however slim, of an accord that could permanently resolve the country's many conflicts. The Tatmadaw never seemed likely to make the political concessions needed to get ethnic armed groups on board; its pri-

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<sup>1</sup> For Crisis Group reporting on Myanmar's peace process since 2011, see Asia Reports N°s 308, *Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, 19 June 2020; 307, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 9 June 2020; 287, *Building Critical Mass for Peace in Myanmar*, 29 June 2017; 261, *Myanmar: The Politics of Rakhine State*, 22 October 2015; and 214, *Myanmar: A New Peace Initiative*, 30 November 2011; and Asia Briefings N°s 164, *From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 23 December 2020; 161, *Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, 19 May 2020; 158, *Myanmar: A Violent Push to Shake Up Ceasefire Negotiations*, 24 September 2019; 157, *Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, 6 August 2019; 154, *A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 24 January 2019; 151, *Myanmar's Stalled Transition*, 28 August 2018; 149, *Myanmar's Peace Process: Getting to a Political Dialogue*, 19 October 2016; 146, *Myanmar's Peace Process: A Nationwide Ceasefire Remains Elusive*, 16 September 2015; and 140, *A Tentative Peace in Myanmar's Kachin Conflict*, 12 June 2013.

<sup>2</sup> These three groups are often mentioned together with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), as none of them have a bilateral ceasefire in place with the military. The KIO, however, has not engaged in significant fighting with the Tatmadaw since 2018. Meanwhile, fighting between the military and Karen National Union's 5th Brigade had been increasing since December 2020, but few clashes had been reported with the group's other brigades.

<sup>3</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, op. cit.

ority was always to disarm and demobilise these groups. Just weeks after the coup, ethnic armed group signatories suspended political negotiations with the regime, and some soon launched attacks on Tatmadaw forces.<sup>4</sup> There is little chance of negotiations resuming; most signatories are on a war footing, and even those inclined to talk with the junta are under pressure from their constituencies to avoid engaging with the deeply unpopular regime.

The coup and subsequent violent crackdown on peaceful protests has transformed the conflict landscape in other ways.<sup>5</sup> It has led to the creation of new armed groups, mostly in lowland majority-Burman areas of the country that have seen little conflict for decades, and rekindled previously dormant conflicts. The new forces range from spontaneously organised rural militias that ambush soldiers to urban underground networks that target junta officials and offices. Although they tend to operate independently from one another, nearly all these forces are anti-regime (the exception being Pyusawhti, a paramilitary network). Since May 2021, when the National Unity Government (NUG) established its People's Defence Force (PDF), many have rebranded themselves as PDF units to underscore their allegiance to the parallel government, though in practice the NUG has almost no control over them and provides little in the way of resources.

This report examines how ethnic armed groups have responded to the coup and what factors influence their decision-making. It looks at how both the NUG and the military regime have sought to engage with them, how that engagement might unfold in the future and what the implications could be for Myanmar and its people. It is based on research conducted between June and November 2021, and builds on Crisis Group's years of fieldwork and analysis on conflict dynamics in Myanmar. Given the constraints on travel due to COVID-19 and the military takeover, research was conducted remotely, using pre-existing networks of contacts. Sources included members of ethnic armed groups, the NUG and civil society organisations, as well as analysts and individuals close to the key protagonists.

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<sup>4</sup> "NCA signatories suspend political negotiations with junta, says steering team", Development Media Group, 22 February 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For Crisis Group reporting since the coup, see Asia Briefings N°s 170, *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-coup Myanmar*, 20 October 2021; 168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, 28 June 2021; 167, *The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, 1 April 2021; and 166, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, 16 February 2021; as well as Asia Report N°314, *Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, 18 May 2021; and Richard Horsey, "A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 February 2021.

## II. Ethnic Conflict After the Coup

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Over the past nine months, Myanmar's ethnic conflicts have entered a new era that is both more complex and more fluid. Ethnic armed groups have been forced to make difficult strategic decisions, sometimes under strong pressure from their grassroots supporters to escalate the fight with the military. Some have played a key role in training and supplying newly formed militias, or even fought the Tatmadaw alongside them. Ethnic armed groups also tend to have close ties to new militias formed in ethnic minority areas, particularly in and on the periphery of Chin, Kayah, Karen and Kachin States. The key questions that all ethnic armed groups are facing in this new environment are whether and to what extent to work with either the opposition, particularly the NUG, or the regime in Naypyitaw, and to what end.

### A. *KNU and KIO: On the Front Foot*

Since March, both the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO), and their respective armed wings – the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) – have adopted a much more aggressive posture toward the Tatmadaw after several years of relative calm. Among the largest ethnic armed groups in the country, both have offered sanctuary to law-makers, protesters, striking workers and others fleeing military abuses, while their fighters have seized Tatmadaw bases and staged deadly ambushes.<sup>6</sup> They have also trained fighters for both urban underground groups and PDFs, and used the latter to expand their operations into new areas of the country.<sup>7</sup> But they have also sought to avoid a return to all-out conflict, limiting fighting to particular theatres.

Several factors explain their response. In the wake of the coup, public opinion in their areas of influence, as in most of the country, has been overwhelmingly against the military regime.<sup>8</sup> Both groups have a strong culture of listening to the views of civil society, religious leaders and grassroots supporters, as they perceive their role to be protecting the population from military oppression. When peaceful protests were violently suppressed in Kayah and Kachin States, and momentum began to build for armed struggle, the KNU and KIO were thus compelled to respond; failure to do so would have damaged their credibility, possibly even resulting in the formation of rival armed groups to oppose the regime. Instead, each group has managed to harness

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<sup>6</sup> Crisis Group interviews, analysts and ethnic armed group officials, June and October 2021. Most importantly for the KIO, it was able to retake Alaw Bum, a strategic mountain base that it lost in 1989.

<sup>7</sup> The KIO has fought alone and together with PDFs in northern Sagaing Region, and trained a new PDF in Putao, in far northern Kachin State; meanwhile, newly formed PDFs have begun fighting the military in parts of Bago Region, Mon State and Tanintharyi Region beyond where the KNU has traditionally been active.

<sup>8</sup> Both states saw large anti-coup protests that the security forces crushed. The KNU provided security to protesters in some areas, while a day after two protesters were shot dead in Myitkyina the KIO warned that it would take steps to “protect the people”. Shortly afterward, it seized a military camp in Mohnyin Township. See “ပြည်သူ့ကို လက်နက်နဲ့ဆက်လက် ခြိမ်းခြောက်နေရင် ကာကွယ်သွားမယ်လို့ KIO ပြော [The KIO says it will protect the people if [the regime] threatens them with weapons]”, RFA Burmese, 9 March 2021, and “KIO/A destroy Burma army camp after protesters killed in Kachin State”, Kachin News Group, 15 March 2021.



the outpouring of popular anger to safeguard its position as the pre-eminent armed group in its ethnic state – in particular by ensuring that newly formed militias are firmly under its control.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, the coup exposed longstanding divisions among these two groups' leaders, particularly within the KNU. Some senior officials, including KNU chair Mutu Say Poe and KNLA chief of staff Saw Johnny, insisted for months that disputes with the regime be resolved through the NCA framework and warned of the dangers that escalating conflict posed to civilians.<sup>10</sup> Others, particularly former KNU vice chair Naw Zipporah Sein and the leadership of the KNLA's powerful 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, based in Mutraw (Hpapun), declared the NCA invalid and called for ethnic armed groups to work more closely with the NUG and PDFs to defeat the Tatmadaw.<sup>11</sup> In December 2021, however, heavy clashes between the military and the KNLA, which was assisted by allied PDFs, in the Lay Kay Kaw area of Kayin State seem to have unified KNU leaders against the military. In a speech to mark the Karen new year on 2 January, Mutu Say Poe said the coup had "made useless" the group's efforts to achieve peace, adding that further negotiations would be impossible without a radical change in approach from the military regime.<sup>12</sup>

#### B. *CNF and KNPP: A Return to War*

For at least two ethnic armed groups, the coup has brought about an even more dramatic shift, marking a return to open conflict. The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP)/Karenni Army, based in Kayah State, and the smaller Chin National Front (CNF)/Chin National Army, based in northern Chin State, have in recent years been marginal players in Myanmar's civil strife. Both signed bilateral ceasefires with Naypyitaw in 2012 and neither has many troops under arms.<sup>13</sup> Prior to the coup, there had been very few clashes in either state for at least a decade.<sup>14</sup> But minority groups in both states still had longstanding and unresolved grievances against the majority Burmans, particularly the military.<sup>15</sup>

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Kayah and Chin – both states in which Aung Sang Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) enjoys significant support – experienced groundswells of anti-regime protest.<sup>16</sup> As was the case elsewhere,

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<sup>9</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leaders and sources close to the groups, June and October 2021.

<sup>10</sup> "Karen armed group leader condemned for backing talks with junta", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> "Myanmar ceasefire agreement is void: KNU concerned group", *The Irrawaddy*, 3 September 2021.

<sup>12</sup> "KNU President General Mutu Say Poe's felicitation letter sent to Karen New Year Day of 2761 Karen Era", Facebook, 2 January 2022.

<sup>13</sup> The Karenni Army is larger than the Chin National Army, with an estimated 600 soldiers prior to the coup. The CNF was also a signatory to the NCA.

<sup>14</sup> The exception is Paletwa in southern Chin State, which saw heavy fighting between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army through much of 2019 and 2020. The CNF is based in the north of the state and was thus in no position to intervene.

<sup>15</sup> These grievances have lately manifested themselves in opposition to attempts to build statues of independence leader Bogyoke Aung San, an ethnic Burman who founded the Tatmadaw. "Statue-building spree tarnishes Aung San's legacy", *Frontier Myanmar*, 26 September 2019.

<sup>16</sup> In the 2020 general elections, the NLD won 36 of 39 national and state seats in Chin State and twenty of 34 in Kayah State.

demonstrations quickly morphed into improvised armed uprisings in response to the Tatmadaw's brutal crackdowns. But in the absence of a powerful local armed group, the newly formed militias were soon taking the fight directly to the military. Had the CNF and KNPP failed to work with the new militias, they would have lost legitimacy and possibly been eclipsed. Unlike the Kachin and Karen armed groups, they have had to treat the new resistance forces as more partners than subordinates. In addition to these calculations, another important factor in their decision to return to war was that both groups have a strong tradition of listening and responding to communal sentiment.<sup>17</sup>

In Kayah State, the revived Karenni Army has fought regime forces alongside the various township-based militias on many occasions. Following heavy clashes in June 2021, many of these militias were reorganised into the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, but the Karenni Army remains separate, as do some PDFs loyal to the NUG. While the Karenni Army takes the lead on military matters, the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force is free to manage its own administrative affairs, such as fundraising and recruitment.<sup>18</sup> In practice, the line between the two entities is blurry, as illustrated by the military's attempt to negotiate a ceasefire in June (see Section V.C below).

In Chin State, the smaller Chin National Front has played a more marginal role. It has helped to train fighters of various militias associated with the newly created Chinland Defence Force at its base in Thantlang, and has provided them with some weapons, though not as many as militia leaders had hoped.<sup>19</sup> Aside from the CNF's lack of resources, cooperation between the historical and new Chin armed forces has been limited by the region's rugged terrain and its ethnic diversity; the CNF has only taken part in fighting in the north of the state, together with members of the local Chinland Defence Force who are from the same Chin sub-group.<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, the new defence force has acted on its own.

Despite the lack of practical support, the Chinland Defence Force is among the more effective resistance forces formed in the coup's wake. Although its fighters tend to lack modern weaponry, they have taken advantage of their intimate knowledge of the mountains to stage deadly ambushes of Tatmadaw convoys, particularly in the southern township of Mindat.<sup>21</sup> When the Tatmadaw has gone on the offensive, however, the Chin rebels have been unable to hold their ground due to lack of firepower: after being attacked with helicopter gunships in May 2021, fighters were forced to

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<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group interviews, analysts and sources close to ethnic armed groups, June and October 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interview, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force senior member, July and September 2021. See also "Karenni youths form a new, and eager, fighting force", *Myanmar Now*, 4 September 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to Chin armed groups, July and October 2021. See also "Inside the Myanmar mountain camp where rebels train to fight for freedom from the junta", CNN, 8 July 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to Chin armed groups, July and October 2021. See also "Chin rebel groups team up to capture military outpost near Indian border", *Myanmar Now*, 13 September 2021.

<sup>21</sup> When a Tatmadaw convoy travelled from Matupi to Mindat in southern Chin State in October-November 2021, it took eleven days to cover a mere 160km, during which it was reportedly ambushed twelve times. Crisis Group monitoring of incident reports in independent media.

abandon Mindat and retreat to the surrounding hills, from where they have continued to harass regime forces.<sup>22</sup>

### C. *Arakan Army: A Temporary Lull*

In November 2020, the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army – an ethnic Rakhine armed group active in Rakhine State – unexpectedly reached a de facto ceasefire after almost two years of sustained fighting that had cost thousands of lives.<sup>23</sup> Following a flurry of meetings between the group and the military at the end of 2020, there have been no serious peace talks since the coup and the truce remains an informal arrangement. Nevertheless, the Tatmadaw, facing conflict on many other fronts, has been largely content to leave the Arakan Army alone. The military has even been willing to make concessions to the group, such as lifting the internet shutdown, freeing relatives of its leader Twan Mrat Naing and others accused of links to the organisation, and offering it COVID-19 vaccine doses to distribute in the state.<sup>24</sup>

The Arakan Army has said little about the coup and resisted the NUG's entreaties to join its armed struggle against the junta.<sup>25</sup> Twan Mrat Naing has even said he does not want street protests like those in Yangon and other cities to emerge in Rakhine State, arguing that such a movement would disrupt progress toward the Arakan Army's "political goals".<sup>26</sup> As resistance elsewhere in the country has increased, this positioning has generated some disquiet in Rakhine State, but the group has largely been able to manage the criticism.<sup>27</sup>

The Arakan Army has made the most of this period of relative calm, recovering from the brutal fighting of the past two years and preparing its forces for future clashes.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps more significantly, it has used the downtime to consolidate its hold on a large swathe of Rakhine State and Paletwa in southern Chin State. After dismantling the lower rungs of the government bureaucratic apparatus, in the two years leading up to the coup, the group is now rolling out its own administrative structures. It has also launched a dispute resolution mechanism – a kind of judiciary lite – and

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<sup>22</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> "World's longest internet shutdown ends in parts of Myanmar", Agence France-Presse, 4 February 2021; "Myanmar junta drops charges against Arakan Army chief's relatives", *The Irrawaddy*, 10 June 2021; and "Myanmar junta offers COVID-19 vaccines to Arakan Army", *The Irrawaddy*, 22 September 2021.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, NUG official, June 2021.

<sup>26</sup> "AA chief does not want Myanmar's strikes and protests in Rakhine State", *The Irrawaddy*, 12 April 2021.

<sup>27</sup> On 21 March, 76 Rakhine-based civil society groups issued a statement condemning the coup, prompting Arakan Army spokesman Khine Thu Kha to publicly criticise the military crackdown two days later. Crisis Group interview, conflict analyst, October 2021. "Rebel militia in Myanmar's Rakhine state joins other minorities in condemning the junta", Reuters, 23 March 2021. For a more detailed examination of the Arakan Army's ambitions and constraints in the post-coup period, see Kyaw Lynn, "The Arakan Army, Myanmar Military Coup and Politics of Arakan", Transnational Institute, 10 June 2021.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interview, conflict analyst, October 2021.

is providing some public services.<sup>29</sup> When COVID-19 broke out in Rakhine State in June 2021, it issued stay-at-home orders and later claimed that most people had complied.<sup>30</sup> As the Arakan Army's forays into governance became more visible, the Tatmadaw issued warnings to the population not to engage with these new administrative and judicial structures.<sup>31</sup>

It is unclear how long the truce on this front will last. On 9 November 2021, fighting erupted between the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw in northern Maungdaw Township, close to the border with Bangladesh – the first reported confrontations since the de facto ceasefire took effect a year earlier. The regime has played down these incidents, even claiming that one clash was with another group, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.<sup>32</sup> Japan's peace envoy to Myanmar, Yohei Sasakawa, who helped broker the November 2020 break in hostilities, flew to the country to help soothe tensions, and no further clashes have been reported.<sup>33</sup> But the Tatmadaw can only let the Arakan Army's state-building continue unchecked for so long, because the last thing it wants is another armed group along Myanmar's borders achieving de facto autonomy – something that would be hard to reverse.

#### D. *Mostly Quiet on the Northern Shan Front*

Northern Shan State has witnessed some of Myanmar's heaviest fighting over the past decade, but in contrast to most of the country the region has been stable since the coup. The country's largest ethnic armed group, the powerful United Wa State Army, as well as its close neighbour, the National Democratic Alliance Army (also known as the Mongla Group), have remained largely aloof, as they enjoy full autonomy, are geographically distant from the political crisis and disengaged from Myanmar politics. Although they have not formally taken sides, their non-participation assists the Tatmadaw by enabling it to concentrate troops in other areas.<sup>34</sup>

The response of other armed groups based in Shan State, particularly the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Shan State Progress Party (SSPP) and Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), has been more ambiguous. The RCSS, together with

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<sup>29</sup> "Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State", *Frontier Myanmar*, 6 August 2021. For a closer examination of the Arakan Army's dismantling of state administrative structures, see Crisis Group Report, *An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup> "Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State", op. cit.

<sup>31</sup> In one example, the commander of a light infantry battalion reportedly threatened administrative officials from six Rohingya villages in northern Rakhine's Buthidaung Township, telling them that if they collaborated with the Arakan Army their villages would be destroyed. See "ဘူးသီးတောင်မှ ကျေးရွာတာဝန်ခံတချို့ကို စစ်တပ်က ခေါ်ယူခြိမ်းခြောက် [Military summons and threatens some village officials in Buthidaung]", *Myanmar Now*, 22 September 2021.

<sup>32</sup> See "Locals report new clash between Arakan Army, military in Maungdaw", *Myanmar Now*, 10 November 2021, and "မောင်တောတိုက်ပွဲ AA နဲ့ မဟုတ်၊ ARSA နဲ့ တိုက်ခိုက်ခဲ့တာလို့ဆို [Maungdaw battle is not with AA, it is with ARSA: military]", RFA Burmese, 10 November 2021.

<sup>33</sup> "Japanese envoy Sasakawa says he told AA to hold its fire in wake of brief clash last week", Development Media Group, 15 November 2021.

<sup>34</sup> In April, the junta sent an emissary to meet the United Wa State Army, apparently to ensure that the group would not side with opposition forces and instead would help keep other ethnic armed groups out of the fray.

other NCA signatories, condemned the coup within a day of the military seizing power, and demanded the “immediate and unconditional release of all leaders who are detained and arrested”.<sup>35</sup> But neither the RCSS nor the SSPP has shown much interest in dialogue or cooperation with the NUG; the RCSS has also ensured that no PDFs form within its territory.<sup>36</sup> The TNLA, on the other hand, has overseen the creation of a PDF, engaged to some extent with the NUG and staged occasional attacks on the Tatmadaw, including one around Lashio in April 2021 that was likely a direct response to the military crackdown on protesters from the Ta’ang ethnic minority.<sup>37</sup> Its involvement with the broader resistance, though, has been quite limited.<sup>38</sup>

Instead, the three groups have ramped up a bitter fight among themselves for control of central and northern Shan State that erupted in late 2015, after the RCSS began to push northward. In June and July, the SSPP and TNLA mobilised large numbers of fighters and artillery against the RCSS in Kyethi Township, managing to force the group to withdraw from positions it first occupied in 2017.<sup>39</sup> Regular clashes have also been reported farther to the north, including around Kyaukme and Hsipaw.<sup>40</sup> Both sides have issued statements blaming the other for the violence, and it is quite clear their focus is presently on each other, rather than on the junta or the NUG.

Conversely, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), an ethnic Kokang armed group active in Shan State, has sought to make the most of the situation by taking on the military. Well aware that the Tatmadaw is stretched thin, the group has launched an offensive on army positions around the town of Mong Ko, on the China border, with clashes reported almost daily in recent months.<sup>41</sup> This fighting has been among the heaviest seen anywhere in Myanmar since the coup, with both sides deploying heavy artillery and the military committing large numbers of soldiers. But the MNDAA has not engaged with the NUG or expressed much opposition to the coup, and instead seems to be taking advantage of the present environment to win back territory to which it stakes a historical claim.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Signatory – Ethnic Armed Organizations (NCA-S EAO) Statement”, 2 February 2021. See also “Ceasefire signatories KNU and RCSS condemn Myanmar coup”, *The Irrawaddy*, 2 February 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, peace negotiator close to the military, October 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Although media reports called it an offensive of the Brotherhood Alliance, which comprises the TNLA, Arakan Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the TNLA led the attack. Crisis Group interview, October 2021. See “Brotherhood Alliance launches lethal attack on northern Shan State police station”, *Myanmar Now*, 10 April 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interviews, TNLA and NUG officials, June 2021; conflict analyst, October 2021.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to armed groups, August 2021. See also “SHAN-SHAN CONFLICT: Shan inter-ethnic armed conflict averted as Shan youth tries another tactic”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 12 July 2021.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, “Civilians wounded by shelling between EAOs in Kyaukme Township”, Shan Herald Agency for News, 26 October 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Crisis Group monitoring of incident reports in independent media.

<sup>42</sup> The Kokang group’s response to the coup is examined in “Fresh clashes in northern Shan open old wounds and displace thousands”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 7 October 2021.

### III. Prospects for a United Front

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The CRPH and NUG recognised quickly that their success would depend in part on their ability to build partnerships with ethnic leaders, and to some degree that they would be dependent on ethnic armed groups for their own survival. For Myanmar's military, a "united front" composed of the newly created PDFs and traditional ethnic armed groups is a nightmare scenario. Over the decades, the Tatmadaw has managed to avoid alliances between the country's many ethnic armed groups through a combination of divide-and-conquer tactics, benefiting as well from its opponents' inability to cement firm military alliances. Many of the familiar obstacles to a united front have re-emerged since the coup. But many ethnic armed groups have nonetheless offered important support to the opposition movement.

#### A. *The Federal Army: A Distant Dream*

For opposition forces, military cooperation with ethnic armed groups has been an important focus since shortly after the coup. The transition from peaceful protest to armed struggle began immediately and organically after the Tatmadaw accelerated its crackdown on demonstrators in late February 2021. In rural areas, resistance leaders began recruiting and training militia members in early March.<sup>43</sup> Around the same time, protesters started fleeing from cities to "liberated areas" controlled by ethnic armed groups, particularly the KNU, KIO, CNF and KNPP, where they soon began receiving training in explosives, small arms and combat tactics. Some began speaking publicly about the need for a "federal army": a force combining the ethnic armed groups and newly formed units drawn from the protesters' ranks and aligned with the CRPH.<sup>44</sup>

As the regime ramped up its crackdown, the CRPH moved quickly to overturn the NLD's longstanding policy of non-violent resistance.<sup>45</sup> On 15 March 2021, it announced the people's "right to self-defence", and three days later the newly appointed acting minister for labour, health and education, Zaw Wai Soe, tweeted about the need for a "federal union along with a federal army".<sup>46</sup> Attention soon focused on negotiations with ethnic armed groups to create a united military front.<sup>47</sup>

The speedy formation of a federal army was never a realistic prospect given the many practical problems that would need to be overcome, not to mention the dis-

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<sup>43</sup> See, for example, "On the Sagaing frontlines, outgunned villagers defy the odds", *Frontier Myanmar*, 26 May 2021.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, "Myanmar's besieged resistance dreams of 'people's army' to counter junta", *The Guardian*, 21 March 2021.

<sup>45</sup> It was Aung San Suu Kyi herself who inspired this policy. She spoke frequently of the power of non-violence during her decades-long struggle with the previous military regime, citing Gandhi as a major influence. In 1998, she told journalist Alan Clements, "I do not believe in armed struggle because it will perpetuate the tradition that he who is best at wielding arms wields power". See Jesper Bengtsson, *Aung San Suu Kyi: A Biography* (Dulles, Va., 2012).

<sup>46</sup> See tweet by Zaw Wai Soe, NUG health and education minister, @ZawWaiSoe4, 6:16pm, 18 March 2021.

<sup>47</sup> "Informing the People of their Right to Self-defence According to the Law as Civilian Population in Case of Violence", CRPH, Declaration 13/2021, 14 March 2021. "Myanmar's besieged resistance dreams of 'people's army' to counter junta", op. cit.

parate priorities of the various ethnic armed groups. For those groups open to the idea, such a force would need to be an integral part of a genuine federal system of government. Many of them advocated for a federal army during past peace negotiations with the government and Tatmadaw, only to see Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing forcefully turn them down.<sup>48</sup> Before they consider joining a federal army under the CRPH, ethnic armed groups would need guarantees that they would be fighting for a common vision.<sup>49</sup> Recognising that such negotiations would take time, and in response to popular pressure for action, the NUG established the PDF on 5 May 2021, describing it as a force that would one day form part of a federal army to replace the Tatmadaw.<sup>50</sup>

The federal army was a non-starter, but the NUG and ethnic armed groups have still cooperated closely, if largely informally, in military matters. To date, only the CNF – a relatively small outfit, with some training capability but almost no fighting force – has signed an agreement to fight the Tatmadaw alongside the NUG.<sup>51</sup> Others have stopped short of going all in, due to mistrust of the NUG and reluctance to tackle the Tatmadaw head on.<sup>52</sup> The NUG's 7 September 2021 declaration of a “people's defensive war”, which was, in effect, a call for a nationwide rebellion, got a muted response from the ethnic armed groups.<sup>53</sup>

## B. *A Legacy of Mistrust*

From the start, mistrust between ethnic armed groups and the democratic opposition, which is majority-Burman, has been a stumbling block to forging a united front. Prior to the coup, relations between the NLD government and most ethnic armed groups were at a low ebb on account of the moribund peace process. Ethnic leaders believed that during its five-year term, the NLD had too often sided with the Tatmadaw in the peace process and failed to make political concessions.<sup>54</sup> The NLD had also directed the Tatmadaw to wage offensives against the Arakan Army in Rakhine and southern Chin States, while doing little to rein in military aggression elsewhere. The stalling of the peace talks was particularly frustrating for leaders of groups that had signed the NCA, as they had committed significant political capital to an initiative that was seemingly going nowhere. Many ethnic leaders felt that the democratic opposition

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<sup>48</sup> See “‘Federal army’ already exists, says military chief”, *The Irrawaddy*, 5 December 2013; “Burma ethnic alliance sets up ‘federal army’ office”, *The Irrawaddy*, 8 May 2014; and “Proposal by Myanmar's rebel groups to discuss federal army rejected”, RFA, 23 September 2014.

<sup>49</sup> “‘We are not naive anymore’: Myanmar EAOs skeptical about federal army”, *Southeast Asia Globe*, 23 April 2021.

<sup>50</sup> NUG Notification 1/2021, 5 May 2021.

<sup>51</sup> “Unity govt allies with Chin National Front to ‘demolish’ junta”, Agence France-Press, 30 May 2021.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leaders, NUG officials and analysts, June and October 2021.

<sup>53</sup> The NUG posted its declaration on its Facebook page on 7 September 2021. See also “Declaration of war necessary as international pressure fails: Myanmar shadow govt”, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 September 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leaders, June 2021. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, op. cit.

had broken the promises it made in the wake of the 1988 uprising against military rule, when some ethnic armed groups had supported democratic forces.<sup>55</sup>

With this history in mind, many ethnic armed groups questioned the wisdom of again supporting the opposition. The CRPH tried hard to win them over. It named ethnic minority leaders from outside the NLD to its interim cabinet, and, later, the NUG formed in April 2021.<sup>56</sup> It removed the Arakan Army, TNLA and MNDAA from an official list of terrorist organisations, and instead added the Tatmadaw. It established a National Unity Consultative Council for dialogue with ethnic armed groups, along with other stakeholders. Most importantly, it began negotiations on a new constitution with ethnic leaders, stressing that this charter would create a federal state with powers devolved to minority groups and the armed forces under civilian control.<sup>57</sup> Although ethnic armed groups welcomed these steps, the CRPH/NUG has so far been unable to quell their doubts about its commitment to genuine federalism and power sharing. These doubts have undermined prospects of reaching formal alliances, while limiting the scope of political and military cooperation.

The post-coup negotiations on an interim charter underscored the concerns of ethnic leaders. On 31 March 2021, the CRPH repealed the military-drafted 2008 constitution and issued a Federal Democracy Charter, in two parts.<sup>58</sup> Part 1, which was drafted in close consultation with ethnic partners, outlined the principles of a future federal system, which got a broad welcome. The interim arrangements included in Part 2 proved more controversial, however, as they essentially handed decision-making power to the CRPH, which comprises mostly NLD representatives elected in November 2020, leaving minorities with little formal leverage. The decision to retain Aung San Suu Kyi's state counsellor position also created unease, as it suggested the charter was less of a break with the past than the CRPH had claimed. Both armed group leaders and other key stakeholders – including ethnic political parties, strike committees and Civil Disobedience Movement representatives – felt the process was rushed, without adequate consultation. Some were given just days to review the draft charter before it was released to the public.<sup>59</sup>

The National Unity Consultative Council has been another point of contention. Established on 8 March 2021, it played a prominent role in developing the Federal Democracy Charter, particularly Part 1. But then numerous disputes emerged – over

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<sup>55</sup> After the 1988 uprising, members of the National Democratic Front, a coalition of ethnic armed groups, provided safe haven to both student activists (who would form a student army) and NLD officials who won seats in the 1990 election (and set up the NLD-Liberated Areas). Some ethnic armed groups, notably the KNU, participated in the National Council of the Union of Burma together with these Burman-dominated movements. See “Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change”, Minority Rights Group International, May 2002, for a brief overview of this period. Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leaders and analysts, June and October 2021.

<sup>56</sup> The vice president and prime minister are non-Burmans, as are several ministers and a majority of deputy ministers.

<sup>57</sup> “‘We’re about 80% there’, CRPH’s foreign minister says on federal union talks”, *Myanmar Now*, 20 March 2021.

<sup>58</sup> The charter is available on the CRPH website. While Part 1 contains a note saying it was approved by the National Unity Consultative Council, Part 2 does not.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group official and activist involved in National Unity Consultative Council negotiations, October 2021.



who should sit on the council, what its role would be and how it would function – delaying its formal launch until 16 November, more than nine months after the coup (a planned launch in early October was cancelled in order to secure wider participation). In the meantime, ethnic leaders instead engaged with the CRPH through a “prototype”, or interim, council. Other stakeholders – including strike committees and political parties – claimed to have been largely frozen out of discussions. Their level of disenchantment was such that some even discussed forming an alternative mechanism.

The CRPH's engagement with ethnic armed groups reflects the privileged place they enjoy relative to other political forces, largely due to the fact they control armies and territory. Even so, they have been far from satisfied with the political discussions or how the NUG has operated in practice. Despite the inclusion of ethnic minority leaders, Burman politicians are still seen as calling the shots within the CRPH/NUG. As one senior KNU official told Crisis Group:

We can't cooperate with the NUG fully – if we did, we would have to follow their orders. We launched our revolution more than 70 years ago and have a lot of experience. They are just new, and they should consult with us, but they don't – they just do what they want.<sup>60</sup>

### C. *Diverse and Divided*

In its efforts to unite armed resistance to the junta, the NUG is seeking to negotiate with a diverse range of entities, which are themselves divided along ideological, geographic and ethno-religious lines. Some of these entities have powerful armies and enjoy de facto autonomy, while others have virtually no soldiers or territory. Ethnic armed groups themselves have found coalition building difficult in the past; while political cooperation has at times been possible, effective military coordination has usually been fleeting. It was thus inevitable that some, if not most, ethnic armed groups would see little common cause with the CRPH/NUG.

Some groups do not see political or military cooperation with resistance forces as serving their interests. The United Wa State Army and National Democratic Alliance Army, both powerful armed groups based along Myanmar's border with China, already have de facto autonomy; for them, a federal system is likely to result in less, not more, control. Since early 2019, the Arakan Army's stated goal has been a “confederate” status similar to what the United Wa State Army enjoys, but more recently its leaders have spoken of re-establishing an independent Rakhine State.<sup>61</sup> Although the two Shan armed groups, the Restoration Council of Shan State and Shan State Progress Party, at least nominally support the idea of a federal state, their battle with each other for control of central and northern Shan State means they have more immediate priorities than fighting the Tatmadaw. For some, mostly smaller armed groups, aligning with the NUG would also bring more risk than reward. With limited

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<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNU official, October 2021.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, Arakan Army leader Tun Mrat Naing's interview with Arakan Media, video, YouTube, 15 August 2021 (Rakhine).

forces at their disposal, they would be easy targets for the Tatmadaw and would lose the privileges that they now enjoy.<sup>62</sup>

Inter-ethnic rivalry has also complicated relations with the NUG. One example is the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, which had planned to stay out of the conflict but was drawn in as anti-coup protests spread near the area it controls. Later, however, the group decided to quietly cooperate with the NUG and allow formation of a Ta'ang Regional Administrative PDF as a sort of home guard. The PDF, however, has drawn strong complaints from Shan activists, who have described it as a threat to other ethnic minorities living under Ta'ang National Liberation Army administration. Although it has not spoken out publicly, even the Ta'ang armed group's traditional ally, the KIO, has been uneasy about the emergence of this new force in a region that has seen heavy conflict since 2015.<sup>63</sup> "The Ta'ang National Liberation Army is the only armed group in northern Shan State that is fighting the regime, but they have to keep their cooperation with us low-profile for now", said one NUG official, in comments that were corroborated by a Ta'ang leader.<sup>64</sup>

#### D. *An Informal Relationship*

Four ethnic armed groups have emerged as the strongest partners of the NUG since the coup: the Kachin Independence Organisation, Karen National Union, Karenni National Progressive Party and Chin National Front. Although the Chin group has been the only one to sign a formal agreement with the NUG, the other three groups' support has been no less significant. On a political level, the groups have offered sanctuary to NUG members and others fleeing the Tatmadaw, engaged in negotiations about a new constitution, nominated members to the NUG, and worked with the parallel administration on responses to COVID-19 and other humanitarian issues. On a military level, they have trained insurgents, fought alongside PDFs, helped the NUG obtain weapons and advised its leaders on strategy.<sup>65</sup>

There is no single reason for these armed groups to collaborate with the NUG. As discussed earlier, all four have a strong culture of listening to the communities they fight for, all of which responded with anger to the coup and the Tatmadaw's subsequent crackdown. Some in these organisations, frustrated at the lack of progress in peace negotiations over the past five years, also viewed the coup's aftermath as a unique opportunity to bring about far-reaching political change. Many are heartened by an apparent shift in perceptions among majority Burmans, who have been indoctrinated for decades to see ethnic armed groups as secessionists, foreign-controlled lackeys or, more recently, "spoilers" undermining progress in the peace process. It is now common for Burmans to express solidarity with the cause of ethnic minorities, including the armed groups, and to acknowledge that the military shaped their pre-

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<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interviews, conflict analyst and peace negotiator close to the military, October 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Crisis Group interviews, NUG and TNLA officials, June 2021.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, NUG and TNLA officials, June 2021.

<sup>65</sup> Crisis Group interviews, analysts and officials from ethnic armed groups and the NUG, June to October 2021.

vious views.<sup>66</sup> The military and its proxies have continued to publish propaganda, including on social media, aimed at turning Burmans against ethnic armed groups, but with no discernible effect.<sup>67</sup>

Self-interest has also been a factor, however. The Kachin Independence Organisation and Karen National Union (particularly its 5th Brigade) have taken the opportunity to seize Tatmadaw bases, regain control of lost territory and build up forces. They have now created buffer zones of PDFs around their territory, in Sagaing Region for the Kachin Independence Organisation, and Mon State and Tanintharyi and Bago Regions for the Karen National Union. Similarly, by aligning with the popular uprising, the Chin National Front and Karenni National Progressive Party have been reinvigorated after decades as bit players in the country's cast of insurgencies.<sup>68</sup> For all four groups, though, the political opposition's shift from peaceful protest to armed struggle also posed a potential threat to their position as the pre-eminent armed force in the region where they operate, compelling them to engage PDFs in order to keep some control.

To some degree, they have acted as a restraint on emergent resistance forces. The Karenni National Progressive Party, for example, was drawn somewhat reluctantly into the conflict in Kayah State. Although it provided combat training to numerous activists from other areas of the country in March and April, a senior cadre told Crisis Group that its armed wing, the Karenni Army, did not initially anticipate joining the fight against the Tatmadaw. Their attitude changed when many young Karenni began taking up weapons and forming militias: the group's leaders feared for their safety if they clashed with the better-equipped and more experienced Tatmadaw. "When, more and more, our ethnic people got involved in this war to fight the junta, we became worried because they didn't know how to protect themselves properly. They just knew they wanted to fight", said a senior official. "We decided we needed to get involved, we couldn't let them fight alone".<sup>69</sup> The group has now heavily recommitted itself to armed struggle.

These four ethnic armed groups have, for now, settled on different modalities of military and political cooperation with the NUG. The Kachin Independence Organisation, for example, has delegated political negotiations to the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team, which was formed in March with Kachin representatives from Myanmar and the diaspora, but has not sought to nominate a Kachin representative to the NUG cabinet. It has said this body and the NUG should cooperate in forming a

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leader and source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021. See also, for example, "People in Myanmar have been totally brainwashed: KNU official welcomes new solidarity", *Frontier Myanmar*, 3 May 2021.

<sup>67</sup> When fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in a mixed-control area of Kayah State on 15 December, pro-military propaganda outlets immediately tried to misrepresent it as infighting between Karen armed groups and PDFs. See the screenshot in the tweet by Nicholas, @nicholas6284, 8:53pm, 15 December 2021. Nicholas is the pseudonym adopted by an anti-Tatmadaw Twitter user. For an earlier example of the misrepresentation, see "With tales of torture, campaign seeks to divided armed resistance", *Frontier Myanmar*, 28 July 2021.

<sup>68</sup> The newfound energy is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in video footage of the Karenni Army's 71st basic training graduation ceremony on 9 October, in which scores of soldiers were seen dancing to a rousing pop tune, အဲလိက်အက ("Hunting Dance").

<sup>69</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Karenni Nationalities Progress Party official, June 2021.

Kachin State government.<sup>70</sup> It has, however, worked directly with the NUG on developing the PDF's structure and training fighters, and has even fought alongside some newly created militias in northern Sagaing Region, which lies outside its traditional area of influence.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast, the Chin National Front has played a more obvious political role, nominating a minister to the NUG, while the Karenni National Progressive Party has put forward a deputy minister.<sup>72</sup> The Karen National Union's experience in service delivery in the vast area it controls along the Thai border, and its close relationship with civil society there, has made it a natural partner for the NUG on initiatives such as the COVID-19 Task Force and the National Health Committee. It even appointed an official from the Karen armed group, Padoh Mahn Mahn, as the latter's chair.<sup>73</sup>

#### E. *The Limits of Engagement?*

The future trajectory of relations between the NUG and these ethnic armed groups – as well as those sitting on the fence about working with the opposition – will depend to an extent on whether they can build the trust necessary to reach agreement on what a future federal system should look like and how to share power in the interim. Although ethnic leaders still harbour doubts, particularly about the openness of the CRPH/NUG to cede some political control and accept a genuinely inclusive political leadership, they are eager to keep working with the opposition. The CRPH/NUG feels the same way, despite the disagreements. All sides recognise that there is more at stake than in the past and perhaps much more to be gained if they can cooperate more closely. As a source close to ethnic armed groups pointed out:

Given the trust issues, the amount of work that has continued to be put into developing these relationships and coordinating lots of practical issues, as well as the big political questions, is incredibly significant. There are lots of times in the past where, in this situation, the relationships just failed.<sup>74</sup>

Instead of walking away from negotiations, ethnic armed groups responded to their disappointment in Part 2 of the Federal Democracy Charter by continuing to negotiate, which has led to progress. Through the “prototype” National Unity Consultative Council, the CRPH/NUG has engaged in discussions with ethnic armed groups on amendments to address some of their concerns. Both sides have also found other avenues of cooperation, such as humanitarian aid delivery, that have also involved civil society. Now formally launched, the Council is expected to provide a stronger

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<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, KIO official, June 2021; source close to NUG, October 2021.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group interviews, KIO and NUG officials, June 2021; source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021. See also “KIA-PDF joint force attack Myanmar army in Sagaing”, *Myanmar Now*, 22 September 2021.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021. See also “NUG and ethnic health organisations form national health committee in Burma”, Network Media Group, 11 August 2021; and “Myanmar's parallel govt forms COVID task force with ethnic health agencies”, *The Irrawaddy*, 22 July 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021.

mechanism for cooperation and policymaking.<sup>75</sup> At such an early stage, however, its impact is difficult to predict; it could help the parties overcome mistrust for good or it could degenerate into a forum for argument.

The debate surrounding Part 2 of the Federal Democracy Charter underscored a major challenge all ethnic armed groups face: balancing the need to make speedy progress in confronting the junta with their desire to establish solid foundations for future cooperation with opposition forces. The CRPH/NUG is under immense public pressure to deliver results as well as to prove to both domestic and international audiences that it is a functioning administration with the capacity to challenge the military regime. But ethnic armed groups' approach to negotiations reflects their past experiences with successive Burman-dominated movements, which they largely perceive to be a long series of broken promises. They want to build trust by reaching agreement on principles, a shared vision and the creation of new institutions – something that will take time.<sup>76</sup>

There are other factors that may limit how far ethnic armed groups will be willing to deepen their engagement with the NUG. They know, from decades of fighting, how difficult it will be to dislodge the Tatmadaw, and therefore have doubts that a coalition with the NUG would prevail, leading them to ponder whether the cost of confrontation will be worthwhile. They also remain vulnerable to Tatmadaw attack – the Kachin Independence Organisation's Laiza headquarters is in range of Tatmadaw artillery, for example – and do not want to make themselves a bigger target than necessary. As a result, they have generally tried to obfuscate their cooperation with the NUG by issuing denials, restricting reporting and limiting the social media use of protesters undergoing military training under their command. The Kachin Independence Organisation, for example, has outsourced political engagement with the NUG to the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team, giving it a degree of plausible deniability with the regime, and discouraged journalists from writing about its training of PDF fighters.<sup>77</sup>

Ethnic armed groups are nearly all based in border areas and are constrained to some degree by the policies of neighbouring countries, particularly China, Thailand and to a lesser extent India. All three countries have close political and military relationships with the Tatmadaw, and none of them want to see increased conflict – or inflows of refugees – along their borders. Some of the ethnic armed groups working with the NUG, particularly the Kachin Independence Organisation and Karen National Union, therefore have to strike a delicate balance – supporting PDFs, which they see as giving them tactical advantages, while still signalling to the military and neighbouring countries that they are not returning to all-out war and remain open to negotiations. That has become more difficult as clashes with the military have escalated, such as at Lay Kay Kaw in Kayin State in December 2021.

Over the last few months, the absence of a clear agreement on military cooperation, as well as the NUG's inability to establish command and control over PDFs and its reliance on ethnic armed groups to train protesters who have fled the military crackdown, loomed as a potential source of discord. The NUG and ethnic armed groups

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<sup>75</sup> Crisis Group interviews, KNU official and source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, ethnic armed group leaders and analysts, June and October 2021.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interview, Myanmar journalist, June 2021.

are now taking steps to pre-empt disputes. On 28 October 2021, the NUG announced the formation of a Central Command and Coordination Committee. This body's main aims are to coordinate with ethnic armed groups, in particular by ensuring proper leadership in a single chain of command; to avoid disputes over territory; and to clarify how PDFs are managed. As such, it could be a significant milestone in fostering better cooperation.<sup>78</sup>

The committee was necessary because, while PDFs ostensibly fall under the NUG, many fighters trained by ethnic armed groups remain within their "liberated areas", along with those waiting for training. The Kachin Independence Organisation and Karen National Union have both stated that they will not allow other armed outfits to operate autonomously on their territory. Instead, they have integrated some PDFs – such as those comprising trainees from Kayin or Kachin States – into their armed forces.<sup>79</sup> As one Karen National Union official told Crisis Group, "We don't want to have two lions in one cave. We accept the NUG, but their PDFs need to stay in their own territory, and our forces will stay in our area".<sup>80</sup> The Kachin Independence Organisation has adopted a similar approach. Of the first seven batches of PDF fighters it trained at its Laiza headquarters, only the first two returned to their home regions; the rest were instead assigned to support roles on the front lines so they could gain experience.<sup>81</sup>

The lack of clarity over control and command has been a source of confusion and, in some cases, complaints – for example, of trainees being conscripted into ethnic armed groups.<sup>82</sup> These have so far been resolved informally, usually by ethnic armed group leaders once they are made aware of them. The new coordination committee cements the understanding that ethnic armed groups will control all forces within their territory, including PDFs, and creates a mechanism for deciding how they will be managed and deployed. PDFs under the KNU, for example, will comprise one third its own fighters, who will be in command, and two thirds newly trained protesters. The NUG has gone along with this arrangement in part to avoid disputes with ethnic armed groups, but also because it cannot realistically command or equip all the PDF trainees, anyway. The coordination mechanism should also help avoid disputes over the activities of the NUG's own PDF battalions, which it is training at undisclosed locations thought to be in the territory of sympathetic ethnic armed groups.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNU official, October 2021. See also "Myanmar civilian government forms military command structure", *The Irrawaddy*, 29 October 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, NUG and ethnic armed group leaders, June 2021. The KIO, for example, has created a Kachin Region PDF under its command, which has begun fighting alongside the KIA. See also "Kachin PDF must be under the command of KIO/KIA", *The Irrawaddy*, 2 June 2021 (Burmese).

<sup>80</sup> Crisis Group interview, KNU official, October 2021.

<sup>81</sup> Crisis Group interview, KIO official, June and October 2021.

<sup>82</sup> "How can we fight without weapons?", *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 November 2021.

<sup>83</sup> Ethnic armed group leaders are also keen to avoid a repeat of the leadership problems that plagued the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, an armed group created by students who fled the military crackdown in 1988 that operated from KNU and KIO territory. In the early 1990s, paranoia over infiltration by military intelligence and power struggles led to brutal purges within the Front's ranks, including the torture and execution of dozens of members in 1991-1992. In 2012, the Front established a truth and justice committee to investigate the incidents; it found that a contrib-

#### IV. The Tatmadaw's "Peace" Plans

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In the wake of its coup, the Tatmadaw has fallen back on familiar tactics in dealing with ethnic armed groups. Its decade of collective peace negotiations with nearly two dozen ethnic armed groups, ostensibly toward a settlement that could permanently end Myanmar's ethnic conflicts, was historically anomalous. Since 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw has instead sought to entice, persuade or coerce ethnic armed groups to refrain from siding with the NUG, strengthened existing alliances and even forged relationships with new partners. It will likely try to weaken the NUG by reaching bilateral agreements, either formal or informal, with those ethnic armed groups cooperating with the opposition, a tactic it used to great effect in the 1990s. This pattern of conflict management, rather than conflict resolution, is likely to persist indefinitely, with the coup having killed off any chance for broad-based talks with the present regime.

Executing this divide-and-rule strategy will prove more difficult than in the 1990s, however. At the time, bilateral ceasefires with certain groups put an end to conflicts that had been raging for four or even five decades. War-weary ethnic groups and their leaders saw the truces as a potential new beginning. The circumstances in 2021 are almost the opposite: conflict has erupted after a decade of peace negotiations that the Tatmadaw ended by toppling an elected government. Among the population, including in ethnic areas, there is now anger rather than weariness, which will make it difficult for ethnic armed groups to engage in any kind of negotiations with the regime.

Many ethnic armed groups also have pre-existing ceasefires with the military, and are claiming to uphold those agreements even while they offer support to the NUG and anti-regime militias. Attempts to negotiate will also be complicated by the emergence of new armed actors, and in areas such as Chin and Kayah States, the complex relationships between established ethnic armed groups and the newly formed militias. The junta's de facto recognition of some newer ethnic militias, such as the Chinland Defence Force and Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, could also result in them becoming permanent features of Myanmar's post-coup conflict landscape, which is likely to make managing the conflicts more difficult.

##### A. *Shoring Up Support*

The Tatmadaw has sought to maintain existing ceasefires and dissuade ethnic armed groups from joining the resistance movement. The first clear evidence of this approach came in April 2021, when two prominent officers, Lieutenant Generals Yar Pyae and Aung Zaw Aye, travelled to northern Shan State for talks with the United Wa State Army and a close ally of the Wa, the Shan State Progress Party. Media reports said the officers urged the groups to maintain their relations with the Tatmadaw.<sup>84</sup>

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uting factor was a loosely defined command structure. Crisis Group interview, ethnic armed group leader, October 2021. See "ABSDF report finds torture, leaves questions in killing of its own", *The Irrawaddy*, 16 March 2015.

<sup>84</sup> "Myanmar regime shores up ties with two powerful northern ethnic armies", *The Irrawaddy*, 10 April 2021.

In mid-December, Yar Pyae led a delegation to Mong La for talks with the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee, a seven-member bloc led by the United Wa State Army; again, the focus was on persuading the groups not to side with the NUG.<sup>85</sup>

Junta negotiators have also met with some of the smaller signatories to the NCA and, in November 2021, Yar Pyae sat down with Kachin religious leaders and peace-brokers in an effort to open talks with the Kachin Independence Organisation.<sup>86</sup> Most significantly, as discussed earlier, the Tatmadaw has given the Arakan Army almost free rein to consolidate its control over large parts of Rakhine State. As a result, the Arakan Army has remained largely quiet and refrained from launching attacks on the military, despite outreach from the NUG.

Another focus for the Tatmadaw has been ensuring the loyalty of military-affiliated Border Guard Forces and People's Militia Forces.<sup>87</sup> The most obvious example is the Karen State border guards. Prior to the coup, the Tatmadaw was engaged in a stand-off with this force's leaders over their extensive, and often illicit, business interests along the Thai border.<sup>88</sup> Since seizing power, however, the junta has allowed the group to resume construction at the controversial Shwe Kokko site and reopen its border trade gates and casinos.<sup>89</sup> It appears to be a quid pro quo: in exchange, the border guards have regularly been deployed against the Karen National Liberation Army, with leaders dispatched to ensure discipline among rank-and-file soldiers unhappy at fighting fellow Karen forces.<sup>90</sup> Elsewhere, border guards and people's militias have cracked down on protesters and embarked on recruitment drives.<sup>91</sup>

The Tatmadaw has also sought to establish relationships with armed groups it previously did not collaborate with, particularly along the Myanmar-India border. Indian Meitei rebels were reportedly involved in a deadly crackdown on protesters in

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<sup>85</sup> Notably, the KIO did not formally attend this meeting, despite being a member of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee. See "KIO doesn't join FPNCC meeting with junta leaders", Kachin News Group, 20 December 2021.

<sup>86</sup> The list of smaller signatories includes the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, New Mon State Party and KNU/KNLA Peace Council, a Karen breakaway group. See, for example, "NSPC holds talks with DKBA, KNU/KNLA (PC)", Eleven Media Group, 27 April 2021. Regarding the meeting with Kachin leader, see "Regime meets Kachin religious leaders in Naypyitaw", Kachin News Group, 4 November 2021.

<sup>87</sup> Border Guard Forces are former ethnic armed groups that formally integrated into the Tatmadaw. People's Militia Forces are often also former ethnic armed groups, but tend to be smaller, receive little formal support and be run more independently. See "Militias in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, July 2016.

<sup>88</sup> "Will the Kayin BGF go quietly?", *Frontier Myanmar*, 26 January 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Shwe Kokko (also known as Yatai New City) is a gigantic property development located at the guard's headquarters that appears to be a front for online gambling operations targeting the Chinese market. See "Shadow Capital at Myanmar's Margins: Shwe Kokko New City and Its Predecessors", ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 1 December 2020; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°305, *Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, 30 March 2020.

<sup>90</sup> "With conflict escalating, the Kayin BGF gets back to business", *Frontier Myanmar*, 13 May 2021.

<sup>91</sup> See "Divide and rule in Kachin State", *Frontier Myanmar*, 2 July 2021. The article also explores how the Tatmadaw has exploited ethnic divisions to undermine support for the KIO.



the Sagaing Region towns of Tamu and Kalay in March.<sup>92</sup> Indian media has reported that Meitei leaders later met Tatmadaw officers, who pressured them into fighting the civilian resistance in exchange for continued safe haven; subsequently, at least five Meitei fighters died in clashes with anti-military forces.<sup>93</sup> In nearby Tedim Township, the Zomi Revolutionary Army, which also uses Myanmar territory to wage insurgency in India's state of Manipur, has staged at least four attacks on anti-regime forces, though this group could simply be protecting its own interests rather than working with the Tatmadaw.<sup>94</sup> Although it did not mention these outfits by name, the NUG was responding to these incidents when it issued a statement in mid-October warning that it "will not allow entities considered by our neighbours as a threat to their national security to settle inside Myanmar's territory".<sup>95</sup>

Elsewhere, the Tatmadaw has sought to expand border guard and people's militia forces, or even raise new forces – in addition to Pyusawhti – to counter anti-regime militias. From far northern Kachin State to Ayeyarwady and Bago Regions, there have been reports of forced recruitment into new pro-regime militias, alongside the expansion of existing forces.<sup>96</sup> These units seem designed to carry out policing duties rather than fight, but they would free up more Tatmadaw soldiers for the front.

#### B. *The Peace Process: The Living Dead*

Publicly, the regime insists that the peace process remains alive. On the day of the coup, junta leader Min Aung Hlaing announced a "five-point road map", the fourth point of which was achieving "eternal peace throughout the nation".<sup>97</sup> Although no negotiations with ethnic armed groups on a peace settlement have taken place since, in a 15 October 2021 speech to mark the sixth anniversary of the NCA's signing the junta leader said talks would continue and rejected suggestions that his administration lacks the legitimacy to parley with ethnic armed groups.<sup>98</sup> State media continues to carry daily banners proclaiming that under the five-point roadmap "[e]mphasis will

<sup>92</sup> The Meitei are known in Myanmar as Kathé. There are at least seven Meitei armed groups active on the Myanmar-India border, and they mostly operate from inside Myanmar. See "Manipur extremists caught in Myanmar conflict", *The Hindu*, 27 May 2021.

<sup>93</sup> See "Rebel fighters from India cooperating with Myanmar military regime", *The Irrawaddy*, 27 September 2021; and "Manipur extremists caught in Myanmar conflict", op. cit.

<sup>94</sup> "Zomi Revolutionary Army attacks anti-regime group in Tedim", *Myanmar Now*, 27 September 2021.

<sup>95</sup> "Declaration on Relations with Neighbouring Countries and Border Security", NUG Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Statement 5/2021, 14 October 2021.

<sup>96</sup> See "Regime council forcibly recruiting villagers for militia duty in Bago Region's Shwegyin Township, say residents", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 10 October; "စစ်ကောင်စီက ဝါးခယ်မမြို့နယ်တွင် ပြည်သူ့စစ်ဖွဲ့ရန် လူသူအဓမ္မစုဆောင်းနေ" [Military council forcibly recruiting villagers for a militia in Wakema Township], *Ayeyarwaddy Times*, 16 June 2021; and "Tatmadaw recalls former soldiers in Putao District", *Kachin News Group*, 4 June 2021.

<sup>97</sup> "Republic of the Union of Myanmar State Administration Council Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing makes speech to public", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 9 February 2021.

<sup>98</sup> "Speech delivered by Chairman of State Administration Council Prime Minister Chairman of National Unity and Peacemaking Central Committee Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to mark sixth anniversary of signing Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 16 October 2021.

be placed on achieving enduring peace for the entire nation in line with the agreements set out in the NCA”.<sup>99</sup> Privately, though, regime negotiators say the Tatmadaw will not push for political talks until after it holds an election, scheduled by August 2023, and transfers power to a new administration, which will almost certainly be military-backed.<sup>100</sup>

Even that timeline is unrealistic, however; as of today, it appears extremely unlikely that ethnic armed groups would engage in meaningful negotiations while a Tatmadaw-backed administration is in power. After five years without much progress under the NLD government, the coup has destroyed what little faith the signatories still had in the process. Even if they wanted to return to the negotiating table, they would likely be prevented by the public backlash that would erupt among their supporters at the idea of holding talks with a widely reviled regime.

Nevertheless, nearly all NCA signatories have continued to engage the Tatmadaw – some publicly, and others privately due to popular anger at the regime – and insist that the NCA remains in force, leaving the door open to negotiations.<sup>101</sup> There is a range of reasons for this ambiguous approach, which has prompted fierce criticism and created internal divisions.<sup>102</sup> Most signatories do not want to make themselves a target for the regime. Some also perceive the NCA as still having utility, even if the peace negotiations that it enabled have stalled – particularly in restraining the Tatmadaw from engaging in all-out warfare against them.<sup>103</sup> There is also a legal argument that the coup cannot invalidate the NCA, as it was ratified by Myanmar’s national assembly.<sup>104</sup>

### C. *Cutting New Deals?*

Although political negotiations have stalled at the national level, it does not mean the end of peace talks more broadly. If anything, efforts to reach new ceasefires or confirm existing agreements are likely to ramp up as the Tatmadaw seeks to relieve pressure by minimising the number of fronts it has to fight on. Shortly after the coup, the regime announced the formation of new peace negotiating teams, including a central committee headed by Min Aung Hlaing, a working committee led by his deputy Soe Win and a coordination committee with Lieutenant General Yar Pyae at the helm.<sup>105</sup> On 16 February 2021, a spokesman said the teams aim to achieve “prac-

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<sup>99</sup> See, for example, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 18 December 2021.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, peace negotiator close to the military, October 2021.

<sup>101</sup> The exception is the Chin National Front, which has signed a formal agreement with the NUG.

<sup>102</sup> These divisions have been most noticeable within the Karen National Union. See also “Views of CSOs on a few EAOs who met with the junta”, Network Media Group, 7 May 2021.

<sup>103</sup> In early November 2021, the regime detained four members of the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front who were at the group’s liaison office in Myawaddy. After protests from other signatories that their detention violated the NCA, authorities released the fighters four days later. See “ABSDF confirms that all Myawaddy detainees released”, Mizzima, 6 November 2021.

<sup>104</sup> Crisis Group interview, source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021. See also “Is the NCA dead?”, Euro-Burma Office, 18 August 2021.

<sup>105</sup> “Do the Myanmar junta’s new ‘peace-making committees’ stand any chance of success?”, *The Diplomat*, 4 March 2021.

tical peace” and “pragmatic results”.<sup>106</sup> The implication is a focus on ceasefires that end fighting for the time being, rather than protracted negotiations over a long-term political settlement.

The regime is likely to adopt a carrot-and-stick approach. Although negotiations over a Union Peace Accord are dead, it will try to sell the benefits of planned political system changes to ethnic armed groups. In particular, the military has proposed replacing Myanmar’s first-past-the-post electoral system with proportional representation, which would leave the NLD much worse off – and indeed probably reduce some ethnic minority parties’ representation – but benefit military proxies and some other ethnic parties.<sup>107</sup> Perhaps more compellingly for ethnic armed groups, the junta will likely offer them licit and illicit concessions, which could include access to natural resources, licence to collect informal taxes and control of informal border trade. Such enticements will, however, be accompanied by the threat or use of deadly force. In his NCA anniversary speech, Min Aung Hlaing hinted at returning to this approach, pointing to the “successes in the peace process in the term of the Tatmadaw government after 1988”, particularly ceasefires that reduced fighting and “development undertakings in ethnic areas”.<sup>108</sup>

To many ethnic minorities, however, the 1990s ceasefires were a failure. Although fighting did decline, there were no political negotiations and the “development” that accompanied them was an insidious “ceasefire capitalism” under which ethnic minority leaders who aligned with the Tatmadaw grew rich, often from illicit or semi-licit activities, but the benefits rarely trickled down.<sup>109</sup> The ceasefires also resulted in the breakup of the alliance between ethnic armed groups and pro-democracy forces that emerged in the wake of the 1988 uprising and 1990 election. A prominent analyst, Martin Smith, has written that the former military regime saw the ceasefires as the “major achievement of their government”.<sup>110</sup>

If and when ceasefire talks happen, they are likely to be bilateral with different groups rather than collective, informal rather than detailed, and focused on security rather than political issues. As was the case in the 1990s, those groups that resist will do so at a potential cost: if others reach agreements, they face the prospect of being

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<sup>106</sup> “SAC seeks ‘pragmatic results’ with new peace process committees: military spokesperson”, Development Media Group, 19 February 2021.

<sup>107</sup> Overall, this proposed change is, however, less about appealing to minorities than ensuring that no single party can dominate Myanmar’s legislature in the way the NLD did after the 2015 election. The most successful ethnic parties, such as the Arakan National Party and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy, would likely be worse off and have boycotted meetings with the Union Election Commission. See “Myanmar political parties reject regime’s proportional representation system”, *The Irrawaddy*, 9 November 2021.

<sup>108</sup> “Speech delivered by ... Senior General Min Aung Hlaing to mark sixth anniversary of signing Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement”, op. cit.

<sup>109</sup> For an overview of the Myanmar military’s various peace initiatives over the decades, including the period from 1988 to 2011, see “Why Burma’s Peace Efforts Have Failed to End Its Internal Wars”, U.S. Institute of Peace, October 2020. For insight into how the Tatmadaw views the period, see “Understanding Myanmar’s Peace Process: Ceasefire Agreements”, Swisspeace, 2013.

<sup>110</sup> “Burma (Myanmar): The Time for Change”, op. cit. See also “Understanding Myanmar’s Peace Process: Ceasefire Agreements”, op. cit.

isolated and targeted, or having segments of their armies splinter and conclude their own ceasefires.<sup>111</sup>

To some extent the junta has already begun this process. Since the coup, the regime's peacemaking team has held fifteen separate meetings with various ethnic armed groups. For those unwilling to meet face to face, it has tried to go through intermediaries, such as religious or civil society leaders.<sup>112</sup> But ethnic armed groups' willingness to continue negotiations with the NUG/CRPH – despite disagreements over the Federal Democracy Charter – has so far prevented the military regime from chipping away at the nascent alliance by reaching bilateral deals.

On 27 September 2021, the Commander-in-Chief's Office announced a five-month national unilateral ceasefire running to 28 February 2022. Although it was not explicitly stated, the ceasefire only applies to ethnic armed groups, and not to entities like the NUG, CRPH or PDFs, whose members the statement described as "terrorists".<sup>113</sup> Most have interpreted the announcement as an attempt to de-escalate fighting with established armed groups in order to focus on battling new insurrections in central Myanmar and on disrupting rural militias and underground networks in the cities. The regime has also stressed its desire for more groups to sign the NCA, saying it will make "separate arrangements" for the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, whom it previously excluded from NCA talks.<sup>114</sup> While these arrangements were not specified, the announcement implied a desire to strike some sort of deal.

Significantly, the military regime has also been willing to enter ceasefire talks with newly formed armed groups, via communal leaders, in ethnic minority regions where heavy fighting has taken place. In Mindat in southern Chin State, for example, Tatmadaw officers have struck several informal agreements with local leaders, while others reached a similar deal in Taunggyi in June 2021 with parts of the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, after intervention from religious leaders.<sup>115</sup> The Tatmadaw thus seems to be drawing a distinction between these forces, which are in ethnic minority states, and the PDFs in majority-Burman areas, with which it has refused to negotiate.

Yet the cooperation between the NUG and ethnic armed groups, and the truly nationwide nature of the anti-coup movement, however disparate it remains, means

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<sup>111</sup> To take the Karen National Union as an example, three of the groups mentioned earlier – the Karen State Border Guard Force, the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and the KNU/KNLA Peace Council – are descended from factions that broke away and reached their own ceasefires with the military. For an account of the KNPP experience during this time (and ceasefire negotiations more broadly), see Tom Kramer, Oliver Russell and Martin Smith, "From War to Peace in Kayah (Karenni) State: A Land at the Crossroads in Myanmar", Transnational Institute, July 2018.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, "Regime meets Kachin religious leaders in Naypyitaw", Kachin News Group, 4 November 2021.

<sup>113</sup> "Myanmar junta announces 'goodwill' ceasefire with ethnic armed groups", *The Diplomat*, 28 October 2021.

<sup>114</sup> "Statement on Situation after Tatmadaw Took State Responsibilities, ASEAN Special Envoy", SAC Information Team, 24 October 2021.

<sup>115</sup> "Karenni resistance fighters agree to ceasefire as number of IDPs passes 100,000", *Myanmar Now*, 16 June 2021. For a detailed examination of the battle for Mindat, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit.

that such distinctions are no longer clear. The Karenni Nationalities Defence Force, for example, fights together with PDFs loyal to the NUG in Kayah State, and the Chinland Defence Force branches in southern Chin State are increasingly coordinating with the Yaw Defence Force based in neighbouring Magway Region, a majority-Burman area.

In practice, these informal ceasefires have failed. The military's nationwide unilateral ceasefire has had no discernible impact, and in both Mindat and northern Kayah State, fighting has resumed. New forces such as the Chinland Defence Force and Karenni Nationalities Defence Force are structured very differently than the military's traditional opponents: they are more a coalition of diverse militias than a single entity, and they operate somewhat independently of the established ethnic armed groups in their region.<sup>116</sup> As one negotiator observed, "To reach a ceasefire you need to know who to negotiate with. With the new groups, it's not even clear who the leaders are".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Karenni Nationalities Defence Force official and source close to ethnic armed groups, October 2021.

<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interview, peace negotiator close to the military, October 2021.

## V. Navigating the New Conflicts

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Outside actors seeking to mitigate conflict in Myanmar need to contend with an entirely transformed political and conflict landscape. The decades-old peace process is dead, at least four ethnic armies have returned to active conflict and hundreds of new militias have formed. Fighting has erupted in areas that have not seen clashes for many years, including the majority-Burman centre of the country, and conflict drivers are now often quite specific to localities. The military's power grab and brutal tactics to crush dissent have created significant levels of support for armed struggle against the military regime. The coup has also forced Burman politicians, who until recently expressed little sympathy for minority grievances, to open talks with ethnic leaders on what a future Myanmar state might look like, and just as importantly upended how many ordinary Burmans perceive ethnic armed groups and their reasons for fighting. Grappling with these changes, and the forces behind them, will be a key challenge for outside actors seeking to engage with Myanmar's conflicts.

The collective peace settlement between ethnic armed groups and the Tatmadaw that international donors supported prior to the coup is for now all but impossible. Attention should instead shift to specific theatres of conflict, with the aim of both protecting conflict-affected communities and meeting humanitarian needs. International actors should also recognise the significance of the growing cooperation between the CRPH/NUG and ethnic armed groups, particularly the political negotiations that are already well advanced. These negotiations, which also include some other key stakeholders, will be where the important discussions on the future structure of the Myanmar state take place, rather than the peace process established in 2011.

The conflict has already created a vast humanitarian emergency, with the UN estimating that 296,000 people have been forced to flee their homes since 1 February 2021, on top of the 370,000 who were already displaced.<sup>118</sup> After pledging more than \$100 million for peace support over the 2016-2021 period, donors should show a similar level of commitment to delivering aid to conflict-affected ethnic areas and helping protect people there from the effects of renewed fighting. To do so, they will need to form stronger relationships with local civil society organisations, who understand how to navigate the complex conflict dynamics in areas where they operate. Several ethnic armed groups also have well-developed service delivery mechanisms that could be of use.<sup>119</sup> Neighbouring countries, particularly Thailand, as well as the Association of South East Asian Nations, also have a big role to play in supporting cross-border aid, which will be an important channel for delivery given the regime's restrictions.

The level of opposition to military rule means the Tatmadaw is unlikely to score a decisive victory in the near term, if at all. The most likely scenario appears to be a prolonged stalemate, with significant territory outside state control.<sup>120</sup> Some of this territory will be under the control of armed groups – both long-established ethnic

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<sup>118</sup> "Myanmar Emergency Update", UN High Commissioner for Refugees Regional Bureau for Asia and Pacific, 17 December 2021.

<sup>119</sup> Among ethnic armed groups, the KNU and KIO have the strongest service delivery mechanisms. See also Crisis Group Briefing, *Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, op. cit.

<sup>120</sup> See Crisis Group Briefing, *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-coup Myanmar*, op. cit.

armies and newly formed militias – either loyal to or working with the NUG. In anticipation of deadlock, foreign governments should further increase their engagement with the CRPH/NUG, beyond just holding talks with officials in the parallel government. Technical and financial support to strengthen the NUG's administrative capacity, particularly for the provision of health services and humanitarian aid, is more important and more feasible than formal recognition of the NUG (something many in Myanmar are demanding), because foreign governments will also need to maintain some level of contact with the regime.

The NUG should not be the only focal point for international engagement with the opposition, however. Concerns persist over the NUG's representativeness and the degree of influence the NLD-aligned CRPH wields over its decision-making. International actors should seek to engage and work with a wider range of entities, including ethnic armed groups, both bilaterally and through bodies such as the National Unity Consultative Council. They should also emphasise to the NUG the importance of ensuring that its movement is genuinely inclusive, rather than dominated by Burman politicians.

International actors should also seek to work with new joint mechanisms that the NUG and ethnic armed groups have established, such as the COVID-19 Task Force and the National Health Committee. In this way, they could help improve the lives of those in conflict zones (and possibly beyond) by delivering vaccines and other types of humanitarian aid. Yet international actors also need to appreciate the fragility of these relationships and tailor their support accordingly. While some funding might be required to support certain operational aspects of service delivery, blindly infusing funds can also create perverse incentives and tie up key individuals with bureaucratic tasks. Most importantly, the NUG and ethnic armed groups themselves, working together with NGOs and community groups, should steer the process of aid delivery.

The success or failure of the CRPH/NUG will hang in part on its ability to convince its own partners, including ethnic armed groups, that it is sincere in its promise of a federal political system, replete with power sharing. Those ethnic armed groups that have either not engaged with the parallel government at all, or only to a limited extent, are watching closely to see how its budding cooperation with groups such as the Kachin Independence Organisation and Karen National Union unfolds. If these relationships falter, the CRPH/NUG is unlikely to be able to attract other ethnic armed groups to its side. It needs to demonstrate that it is genuinely willing to share political power not just in the future, but also in the interim, by addressing the shortcomings of Part 2 of the Federal Democracy Charter. At the same time, it should ensure that it does not privilege ethnic armed groups at the expense of other stakeholders, such as ethnic political parties and civil society groups, which are crucial to ensuring that the movement is truly inclusive.

Ethnic armed groups are rational and strategic actors with decades of experience navigating political upheaval. Those that have decided to work with the CRPH/NUG understand the risks of doing so, and have carefully weighed the likely benefits and consequences; those that have remained aloof or sided with the regime have done the same. It is important to understand the objectives of Myanmar's various ethnic armed groups. International actors should also avoid overplaying the distinction between those that are "in" – that is, working with the CRPH/NUG – and those that are

“out”. These positions are not set in stone, and stressing them unduly could create divisions that can only play into the Tatmadaw’s hands.

If relations with the NUG do falter, ethnic armed groups may decide to pursue ceasefires with the Tatmadaw. Should that happen, international actors should carefully assess whether the truces create opportunities to expand delivery of humanitarian assistance or to mitigate conflict in and around areas these groups control. They should, in any case, continue existing aid deliveries to conflict-affected areas, thereby avoiding the mistakes of the 1990s, when groups that signed ceasefires with the former military regime were largely ostracised and received little international support.



## **VI. Conclusion**

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The 1 February 2021 coup has ended a decade of negotiations over a peace settlement between the majority-Burman state and the country's ethnic armed groups, leaving a much more complex and fast-changing conflict environment. Ethnic armed groups can no longer be easily divided into those who signed or did not sign the National Ceasefire Agreement, and even within long established alliances of armed groups, a range of positions has emerged. The lines between the anti-coup resistance and long-established ethnic armed groups are also increasingly blurred: some newly formed militias in majority-Burman areas have no links to ethnic armed groups, but others have received training and weapons from them, or even fought the Tatmadaw alongside them.

Both the Tatmadaw and the democratic opposition, led by the CRPH/NUG, have sought to win ethnic armed groups to their side, albeit through very different approaches. Responses have ranged from formal cooperation with the parallel administration to a complete distancing from the political crisis in Myanmar. The majority of armed groups sit somewhere in the middle: facing public pressure to resist the coup and eyeing opportunities to expand territory and influence, but also remaining unwilling to commit entirely to a partnership with the CRPH/NUG. To some extent, the future trajectory will depend on whether the NUG can overcome their mistrust, which has lingered despite lofty promises of a future federal political system, and convince them that a formal alliance to present a united front to the military regime is a risk worth taking. Even if the NUG is unable to cement such deals, Myanmar is likely to witness a continued increase in conflict as armed groups press their advantage against a stretched Tatmadaw.

**Yangon/Bangkok/Brussels, 12 January 2022**

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. Ero first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director and Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, UN Mission in Liberia.

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## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2019

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### Special Reports and Briefings

*Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy*, Special Briefing N°1, 30 April 2019.

*Seven Opportunities for the UN in 2019-2020*, Special Briefing N°2, 12 September 2019.

*Seven Priorities for the New EU High Representative*, Special Briefing N°3, 12 December 2019.

*COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch*, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

*A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

*Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022*, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

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*The Case for Kaesong: Fostering Korean Peace through Economic Ties*, Asia Report N°300, 24 June 2019.

### South Asia

*After Sri Lanka's Easter Bombings: Reducing Risks of Future Violence*, Asia Report N°302, 27 September 2019.

*Getting the Afghanistan Peace Process Back on Track*, Asia Briefing N°159, 2 October 2019.

*Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work*, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

*Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir*, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

*Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis*, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

*Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace*, Asia Report N°311, 11 August 2020.

*What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?*, Asia Briefing N°165, 13 January 2021.

*Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process*, Asia Briefing N°169, 30 June 2021.

*Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe*, Asia Report N°317, 6 December 2021.

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*Fire and Ice: Conflict and Drugs in Myanmar's Shan State*, Asia Report N°299, 8 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Briefing N°154, 24 January 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*Building a Better Future for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Briefing N°155, 25 April 2019.

*An Opening for Internally Displaced Person Returns in Northern Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°156, 28 May 2019 (also available in Burmese).

*The Philippines: Militancy and the New Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°301, 27 June 2019.

*Peace and Electoral Democracy in Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°157, 6 August 2019.

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*A Sustainable Policy for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh*, Asia Report N°303, 27 December 2019.

*Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form*, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

*Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship*, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

*Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

*Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

*An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

*Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process*, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

*COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand*, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

*Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, Asia Report N°312, 28 August 2020.

*Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election*, Asia Briefing N°163, 22 October 2020 (also available in Burmese).

*From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, Asia Briefing N°164, 23 December 2020.

*Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, Asia Briefing N°166, 16 February 2021.

*The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, Asia Briefing N°167, 1 April 2021.

*Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro*, Asia Report N°313, 15 April 2021.

*Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, Asia Report N°314, 18 May 2021.

*Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, Asia Briefing N°168, 28 June 2021.

*Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea*, Asia Report N°315, 29 November 2021.

*The Philippines' Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea*, Asia Report N°316, 2 December 2021.

*Vietnam Tacks Between Cooperation and Struggle in the South China Sea*, Asia Report N°318, 7 December 2021.

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