



Conflict in Focus

Myanmar

What happened in May? Myanmar's military has suffered a series of humiliating battlefield defeats to ethnic armed groups and allied resistance forces, and is rapidly losing control of the country's periphery. In Rakhine State in the west, the Arakan Army has carved out the largest territory controlled by any non-state armed group in Myanmar. Desperate to keep a foothold, the military has intensified its recruitment of members of the Rohingya community to stoke inter-communal tensions. In Kachin State in the far north, the Kachin Independence Army's offensive has seized scores of regime outposts and bases. In Kayin State on the Thai border, the Karen National Union – Myanmar's oldest ethnic armed group – has also gone on the offensive.

Why does it matter? The scale and speed of defeats since October 2023 is unprecedented in the Myanmar military's post-independence history. The losses will be extremely difficult for the regime to reverse, and more setbacks seem inevitable. The state appears headed toward fragmentation where various ethnic armies will have established autonomous statelets in the periphery. Meanwhile, in Rakhine State, the military has fomented communal tensions between the Rakhine and Rohingya, leading to abuses against civilians.

What to watch in the coming weeks and months? The military is unlikely to entirely collapse as a result of battlefield losses. Its chain of command is intact and ethnic armed groups are focussed on consolidating control and administration of their expanded territory. The current trajectory is therefore one where relatively functional ethnic minority statelets could coexist, albeit with the potential for some conflict, alongside a weak and vengeful regime in the centre. Further violence may concentrate in strategic locations that the military risks losing, including: the Rakhine State capital Sittwe and the military regional command at Ann; the Kachin State capital Myitkyina and nearby military regional command; and the Asia Highway between Hpa-an and Myawaddy in Kayin State.

In Rakhine State, fighting between the regime and Arakan Army has taken a dangerous communal turn as the military has sought to foment inter-communal tensions by rallying some Rohingya to its side. Rohingya armed groups are stepping up their own recruitment and the Arakan Army appears to be forcibly displacing Rohingya communities in some areas and burning their homes. Escalated conflict between the Buddhist Rakhine and the Muslim Rohingya would come at great cost to both sides. It could also trigger refugee flows into Bangladesh, where camps hosting one million

Rohingya have already been destabilised by violence and recruitment by Rohingya armed groups and criminal gangs.

In the capital Naypyitaw, discontent within the regime is such that the coup leader and commander-in-chief Min Aung Hlaing's future is in some doubt. Many in pro-military elite circles see him as being primarily responsible for the battlefield failures. But since there is no institutional mechanism for removing him from his military position, it is difficult to predict when or how other senior officers might move against him.

What should be done? Outside actors must reckon with the new reality of Myanmar's fragmentation.

Non-state administrations look set to expand and become more durable. The considerable needs of populations under their control cannot be met through typical state-based aid modalities. Donors should therefore explore ways to strengthen the service delivery and governance functions of existing and emerging subnational administrations, while remaining mindful of conflict risks, human rights considerations and legal constraints. In Rakhine State, international actors should expand channels of communication with the Arakan Army leadership and work to expand humanitarian support for all communities affected by conflict, including the hundreds of thousands who have been displaced. They should also push Bangladesh to take stronger action to prevent Rohingya armed groups from forcibly recruiting refugees.