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Do ‘good rebels’ exist in Myanmar?

‘To engage the country responsibly in a post-junta context, international stakeholders must appreciate the nuance of each ethnic armed group’s unique history, cultural identity, and ideological goals.’



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Smoke rises as security forces fight with rebels opposing the ruling junta, in Mobye, Myanmar, on 7 June 2021.

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WASHINGTON D.C.

Myanmar is experiencing unprecedented levels of conflict between the military junta, or Tatmadaw, and increasingly collaborative ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). In the past year, various EAOs’ territorial and political successes have wrested more than 86% of the country’s territory from junta control, fuelling optimism that the Tatmadaw’s fall to the Spring Revolution – as the opposition to the 2021 military coup d’état is known locally – is imminent.

Yet, evidence shows that many of Myanmar’s EAOs have also committed gross *in bello* contraventions of international law. To engage the country responsibly in a post-junta context, international stakeholders must avoid falling into familiar archetypal characterisations of the EAOs as “good rebels”, and appreciate the nuance of each EAO’s unique history, cultural identity, and ideological goals.

In October 2023, with the junta facing **large-scale defection** and substantial setbacks, the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) – composed of the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) – launched Operation 1027. The operation’s “**stunning gains**” reenergised the National Unity Government (NUG), which now operates in exile. By February, the NUG declared its intention to collaborate with 3BHA and credited the operation with creating the conditions for a **post-coup governance plan**.

The junta failed to sufficiently mobilise a response to Operation 1027. Its increased use of **airstrikes** has not weakened the Spring Revolution, and has instead driven up **severe humanitarian needs** and led to **credible allegations** of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Some 2.7 million people in Myanmar are displaced due to armed conflict and 15 million suffer food insecurity. The ongoing **effects** of Typhoon Yagi, which left **more than 470 people dead or missing** earlier this month, and affected up to 887,000, will only exacerbate Myanmar’s dire humanitarian vulnerabilities.

Between 2023 and the end of August 2024 – the “period of analysis” for the purposes of this analysis – military forces executed 622 airstrikes on civilian targets, leaving 1,220 dead, according to the **Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project** (ACLED), whose data is used throughout this article to track civilian targeting. Most attacks occurred in Rakhine State, the homeland of the Muslim minority Rohingya. The Tatmadaw systematically targets Rohingya, notably including a mass purge in 2017 that forms the merits of an ongoing International Court of Justice case accusing the junta of violating the Genocide Convention. Last week, the UN condemned “gross violations of human rights” by the junta, and renewed its recommendation that the Security Council refer the situation to the International Criminal Court.

While 3BHA’s Operation 1027 does not approach the junta’s level of civilian targeting, it has borne a significant human cost, with evidence of each member of the 3BHA violating international law. Last month, the AA reportedly killed 200 Rohingya in a single day – a war crime that may constitute ethnic cleansing when contextualised alongside its other campaigns that have killed and displaced hundreds of Rohingya. The 3BHA is not a monolithic organisation, nor are the EAOs two-dimensional actors. International stakeholders must balance supporting the Spring Revolution’s legitimate acts of armed resistance with seeking appropriate justice for civilian abuses.



The Arakan Army

The largest contingent of the 3BHA, the Arakan Army, was founded in 2009 by Commander in Chief Major General Twan Mrat Naing with the political backing of the Kachin Independence Army. Despite its relatively recent nascence, it commands 30,000 soldiers and has rapidly become a major player – its confrontations with junta forces escalated from 83 clashes in 2023 to 379 by the end of August 2024.

The AA embraces **Rakhine nationalism**, striving to restore Rakhine to the “Land of Arakan” – a territory 50% larger than its current land area. Rakhine nationalism grounds the AA’s longer-term aspirations. The AA has notably vowed to protect foreign direct investment, potentially aimed at safeguarding neighbouring China’s \$8 billion investment in Rakhine State’s **Kyaukphyu** special economic zone. It has also demonstrated limited statecraft capabilities, establishing **civil administrations** to police streets, collect taxes, and, in some cases, deliver **social services**. This feature of the AA is not unique – in most of Myanmar, failing Tatmadaw leadership has forced EAOs to adopt responsibility for the administrative systems under their control. Experts note that the translation of tax revenue into effective public service delivery acts as a “**virtuous cycle**” for the AA, simultaneously sustaining and legitimising its authority.

While the AA may contribute to social stability, its Rakhine nationalism also introduces darker implications. The Arakan people are not the only ethnic community to call Rakhine home; the Rohingya are also native to the region and **historically distinct** from Arakan Buddhists. Although Arakan-Rohingya relations have fluctuated over the years, the AA’s Rakhine nationalism de facto implies the intention to control the Rohingya homeland. The Tatmadaw exploits this inter-communal rift to undermine the AA’s rapid expansion, including allegedly forcing civilians to fight for the AA’s rival, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), another EAO also accused of **human rights abuses** that is **reportedly** funded, armed, and trained by the junta.

The UN and other rights watchdogs **accuse** the AA of committing significant atrocities against Rohingya and other civilians. During the period of analysis, the AA forcibly abducted at least 45 civilians. In May 2024, after capturing a village, the AA reportedly **burned Rohingya homes** and **bombed a high school** sheltering Rohingya civilians, resulting in 18 Rohingya fatalities and over 200 Rohingya injuries. AA leadership then **mocked** the remaining Rohingya prisoners, calling them “Bengalis”, considered a slur reflecting the **damaging stereotype** that Rohingyas are recent Bangladeshi immigrants. As noted above, in August 2024, an AA **drone attack** killed at least 200 Rohingya in a single day as they attempted to flee across a river. These targeted acts of violence are grossly inhumane and, at minimum, constitute war crimes. In the face of significant **international backlash**, the AA stated that it strives for “the rights of all communities in the region regardless of race, religion, or ethnicity”, and blamed junta airstrikes for the Rohingya deaths in **May** and **August**.

The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)

Across the Irrawaddy River, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the second member of the 3BHA, operates in Myanmar’s largest province, Shan State. Founded by ethnic Kokang leader Pheung Kya-shin in 1989, the MNDAA aims to **remove** the Tatmadaw and control the Kokang region. Notably, Kokang enjoys unique, although ambiguous, autonomy as ‘Special Region No. 1’, a vestige of MNDAA negotiations with prior military governments. The MNDAA recently claimed a major victory by **capturing** the northern Shan State capital, Lashio – the first seizure of a junta command headquarters since the beginning of the Spring Revolution.

Unlike other members of the 3BHA, the MNDAA exhibits strong ties with China, its patron and neighbour. The **Kokang people** originally migrated from China in the 17th century. This cultural connection likely shapes the MNDAA’s vision for post-revolutionary Myanmar. While other EAOs may maintain neutrality toward international partners, the MNDAA would court Beijing’s favour and prioritise Chinese investment.

Despite China’s outsized role in the MNDAA’s strategic decision-making, the MNDAA exercises total independence. Its quiet rejections of China’s **repeated overtures** to negotiate an end to the conflict demonstrate that the MNDAA is more committed to long-term Kokang independence than to short-term Chinese favorability.

The MNDAA has not always presented itself as a law-enforcing actor. **Isolated** from British and Burmese rule, the Kokang people grew opium as a cash crop in the Shan highlands after the Opium Wars caused a drop in Chinese supply. Shan formed part of the region’s **Golden Triangle**, a tri-country border area known for organised crime. Although the MNDAA had sought to polish its reputation, **banning** the cultivation of opium in 2002, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime reports that opium fields have rapidly **increased** in Shan since 2021. Cultivation increased 20% from 2023 to 2024, even while the MNDAA was ostensibly eradicating drug production under Operation 1027.

Moreover, increasing evidence demonstrates that the MNDAA is committing human rights violations in its efforts to purge scams, gambling, and drugs from Shan State. MNDAA troops abducted at least 70 civilians during the period of analysis, at least 37 of whom were arrested related to online scams and gambling. These arrests are, by definition, abductions. Although the MNDAA self-characterises as “cleaning up” Shan, it lacks legal authority and is thus forcibly detaining civilians in an abuse of power.

The MNDAA also **forcibly recruits civilians** by imposing quotas on villages under its control. According to the UN, the MNDAA recruited seven **child soldiers** in 2023. In the same period, MNDAA members allegedly sexually abused a 17-year-old and directly attacked civilians in 15 instances, killing 16 and injuring over 200. In its months-long offensive in Lashio, the MNDAA generated mass displacement but reportedly ordered troops not to enter houses or seize civilian property, and explicitly prohibited human rights violations. Nonetheless, MNDAA troops abducted at least six people fleeing the fighting in Lashio, and the UN **noted** “alarming reports” of violence against civilians.

The Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)

The Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), 3BHA’s final member, also operates in northern Shan State. Although officially formed in 2009, the TNLA’s roots date back to the 1963 founding of Myanmar’s first revolutionary organisation, the Palaung State Liberation Front, which now serves as the TNLA’s political wing. After decades of expansion across Shan, the group deliberately adopted the name “Ta’ang” rather than “Palaung” to redefine its “**ethnonational collective identity**”, reflecting the fluid social and geographical boundaries under its control.

As one of the most mature EAOs, the TNLA is highly battle-tested. From 2011 to 2021, it was almost constantly fighting the military, military-backed militias, or other EAOs. Consequently, the 2021 coup **strengthened** the TNLA by diverting the military’s attention to multiple other fronts, allowing the TNLA to consolidate control over its territory. Recently, the TNLA **captured** the Mogoke ruby mining hub and nearby junta bases in northern Mandalay, the junta from a much-needed revenue source.

The TNLA operates with **recruitment programmes** ostensibly grounded in defending Ta’ang communities from both junta repression and social ills. Under an anti-drug policy, the TNLA offered rough rehabilitation in return for military service. Dismantling community militias, the TNLA absorbed experienced village soldiers into its ranks. Aware of women’s unique power in Ta’ang households and communities, it recruited women to mobilise support and **participate** in civil structures. These strategies have reportedly contributed to **goodwill** and **satisfaction** among TNLA soldiers. However, after decades of aggrandising itself as the Ta’ang people’s defender, the TNLA expects community obligation towards recruitment. Families are expected to enlist their **second son**, and the TNLA often takes forced conscripts. During the period of analysis, the TNLA abducted 71 civilians, at least 25 of whom were forced recruits.

The TNLA’s unique populism informs its attitude toward civil society. Especially in the post-coup atmosphere, EAOs generally exert authority over civil society within their territory. The TNLA apparently views its relationship with civil society as a partnership, perhaps because of its conviction that it serves as a guardian to Ta’ang heritage.

The combined effects of relative junta disengagement and the TNLA’s on-the-ground relationships facilitate the TNLA’s **governance** model and vision for post-civil war leadership. In some areas, the TNLA has successfully delivered health and education services and improved the local economy. However, as the TNLA’s territory expands into remote areas never reached by the Burmese state, it confronts the **significant challenge** of building public institutions from scratch with a limited tax base and already stretched finances. Experts worry about the **scalability** of the TNLA’s approach in a post-conflict scenario.

Conclusion

If the Spring Revolution achieves its goal – toppling the Tatmadaw – the unifying force of a common enemy would disappear. A transitional period would present many risks, including inter-communal fighting over territory and continued or worsened civilian violence. Moreover, although members of 3BHA have shown some capacity to govern, **questions** still remain regarding their intentions and abilities to implement democratic governance. The international community, including the NUG’s allies, the United States, China, the EU, and ASEAN, must show EAOs the value of advancing their shared interest through the consolidation of a federal democracy. International stakeholders should provide tangible incentives for EAOs to transition from military to political actors, reintegrate with civil society, and achieve self-governance.

In protracted conflict scenarios like Myanmar, no party is ever wholly innocent. While cooperation with EAOs is essential, any future transition must avoid the trap of typifying EAOs as “good rebels”. A truly democratic transition must provide redress to victims of abuses committed by these actors, in addition to those committed by the junta. It is imperative that all parties, including the 3BHA, engage in a consultative process of social reconciliation to heal the deep wounds of human rights abuse. Concurrently, international actors must uphold impartiality and ensure accountability across all factions. This balanced approach should prevent the entrenchment of inter-communal rifts and support the rights of all peoples of Myanmar toward self-determination.

Edited by Ali M. Latifi.

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