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# One Year On: The Momentum of Myanmar's Armed Rebellion

By Ye Myo Hein

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Since the February 1st, 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar, the country has become engulfed in a rapidly escalating civil war as the pro-democracy movement picked up arms in conjunction with several longstanding ethnic armed organizations to challenge the military junta's control over the country. In little over a year, the conflict has spread across half a dozen distinct theaters, destabilizing military rule in many places, and resulted in widespread violence and devastation in Myanmar as the junta deployed indiscriminate violence against its opponents. Yet, the determined anti-junta resistance gained substantial momentum and now fields an impressive number of enthusiastic volunteers that stand poised to continue fighting indefinitely. Challenges remain, however, most notably in the pro-democracy forces' lack of centralized command and equipment.

In this report, the Wilson Center and Tagaung Institute's Ye Myo Hein explores the development of the conflict in Myanmar, its trends, and potential outlook

## Abbreviations

AA/ULA	Arakan Army/United League of Arakan
ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
ALP	Arakan Liberation Party
C3C	Central Command and Coordination Committee
CDF	Chinland Defense Forces
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CJDC	Chinland Joint Defense Committee
CNF/CNA	Chin National Front/Chin National Army
CNO/CNDF	China National Organization/Chin National Defense Force
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
EAO	Ethnic Armed Organization or Ethnic Armed Groups
FPNCC	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee
KA/KNPP	Karenni Army/Karenni National Progressive Party
KIA/KIO	Kachin Independence Army/Kachin Independence Organization
KNDF	Karenni National Defense Forces
KNP	Kayan National Party
KNPLF	Karenni National People's Liberation Front
KNU/KNLA	Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army
KNU/KNLA (PC Council)	Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (Peace Council)
KPDF	Kachin People's Defense Forces
KPICT	Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team
KRU	Karenni Revolution Union
KSCC	Karenni State Consultative Council
LDF	Local Defense Forces
LDU	Lahu Democratic Union
LID	Light Infantry Division of the Sit-Tat
Ma Ba Tha	Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion



MNDAA/MNTJP	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army/Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party
MOD	NUG’s Ministry of Defense
MOC	Military Operations Command of the Sit-Tat
NDAA (ESS)	National Democratic Alliance Army (Eastern Shan State)
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
NUG	National Unity Government
PAT	People’s Administrative Team (PaAhPha)
PCG	Peace-Talk Creation Group
PDF	People’s Defense Forces
PDT	People’s Defense Team (PaKaPha)
PPST	Peace Process Steering Team
PRA	People Revolution Army
PST	People’s Security Team (PaLaPha)
Sit-Tat	Myanmar Armed Forces or Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces exclusively uses its name as “Myanmar Tatmadaw,” which literally translates into “Myanmar Imperial or Royal Armed Forces” with the suffix “daw” or “taw” denoting “royal” or “sacred”. In fact, Myanmar People usually call it as Sit-Tat, meaning “Sit (Armed or Military), Tat (Forces).” Accordingly, the word “Sit-Tat” will be used interchangeably with military, army, junta’ troops, and armed Forces in this report instead of loaded term “Tatmadaw.”)
SSA-South/RCSS	Shan State Army (South)/Restoration Council for Shan State
SSA-North/SSPP	Shan State Army (North)/Shan State Progressive Party
TNLA/PSLA	Ta’ang National Liberation Army/Palaung State Liberation Front
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UNFC	United Nationalities Federal Council
UWSA/ UWSP	United Wa State Army/United Wa State Party





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## Executive Summary

### Section I: From the Outbreak of Armed Resistance to Hope for a Federal Army

- Following the February 1st, 2021 military coup d'état in Myanmar, a wave of nonviolent protests emerged across the country, but the military soon launched an indiscriminate crackdown. The anti-coup movement gradually morphed into an armed resistance when confronted with the junta's extreme repression.
- Open fighting between the military regime and the pro-democracy movement began on March 28th, 2021 when junta troops stormed a protest camp in Tarhan ward, Kalay Town in Sagaing Region. Protesters in Tarhan, armed with makeshift weapons, resisted the security forces.
- Fighting quickly sprang up in other parts of the country. Completely unanticipated by the coup leaders, an armed resistance movement erupted in the Bamar-dominated heartland of Myanmar, which had witnessed little armed conflict for several decades.
- In March 2021, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) — formed by ousted elected lawmakers predominantly from the National League for Democracy — voiced its intention of forming a Federal Army incorporating the various ethnic armed groups opposed to the regime.
- The concept of a “Federal army” had existed for some time, and a few ethnic groups had repeatedly proffered up the idea. Prior to the 2010 elections, some ethnic armed groups

articulated a proposal for a “Federal Union Army,” in their drafted constitution.

### Section II: The Twisted Road to a Federal Army

- Despite the anti-junta resistance's expectations of forming a Federal Army, the disparate ethnic armed groups do not share a common response to the military coup. Each group, divided geographically, politically, historically and ethnically, differs in terms of interests, positions, and objectives.
- At the same time, most ethnic armed groups (EAOs), some with decades of experience fighting the Myanmar military, called the “Sit-Tat” by Myanmar people, largely view the military coup as a breakdown of the post-2010 political process, and therefore responded negatively to the military's grab for power. Moreover, the Sit-Tat's brutal crackdown on the peaceful protesters drove some to initiate retaliatory attacks on junta outposts located in their operational areas.
- Yet, the EAOs have a diversity of views and responses. While a few, such as the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) began hostilities against the junta and aided the pro-democracy resistance, most have hedged in favor of their own interests.
- The leaders of the anti-coup resistance movement appear to have undersold this complexity and diversity. Despite optimism about the emergence of a federal army



amongst the general public and leaders of the resistance movement, it is not be a realistic prospect for the foreseeable future.

- The most significant reasons for the failure of a federal army are (1) a deep mistrust between the ethnic armed groups and the majority Bamar pro-democratic forces, (2) the lack of political agreement on a shared political vision, (3) the lack of strong revolutionary leadership to unite the disparate armed forces, and (4) a fragile and fragmented ethnic politics.

### **Section III: The Emergence of Organized Pro-Democracy Forces**

- On May 5th, the CPRH's National Unity Government (NUG) stated that it formally formed a "People's Defense Force (PDF)"; a precursor to a Federal Union Army. The PDF's units can be classified into two categories: autonomous "local defense forces (LDFs) and those linked with the NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD), which can be labeled "PDFs". The PDFs soon proliferated across the country to contest the military's control.
- The PDFs and LDFs are an evolving phenomenon in the country's complicated security landscape. Despite its full configuration still uncertain, analysis reveals a variety of significant features:
  1. their political objective is to seize the central state apparatus from the military, a distinct political objective from the EAOs;
  2. the PDFs have so far worked to actively and closely cooperate with the EAOs,

but the LDFs and other local groups are operating more independently;

3. the resistance forces' main strategy emphasizes "denial" to block the junta's expansion of power and "sabotage" to undermine its governance.
4. a Central Command and Coordinate Committee (C3C) was formed to centralize a military command structure, including with NUG and allied EAOs leaders, but remains a work in progress;
5. an estimated 25 percent of the LDFs are still operating independently, and 75 percent are linked with the NUG;
6. a weak centralized command and autonomous armed entities entail operational disadvantages against the formidable military, in addition to issues caused by a loose adherence to a military code of ethics and discipline, and an ineffectual management of limited resources;
7. the pro-democracy forces do not have reliable access to small arms and ammunition;
8. the resistance forces severely lack heavy armaments;
9. despite the considerable mismatch in armaments, morale, although difficult to measure, remains high in contrast to the junta's troops; and
10. despite obvious inferiority in weaponry, one year of armed struggle has gradually



tipped military balance in favor of the anti-junta forces, but due to a lack of centralized command, unified troops and a dearth of arms, a decisive victory is still far off.

- Four months after forming the PDFs, the NUG officially declared a “people’s defensive war” against the military junta on September 7th, 2021. This marked a new phase in the people’s revolution. The declaration of the people’s defensive war led to a nationwide surge in attacks by resistance forces.

#### **Section IV: Conflict Hotspots in the Armed Rebellion**

- Following the NUG’s declaration of “people’s defensive war”, several conflict hotspots throughout the country can be discerned: Anyar, Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni, and Karen State conflict theaters, as well as urban guerilla outbreaks in major cities and conflict-simmering Rakhine State.
- The armed conflicts in each theater have developed with their own peculiar features, and most seldom overlap.
- *Anyar Theater* – “Anyar,” the central plains of the Upper Myanmar, comprising majority Bamar-inhabited regions of Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay, became the prime center for public resistance. The Sit-Tat is strategically deploying numerous troops to conduct “a rolling series of separate but interlocking offensives” supported by artillery, armored vehicles and airstrikes to systematically clear the resistance forces in Anyar theater. Despite executing a series of heavy offensives, local resistance forces

remain highly active in the Anyar theater. The upcoming rainy season could possibly decide the military balance in Anyar theater, and it could have a significant impact on the entire resistance movement.

- *Chin Theater* – Currently, there is active fighting in eight out of nine townships in Chin. The key strategy of the resistance forces in Chin State is primarily focused on “denial” to block the Sit-Tat’s penetration into their area, “restriction” to obstruct the enemy troop movement, “sabotage” to destroy military-linked facilities and infrastructure, and “attrition” to impose a constant strain on the junta units. It looks like that the military is seeking to deploy its troops so as to hold its ground in cities and towns prior to the rainy season, while resistance forces are also possibly preparing for offensives during the upcoming wet season. It is highly likely that the military balance in the Chin theater would be tilted towards the resistance forces during the upcoming monsoon season.
- *Kachin Theater* – Clashes between the KIO and the Sit-Tat have continued since February 2021. The Kachin Independence Army’s strategy seems to focus on cutting off the military’s logistics and reinforcement routes into Kachin State, weakening the military’s existing strength through a series of operations, capturing military’s strategic outposts, locking down the economically vital areas under its control, and ultimately building up its strength in Kachin State. Amidst growing resistance and overstretch of its troops across the country, the military may be unable to ratchet up costly operations in Kachin state. So, amongst



all theaters, conflicts could simmer in the Kachin theater for a moment.

- *Shan Theater* – Shan Theater is perhaps the most complicated, with not only high-intensified clashes between the EAOs and the Sit-Tat, but also intra-and inter-ethnic conflicts. Throughout the post-coup period, a variety of EAOs have waged war against both each other and, on occasion, the military to acquire territory and advance their parochial interests. Despite facing widespread resistance across the country, the military's strategists are predominantly concerned with the threats in northern Shan State, which hosts a plethora of non-state armed outfits capable of deploying substantial firepower. Most EAOs in Shan State are not aligned with the NUG or the wider pro-democratic movement, and they are more focused on advancing their own political agendas and interests, namely acquiring territory and securing their own quasi-independence.
- *Karenni Theater* – Karenni Theater is currently a hotbed of resistance against the junta. Starting from February 2022, the junta' troops ramped up heavy aerial bombardment and continuous artillery attacks. The military has employed a scorched earth campaign in Karenni Theater. Yet, resistance continues, and the Karenni National Defense Forces (KNDF) claims that 90 percent of the junta's administration has ceased, and the people's administrative groups and civilian resistance forces have been filling the vacuum and running public services. However, the key challenge for the anti-junta forces is a lack of centralization and consolidation, and a serious shortage of arms and ammunition
- *Karen Theater* – Since the start of the coup, the Karen National Union (KNU) demonstrated its opposition to the junta and support for the anti-coup movement. When the protests morphed into armed resistance, most young vigilantes snuck into KNU areas to obtain military training. In December 2021, regime troops assaulted Lay Kay Kaw village, which had sheltered pro-democratic dissidents. That incident decisively escalated into a full-blown conflict, and consequently forced the KNU to involve itself more directly in the fray. The KNU has been striving to rebuild its military power and to advance its political vision, alongside working together with the pro-democratic forces and fighting against the military. An upward trend in clashes is thus inevitable in Karen theater in the near future.
- *Urban Guerrillas* – Since the start of the armed rebellion, successive waves of PDFs have also endeavored to infiltrate and operate in urban areas, such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. These groups' tactics range from bomb attacks, sabotage, and skirmishes to targeted assassinations. In the modern history of Myanmar, the current armed rebellion movement has witnessed the greatest intensity of urban guerilla attacks. The Sit-Tat has naturally sought to tighten its control in urban areas by strengthening its intelligence networks, upgrading tracing and surveillance technology, and actively hunting down the guerilla networks. However, attacks in capitals and cities across the country are highly unlikely to decrease in the future.





- *Rakhine State's Fragile Ceasefire* –The military is still deploying a significant number of troops to Rakhine State despite its fragile ceasefire with the Arakan Army (AA). The AA's political vision, "way of Rakhita" which promises a "struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan sovereignty," is irreconcilable with the Sit-Tat's self-proclaimed role as the guardian of national unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty. So, at some point, a renewed, possibly intensified, armed clash is inevitable, and if conflict resumes in Rakhine state, a continuous corridor from Kachin State to the Bay of Bengal could be formed by linking the Kachin, Chin, Anyar, and Rakhine theaters in the western part of the country.
- *An Overview of Combat Theaters* –Analysis of all conflict hotspots portends upward trend of clashes across the country in the foreseeable future. The Sit-Tat's limited resources have been overstretched across all theaters, with its chances of bringing the whole country under its control being progressively eroded. The upcoming monsoon season would tremendously contest the Sit-Tat's capability and resiliency to retain its hold in strategic areas, particularly cities and towns in conflict hotspots when airstrikes will be curtailed.
- Although the sprawling and decentralized resistance movement across the country have rapidly accelerated momentum of the armed rebellion in the first year, analysis of all theaters clearly demonstrates that the quickly developed armed resistance required strong coordination, consolidation and centralization amongst the anti-junta forces, as well as sufficient supply of

arms and ammunitions, particularly heavy armaments in order to wrest control of the state from the junta.

- In the current rebellion, although the Bamar-majority rise up to fight against the military and new conflict hotspots emerged in the central plains of Myanmar, an analysis of all theaters displays that the major battlefronts still lie in ethnic areas. Despite the complicated dynamic of ethnic politics and their inter- and intra-ethnic divergence, the ethnic armed groups, particularly the powerful major outfits, have played crucial roles in the current movement in terms of supporting the anti-junta forces and exerting enormous military pressure on the Sit-Tat.

## **Section V: The Point of No Return**

- In the current complicated conflict landscape, the NUG's strategy is primarily predicated on a mix of negotiating with ethnic political forces to find a political common ground, seeking formal recognition from the international community, increasing and institutionalizing military collaboration with the EAOs, disrupting the military's rule, expanding its operation areas through urban and rural guerilla warfare, establishing interim administrative and judicial mechanisms, and granting basic social services in controlled areas. However, an analysis of all conflict dynamic pointed that the anti-junta movement has a long road ahead to achieve its objectives of overthrowing the military and building an inclusive federal democratic state.
- For its part, the junta is applying a similar playbook enacted by previous military



dictators to consolidate its illegitimate power by compelling the people to submit to its rule through the excessive and brutal use of coercive power, normalization of the post-coup's abnormality, and the prolonging of its grip on power with the "3Cs" tactics (meaning "controlling urban centers," "containing and coopting the ethnic armed forces through peace negotiation," and "crushing the pro-democracy armed resistance").

- The junta has not been able to bring the recalcitrant people to accept its rule, and it has instead provoked an increasing level of resistance. In this context, the ferocious resistance movement led the junta to switch its strategy from "how to control" to "how to survive."
- In this way, post-coup Myanmar have progressively witnessed the proliferation of conflict and the deterioration of security infrastructure across the country. As neither the pro-democratic forces led by the NUG nor the Sit-Tat have so far been able to prevail, the gradual disintegration of central authority is increasingly clear.
- In these circumstances, the major ethnic armed groups have become the most important players that both Bamar-dominated belligerents aim to pull to their sides. There are now three groups of EAO responses to the military rule: the first group is actively joining forces with the resistance movement, the second is aligning with the junta, and the third is steadfastly advancing its own political visions of complete autonomy and quasi-independence. Amongst these three groups, the third unaligned group is the strongest

uncommitted player, and their alignment could very well shift the balance of power.

- Given the ascendancy of these centrifugal groups and an uncontrollable escalation in the nationwide conflict, Myanmar's polity has reached a point of no return for the pre-coup status quo ante.

## Section VI: One Year on and the Future

- The ill-judged military coup has opened up a Pandora's Box in Myanmar, out of which a series of unexpected crises, conflicts, and calamities have chaotically swirled. The coup has failed to consolidate control in the past year, and the armed rebellion has dramatically gained momentum with the emergence of new security actors, the repositioning of longstanding EAOs, and a resurgence in largescale conflicts.
- With uncertainty hovering around the whole landscape, as the situation is dynamic and quickly changing over time, an analysis of the whole dynamic landscape starting from our current understanding of the conflict and the military balance points to several possible outcomes facing Myanmar.
- The first scenario is that the junta successfully manages to bring the whole country under its control by annihilating the pro-democracy resistance forces while containing or coopting the EAOs. Although, during previous outbreaks of conflict in Myanmar's modern history, the central authority always managed to prevail in imposing its control, or at the least partial control, over the whole country (despite some setbacks, such as the continued



autonomy of some EAOs), it is less clear that it can do so this time.

- Another scenario is a negotiated settlement between the anti-junta forces and the military regime, as anticipated by the international community. In the current situation when the junta is likely to do everything to stay in power, even if it brings utter devastation to its institution and the country and public hatred against the military is unprecedentedly at high tide, a negotiated settlement is perhaps the least likely outcome.
- The third scenario is that the pro-democracy forces could attain victory over the military and forge effective political agreements with the ethnic armed groups to form the foundations for a genuine federal democratic union. Although the anti-junta forces hope to advance this scenario, this scenario is still far off in the current context.
- The last scenario is that the country could territorially fragment after a protracted cycle of conflict. It could lead to the emergence of several distinct polities surrounding a devastated and failed state, instead of one Myanmar. This context has prompted some analysts to predict the possibility of “balkanization” in Myanmar.
- In sum, it is difficult to predict which scenario will prevail in the future of Myanmar. But an overarching analysis of the current conflict landscape of post-coup Myanmar finds the following broad observations:
  1. the country has now become locked in a cycle of conflict;
  2. the military is frail, and its rule, despite excessive use of coercive power, is also fragile;
  3. despite gaining widespread popular support, the NUG and the PDFs are still far off from achieving their key objective of seizing the state from the regime, so it may be more inclined to hold onto gains and consolidate its authority in conflict hotspots;
  4. the ethnic armed groups have become the kingmakers in Myanmar’s conflict, as well as some being the primary beneficiaries of the current crisis; and
  5. with the quick escalation, intensification, and expansion of conflict, and the effective and forceful advancement of some powerful ethnic armed outfits, Myanmar cannot revert to its pre-coup status quo ante.
- However, a primary concern surrounding this current trajectory is that protracted, multifaceted conflict puts the country at risk of dividing into several distinct polities and serious territorial fragmentation, as in scenario four. In such an outcome, Myanmar could be overwhelmed by anarchy and warlordism, even transcending the hypothetical scenario of a failed state. In both the event of a Sit-Tat victory or this type of territorial fragmentation, the violence that now plagues Myanmar’s people is likely to continue indefinitely, strangling the fading promise of a country once on the path to democracy and development.







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## Introduction

The military's February 2021 coup opened up a Pandora's Box in Myanmar, causing a series of unexpected crises, conflicts and calamities to chaotically spiral. The junta's extreme violence against its own people unleashed a revolutionary energy amongst the people, particularly the youth, across the nation. Now, over a year since the coup, a relentless people's resistance movement rages on. Alongside daily protests, and boycott and disobedience campaigns, the armed resistance movement has dramatically gained momentum, zigzagging through different phases of rebellion. In the political turmoil of the post-coup Myanmar, a variety of new security actors have also emerged, and some are quickly institutionalized, thus posing a significant challenge to the now over-burdened ruling junta. Myanmar's more

longstanding non-state security actors (the ethnic armed organizations, or EAOs), have similarly adjusted to the evolving situation, with some resorting to fighting, others struggling to reposition themselves, and a few availing themselves of the chaos to advance their own interests and objectives.

A new dynamic range of hostilities shapes the conflict landscape of post-coup Myanmar. Fierce clashes, confined mainly to peripheral ethnic regions in the past, now spread to the country's heartland and urban areas. Previously dormant conflicts have been revived in ethnic peripheral areas, even those which experienced a period of relative peace over the past decade, while other simmering clashes in some states have boiled over into open and intensified violence. After the



coup, Myanmar increasingly appears locked in a cycle of escalating conflict.

In analyzing the developing conflict, this report makes several arguments. Firstly, Myanmar military's indiscriminate crackdown on the peaceful protest movement spurred the renewed civil war and the proliferation of anti-junta armed resistance throughout the entirety of Myanmar. This directly led to attempts by the pro-democracy movement to forge a united Federal Army under the National Unity Government (NUG) and an unprecedented unity between the Bamar-majority and minority ethnic actors, the subsequent emergence and evolving phenomenon of the People's Defense Forces, increasing involvement across Myanmar's diverse security actors, and the emergence of several major conflict hotspots.

Yet, secondly, it is increasingly clear that the ethnic armed groups, particularly powerful major EAOs, arguably now hold the key bargaining position. Yet, while both the NUG and the military regime have sought to pull them to their sides, several powerful EAOs remain concerned primarily with their own agendas. In the current environment, the EAOs can be categorized into three types: the first group are those actively joining forces with the resistance movement, the second group is aligning with gradually the junta, and the third group is steadfastly advancing their own autonomous political visions (i.e., de facto independence). Amongst these three groups, those in the third grouping have efficiently and practically availed themselves of the post-coup turmoil to their benefit. Distancing themselves from the NUG's federal democratic vision and the junta's military-dominated future polity, members

of the third groups are moving towards a loosely confederal political arrangement, with the Arakan Army (AA) even eyeing complete independence.

Thirdly and finally, an assessment of each wartime theater shows that neither pro-democratic forces led by the NUG nor the junta are currently favored to decisively prevail, and the gradual disintegration of central authority is increasingly apparent.

As seen across each of the major conflict theaters, the junta has not been able to subsume the country and people under its control, despite tremendous escalation in its employment of violence. To be clear, it is the junta's active choice to resort to such destabilizing violence, which highlights the terrible irony of their hollow claims to be the nation's sole unifying force. The junta's army as a force of "chaos" is intentionally creating anarchy throughout the country and forcibly driving the country into disintegration.

On the other hand, while anti-junta forces enjoy widespread popular support and built-up momentum, they are still far off from achieving their key political objective of seizing control of the state from the regime. Pro-democracy forces are still struggling to forge a broad alliance with the EAOs, including the third group, as well as acquire the military capabilities necessary to consolidate control over territory. Only in the event that pro-democracy forces seize effective control over key territories, sabotage the authority and rule of the junta, and put in place an interim administration can they hope to achieve their goal. Even so, this kind of success is a long way off, and, needless



to say, a prolonged conflict will be bloody and disastrous for the people of Myanmar.

In these circumstances, the major ethnic armed groups have become the kingmakers that both Bamar-dominated belligerents aim to pull to their sides. Amongst the EAOs, the unaligned group is the strongest uncommitted player, and their alignment could very well shift the balance of power.

Ultimately, with the ascendancy of these centrifugal actors and an uncontrollable multi-sided civil war, Myanmar's polity has reached a point of no return for the pre-coup status quo ante. Instead of restoring the country to its previous era, any outcome will mark a significant departure from Myanmar's modern history. An analysis of the whole dynamic landscape can reveal several possible outcomes facing Myanmar – the triumph of the military to bring the country under its rule, the resistance

movement's decisive victory to form a genuine a federal democratic union, a negotiated settlement, and finally, emergence of several distinct polities and territorial fragmentation.

To observe possible outcomes, this report traces the one-year journey of Myanmar's most recent armed rebellion, starting from late March 2021 to the present situation. It first examines the metamorphosis of the peaceful protests into armed rebellion, before discussing the concept of a Federal Army and the involvement of Myanmar's various EAOs in the fighting. Then it highlights the emergence and evolving phenomenon of the People's Defense Forces prior to systematically exploring conflict dynamics across Myanmar's various security actors, the shaping of several conflict hotspots, the belligerents' different strategies and positions, and, finally, the trajectory of the current conflict.

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## Section I: From the Outbreak of Armed Resistance to Hope for a Federal Army

On March 28th, 2021, the junta's troops stormed a protest camp in Tarhan ward, Kalay Town in Sagaing Region. As elsewhere in the country, soldiers and police, armed with heavy weapons, deployed ferocious firepower to raid the camp, later dubbed the Tarhan fortification. A protester said he never experienced such a barrage of lethal fire in his life.<sup>1</sup> However, unlike at other protests across the country, protesters in Tarhan resisted the ruthless attacks of the heavily armed security forces with makeshift weapons – traditional macho guns, gas rifles and hand-made firearms – at their disposal. Four protesters died in the attacks, but so did an equal number from the attacking side.<sup>2</sup> This was the first instance of civilian armed resistance to the military's one-sided crackdown on peaceful protesters since the February 1st coup d'état, and the very

beginning of the Myanmar's armed revolution against military rule.

In brief, the coup took place on February 1st, 2021 when the Myanmar military, called the "Sit-Tat"<sup>3</sup> by Myanmar people, overthrew and arrested the elected civilian leadership.<sup>4</sup> It is the third such power grab in Myanmar's modern history, and contrary to previous takeovers, this time triggered a widespread anti-coup protest across the country. Immediately following the coup, the people employed peaceful and nonviolent protests, which included acts of civil disobedience, public protests, a pot-banging movement, and boycott campaigns against military owned businesses. However, it gradually morphed into an armed resistance when it was confronted with extremely brutal repression from the Sit-Tat. The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – formed by ousted





elected lawmakers, predominantly from the National League for Democracy – declared that civilians have the right of self-defense on March 14th after the junta’s troops perpetrated a nationwide killing of at least 70 protesters,<sup>5</sup> including 58 people in raid on a protest camp in Yangon’s Hlaing Tharyar Township.<sup>6</sup>

The people, particularly the youth from urban areas who came of age after political reforms began in 2011, were driven towards the conclusion that peaceful resistance by itself cannot restore democracy in Myanmar. Across the country, defense teams quickly came into being with the aim of protecting protesters and civilians from the brutal and lethal crackdown, while dozens of other flocked into areas controlled by the established ethnic armed groups, predominantly in Karen, Karenni and Kachin States, for military training and equipping.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the month of March, several incidents of attacks against police stations and administrative offices with incendiary devices and hand grenades erupted in various cities and towns.<sup>8</sup> In late March, tension reached a tipping point as the junta stepped up its assaults on dissents. March 27th, the Armed Forces Day, commemorating the founding of the Sit-Tat, was the bloodiest day, witnessing at least 114 civilians including children killed.<sup>9</sup>

The March 27th massacre prompted many in the anti-junta movement to resolve that they have no other option but to fight back against the junta’s troops. A protester from Kalay Town recalled that “the news from the whole country has come to us, and we decided to fight back with all the weapons at our disposal, instead of being killed, if the soldiers attack our camp.”<sup>10</sup>

As described above, the protesters at “Tarhan fortification” resisted the junta’s troops with all available weapons. Elsewhere in the immediate vicinity, clashes soon broke out in villages around Kalay Town.<sup>11</sup> People from the villages along Gangaw-Kalay road also ambushed military convoys heading towards Kalay so as to block the reinforcement.<sup>12</sup> Despite being armed only with makeshift weapons such as traditional macho guns, protesters managed to hold their sandbag-fortified Tarhan camp for several days.<sup>13</sup> The Tarhan fighting not only marked the beginning of the armed resistance of the anti-junta movement, but clearly demonstrated a firm resolve to end military rule and restore democracy in Myanmar.

Completely unanticipated by the coup-leaders, the armed resistance movement sprung up in Bamar-dominated heartland of Myanmar which has seen no armed conflict for several decades since the collapse of the Bago-Yoma central headquarters of the Communist Party of Burma. This is a crucial element in the story of the post-coup environment developing into a full-scale civil war, as the active participation of ethnic Bamar against the military marks a decisive change from the heretofore on-and-off periphery conflicts with ethnic armed groups.

The fighting in Kalay was quickly followed by similar outbreaks of armed resistances in Gangaw,<sup>14</sup> Tamu,<sup>15</sup> Yinmarbin,<sup>16</sup> Pinlebu,<sup>17</sup> and Taze of the Sagaing Region,<sup>18</sup> as well as Mindat of the Chin State.<sup>19</sup> In these skirmishes in late March and early April, protesters managed to inflict some casualties on the junta’s troops despite being heavily outgunned, and it inspired others to believe that they can fight back against the military.



### *The Hope for a Federal Army*

While spontaneous fighting broke out, people who were very enthusiastic to fight the military regime hoped for the creation of a Federal Army, incorporating various ethnic armed groups opposed to the regime. Reflective of this hope, the CRPH voiced its intention of forming the long-discussed federal army. In late March 2021, Dr. Sa Sa, then the CRPH's international envoy, said in his interview with the Reuters that, "Having a federal army becomes a must and it's the way we achieve democracy and freedom."<sup>20</sup>

A federal army is not a new idea in Myanmar, and understanding this history is key for knowing its importance today. Throughout many decades of struggle, the concept of "federalism" in Myanmar has taken root and been advocated for by a variety of ethnic armed groups and organizations. Considering the military's dominance in Myanmar's political structure and its ever-present threat of violence against minorities, some EAOs had also repeatedly proffered up the idea of establishing a "federal army," integrating all armed groups into the national army so as to balance to the powerful Myanmar Sit-Tat, in a future federal state. Indeed, prior to the 2010 election, some ethnic armed groups articulated a proposal for a "Federal Union Army," in their drafted constitution.<sup>21</sup> As the peace negotiations gained momentum under the U Thein Sein's government (2011-2016), the federal army discourse naturally intensified. In late 2013, EAOs discussed a "Federal Union Army" as a main agenda item at a conference in Laiza, Kachin State.<sup>22</sup> Most EAO leaders put forward a proposal of the Federal Army as a part of the future Federal Union. Major General

Gam Shawng, chief of staff of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), once famously said that "The Federal Army is a necessity if the State is to be made up of federal structure."<sup>23</sup>

In spite of the popularity of a federal army after the Laiza conference in 2013, it has been vaguely and variously defined. Some EAO leaders even went so far as to deliberate about the composition and structure of the Federal Union Army, including a proposal that the position of the Commander-in-Chief should be rotated amongst the different ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup> However, some EAOs such as United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ethnic armed outfit, have not embraced the idea.<sup>25</sup> The UWSA perceives itself as different from other armed outfits, and integrating its large army into another military structure is presumably a virtual impossibility for them. For the Sit-Tat and U Thein Sein's government, the federal army was completely unpalatable, and they viewed it as a prelude to the disintegration of Myanmar's armed forces that they believe is the only institution that can preserve Myanmar's territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Yet, many persevered, and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC), an umbrella group composed of twelve ethnic rebel groups, announced the establishment of a Federal Union Army (FUA) under its supervision.<sup>26</sup> The UNFC then held military meetings of the FUA,<sup>27</sup> prepared its structure by designating military ranks to some commanders,<sup>28</sup> and even undertook a few joint-operations against the Sit-Tat while wearing the insignia of the FUA.<sup>29</sup> This move shocked Naypyidaw and even obstructed the ongoing peace negotiations.<sup>30</sup> However, a federal army did not practically come into being,



as some members were mainly concerned with military operations in their own geographic areas instead of integrating a patchwork of various armed forces and conducting comprehensive joint-operations. Moreover, the peace negotiations divided the UNFC itself, which ultimately dissolved via the gradual withdrawal of its members.<sup>31</sup> With the dissolution of the UNFC, the initiative to form a federal army disappeared as well. But the idea of federal army still remained in the ether of peace negotiations prior to the coup.<sup>32</sup>

After March 2021, the anti-junta movement soon resurrected the concept of a federal army, with protesters and activists hopeful of forming a monolithic federal army integrating all ethnic armed forces opposed to the military. In the past, the majority Bamar people often believed that the Sit-Tat represented them and the nation, but after experiencing a wantonly ruthless and lethal crackdown by the soldiers, they were shocked to realize that this was not the case. A *Guardian* report in March 2021 reflected the public mood then prevalent in Myanmar. People

yearned for the formation of a federal army, a force incorporating all the ethnic armed outfits and anti-junta groups.<sup>33</sup>

On March 18, 2021, three days after CRPH's declaration of "right of self-defense" Dr. Zaw Wai Soe, then a newly appointed acting minister of the CRPH, tweeted that "a federal union along with a federal army will arise" so as to "unroot and eliminate the corrupt dictatorship and its army."<sup>34</sup> Amongst rising call for a federal army, public attention then focused on the negotiations with ethnic armed groups to create a united military front.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the CRPH, pro-democratic activists, and ethnic political forces created the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), a political platform to deliberate about the future federal union, alongside growing rhetoric about a federal army. As the ethnic armed groups had the territory, arms, training, and experience garnered from decades of opposition to the military, getting them onboard through a federal army soon become a focus for the CRPH. Without them, taking on the Tatmadaw then seemed a nigh impossible task.

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## Section II: The Twisted Road to a Federal Army

Despite the people's expectations of forming a Federal Army, the ethnic armed groups do not share a common ground in their responses to the military coup. Divided geographically, historically, politically and ethnically, each group diverges in terms of interests, positions, objectives and visions. However, most EAOs, which have been battling the Sit-Tat for several decades, view the military coup as breakdown of the post-2010 political process, and negatively responded to the military's grab on power. Moreover, the junta's brutal crackdown on the peaceful protests drove some to initiate retaliatory attacks on the Sit-Tat's outposts in their operation areas.

A day after the coup, the Peace Process Steering Team (PPST), a bloc composed of ten ethnic armed groups which had signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), quickly responded to the coup with condemnation. As the takeover abruptly

closed off the political opening that had paved the way for the then-ongoing peace negotiation, uncertainty as to the ceasefire and the tenuous peace process prevailed. They soon called for the unconditional release of all detained leaders, including State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and the establishment of conditions that would allow for continued negotiation<sup>36</sup> But, these calls fell on deaf ears. The generals had no intention of reversing course. On March 6th, 2021, Karen National Union (KNU), the largest armed group in the PPST, held an online meeting with Dr. Sasa, then the CRPH's United Nations Special Envoy.<sup>37</sup> It was the first publicly known meeting between an EAO and the CRPH, which reinforced the expectation that a federal army could soon be formed.<sup>38</sup> Soon thereafter, the KNU announced it would protect the demonstrators in areas it controlled, and deployed troops to guard protests in some areas.<sup>39</sup>

Moreover, in a letter to the junta's chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on March 22nd, 2021,



KNU's Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe condemned the violence against civilians and rejected the former's invitation to a meeting.<sup>40</sup> It was followed by the KNU's refusal to attend the Armed Forces Day parade in Naypyidaw on March 27th.<sup>41</sup> That same day that the 5th Brigade of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the armed wing of the KNU, launched a surprised attack and seized a military outpost in Hpapun District near the Thai-Myanmar border.<sup>42</sup> Prior to the coup, several fights had occurred between the Sit-Tat and the 5th Brigade over disputes regarding the construction of a road by the military units in the 5th Brigade-controlled area.<sup>43</sup> Fresh clashes broke out soon after the coup. Although the Sit-Tat deployed numerous troops in the this location, the KNU troops moved to strategically isolated those units and blocked their supply.<sup>44</sup> With the March 27th seizure of the military outpost, the KNLA 5th Brigade demonstrated its solidarity with the anti-coup movement. This triggered an intensified retaliatory attack by the Sit-Tat, which launched several air strikes and artillery attacks on the 5th Brigade's bases and villages in this area.<sup>45</sup>

There is some debate as to whether the KNLA 5th Brigade launched the March 27th attack on its own volition or on order from the KNU headquarters. The junta issued a statement that the KNU had informed it that the attack was carried out by an order from Lt. Gen Baw Kyaw Hae, the deputy commander-in-chief of the KNLA, but not by one originating from headquarters. Later, that statement was denied by the KNU leadership, who accused the Sit-Tat of attempting to drive a wedge between KNU headquarters and the 5th Brigade.<sup>46</sup>

However, there were undeniably deep divisions within the KNU, with its central leadership devoid of authority and the separate Districts/Brigades acting autonomously. Therefore, the KNU headquarters

and most of the Brigades distanced themselves from the 5th Brigade while it was grappling with military's offensives prior to the coup. But, in this time, with escalation of the Sit-Tat's unceasing violence against peaceful protesters, armed clashes sporadically erupted in some areas controlled by other KNLA Brigades.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike the PPST, the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), composed of ethnic armed groups that primarily based in Northern Myanmar and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine, remained silent in the wake of the coup. However, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) soon signaled its disagreement with the other FPNCC members in its response to the military takeover. A week after the coup, KIO Vice-chairman Lt. Gen. Gun Maw "posted a note on his Facebook, raising his concerns that the authorities might use lethal force against protesters and urging demonstrators to be careful." Meanwhile, the KIO invited members of the Peace-Talk Creation Group (PCG), a Kachin civil society group that mediate peace talks between the government and KIO, to discuss the current political situation, and the KIO "urged the Tatmadaw (Sit-Tat) to avoid a violent crackdown on the protesters, otherwise it would raise its voice in defense of the people."<sup>48</sup>

In fact, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the armed wings of the KIO, had already engaged in regular clashes with the Sit-Tat in Kachin state since February 2021.<sup>49</sup> A day after two protesters were shot dead in Myitkyina, Kachin State in early March, the KIO reiterated that it would take steps to protect the people.<sup>50</sup>

Shortly afterwards, KIA seized and destroyed a military camp in Mohnyin township, and fighting intensified. It was reported that while leaving the destroyed camp, KIA soldiers chanted a popular



protest song and flashed “three fingers, a symbol of resistance for anti-coup protesters adopted from the Hunger game movie, as a sign of solidarity with the resistance movement.”<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, the KIA launched several offensives against military outposts in Kachin and Northern Shan States, and according to some reports, about 15 clashes broke out between the military and the KIA in northern Shan State, Mohnyin, Mogaung, Hpakant, Waingmaw, Dawthponeyan, and Sadon.<sup>52</sup>

While brutally cracking down on the peaceful protesters in urban areas, the junta swiftly responded to the KIA with fierce airstrikes.<sup>53</sup> On March 25th, two days before KNLA 5th Brigade overrun a military post in Karen state, the KIA captured a strategic military base at Alaw Bum near its Laiza headquarters.<sup>54</sup> The KIA’s seizure of Alaw Bum military base clearly exhibited its resolve to fight against the Sit-Tat, and it heralded a new front in the rapidly spreading conflict in Myanmar. These attacks by two major ethnic armed groups occurred before the Tarhan battle in Kalay town, and such attacks by major EAOs fueled people’s expectation of a federal army.

With resurgent clashes in some areas of Kachin and Karen state, the situation was building up for conflicts in Chin State in the west and Kayah State in the east. Two ethnic armed outfits based in these regions began stirring, the Chin National Front (CNF) in Chin State and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) in Kayah State. These are smaller groups than the KIO and KNU in terms of manpower and weaponry, and both states witnessed very few clashes in in the past ten years after both signed bilateral ceasefires with Naypyidaw in 2012.<sup>55</sup>

Like most ethnic armed outfits, KNPP and CNF were initially slow to cope with the rapidly changing

political dynamics of post-coup Myanmar. However, the coup led to a massive protest in these two states, and in the face of the Sit-Tat’s brutal crackdowns, the younger protesters decided to take up arms against the military regime. In this way, the coup brought a dramatic transformation to the conflict landscapes in Chin and Karenni States, albeit not initiated by the existing ethnic armed groups, but rather by young dissidents. Nevertheless, the CNF and KNPP gradually adapted to the evolving political trend and allied themselves with the resistance movement by providing crucial training and weapons to largely inexperienced volunteers.

### ***The Peace Process Steering Team Response***

Despite public expectation for a federal army and escalating fighting between some EAOs and the Sit-Tat looming large, the federal army is still far from being practically implemented. Although the EAOs always proudly presented themselves as ethnic revolutionary forces, their responses were decidedly mixed when faced with a nationwide revolutionary moment. David Scot Mathieson correctly identified three broad typologies of the EAO early responses to the coup, “rhetoric and armed action, words with little action, and silence and inaction,”<sup>56</sup> but the range of responses grew more complex and diversified later. In David Mathieson’s typology, the KNU, KIA, and later the CNF and KNPP fit into the first category, while other EAOs are in the second and third. The responses of the other EAOs are worth exploring in further details here.

The PPST (of which, the KNU is the most powerful member) issued several stern statements that included inspirational rhetoric condemning the military coup and violence against civilians, and supporting the anti-junta movement, but most members of the bloc hesitated to openly side



with the movement, with some focusing more on advancing their own political interests and agendas.

The Restoration Council for Shan State (RCSS),<sup>57</sup> one of the largest groups in the PPST, was very vocal in publicly denouncing the coup and the Sit-Tat's violence, and its leader General Yawd Serk was the first to call for the unity of ethnic armed groups and the people against the military junta. In the meeting of the PPST organized on February 20th, 2021, Yawd Serk proclaimed that "we have to stand together with the whole public,"<sup>58</sup> and again on March 27th when the military brutally killed over 110 people across the country, he reiterated that, "The ethnic armed groups now have a similar enemy and we need to join hands and hurt those that are hurting the people. We need to join together."<sup>59</sup>

Yet, contrary to its conciliatory rhetoric, the RCSS had been battling its rival EAOs such as Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP) for greater control of territory and resources in the Northern Shan States, and the RCSS made no discernable military move against the Sit-Tat despite its lofty statements. Thus, David Mathieson commented that "it's more likely that Yawd Serk is prevaricating, waiting to see which side will prevail so he can cut a deal with them."<sup>60</sup> Subsequent developments have confirmed this analysis.

Like the RCSS, most members of the PPST hedged their bets by issuing several lofty statements in favor of the anti-coup movement while quietly maintaining their relations with the junta. Two small members of the PPST, the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (a small KNU splinter group) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) sent officials to the Armed Forces Day parade in 2021.<sup>61</sup> Others, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), the New Mon State Party (NMSP) and KNU/KNLA

Peace Council (PC) met with the representatives of the junta in late April.<sup>62</sup> These meetings occurred despite the PPST formally declaring an end to peace talks with the army.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, all members of the PPST, except the CNF which has been engaging an active combat with the Sit-Tat in Chin State, attended, virtually or in person, the sixth anniversary ceremony of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, held by the junta on October 15th, 2021. According to reports, General Mutu Say Poe (Chairman of the KNU), Col. Khun Okker (Pa-O National Liberation Organization-PNLO), Ja Yakob (Lahu Democratic Union-LDU), and Nai Onh Ma Nge (NMSP) were virtually present for the ceremony, and Saw Steel (DKBA), Naw Kapaw Htoo (KNU/KNLA-PC), Yebaw Min Zaw (All Burma Students' Democratic Front - ABSDF) and Lt. Col Sai Kwang (RCSS) attended it in person.<sup>64</sup> Their attendance triggered stern public criticism for conferring a certain legitimacy on what many see as an illegitimate junta. In particular, the presence of the KNU's leader in this event clearly demonstrated the hedged stances and flexible approach many EAOs have adopted in the current anti-coup struggle.

Despite registering the KNU within David Mathieson's "rhetoric and armed action" typology, its approach initially was somewhat cautious overall, especially before entering into open conflict with the Sit-Tat in the Lay Kay Kaw incident. In the months after the coup, it sheltered dissidents and CRPH members in its areas and offered military trainings to young people planning to fight against the junta, while some Brigades of the KNU actively fought against the Sit-Tat. However, the KNU leadership was initially reluctant to throw in its lot with the anti-junta movement, and if doing so, they are deeply concerned about a return to all-out warfare in their base areas.



Moreover, the KNU, similar to other EAOs who harbor a profound distrust for the NLD, have doubted the political orientation of the CRPH, comprising mostly NLD representatives. The Bamar politicians in CRPH and NUG are widely viewed as remaining true to their NLD-culture of a dismissive attitude towards the ethnic political forces, and of holding political privileges. Some disagreements between the CRPH members and ethnic political forces in the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), many of which remain unresolved, have incited more mistrust from the ethnic armed groups.<sup>65</sup>

In this situation, the KNU leadership, especially the pro-NCA faction, sought to preserve the moribund NCA through which it hoped to be able to maintain some relations with the junta and to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. Despite increasing counter-arguments that this peace agreement is invalid,<sup>66</sup> most members of the PPST shared a similar position to the KNU leadership, reiterating their firm commitments to the NCA. Accordingly, even a representative of the ABSDF, a student army formed after the 1988 democratic uprising, participated in the meeting with the junta,<sup>67</sup> all while its leaders were believed to be working closely with the dissidents since the coup.

Most PPST members appear to be of the opinion that the current crisis must ultimately be resolved through political means at the negotiation table, instead of through toppling the military junta by military means. Despite repeated exhortations to stand up with the anti-junta movement and the occasional support to the newly formed militia groups and dissidents based in the hope that the public resistance movement's limited military pressure would generate more leverage over the Sit-Tat in the negotiation process, integration of

their forces into a federal army in this revolutionary movement is not a part of their strategy.

### *The Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee Response*

Similar to the PPST, most members of the competing FPNCC have primarily focused on advancing their own political agendas and interests instead of forging a united military front. In preparation for the coup, the Sit-Tat sought to secure ceasefires with the Arakan Army (AA) that it fought with until late 2020.<sup>68</sup> After the 2020 elections, fighting largely ceased in Rakhine State, and it remained quiet even during the height of the public protests against the coup in spring 2021. AA chief Major General Twan Mrat Naing even said that he does not want the pro-democratic Civil Disobedience Movement and street protests spreading to Rakhine state.<sup>69</sup>

It appears that the AA's leaders do not want their state to be convulsed by the power struggle ongoing in the country's heartland politics. Indeed, they are predominantly concerned with the implementation of their own "Rakhita way," which they describe as "the national liberation struggle to restore the Arakan's sovereignty."<sup>70</sup> Therefore, the AA did not hesitate to exploit the heartland's political turmoil to their advantage with strategic moves aimed at consolidating its hold in Rakhine State.<sup>71</sup>

At the same time, however, the AA, along with its Three Brotherhood Alliance counterparts, the TNLA and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), issued a statement in March 2021 after a long silence calling on the military to immediately cease "the violent shootings and killings of peacefully protesting citizens," and claimed that, if not, they would cooperate





with the ethnic people fighting in the “Spring Revolution.”<sup>72</sup> This statement enhanced the public expectations for a federal army, but the AA still cautiously maintains its ceasefire with the Sit-Tat. The TNLA and MNDAA, on the other hand, have then engaged in sporadic fighting with the Myanmar military in Northern Shan State. On April 10th, ten days after issuing statement, forces of the Brotherhood Alliances led by the TNLA attacked a police station in Shan State, killing at least ten police officers, in symbolic solidarity with the anti-coup resistance.<sup>73</sup>

Nonetheless, these two groups are more attentive to the expansion of their controlled areas in Northern Shan State than actively allying themselves with the pro-democratic forces. The TNLA has reportedly cooperated with the Shan State Progressive Party/Shan State Army North (SSPP/SSA), a member of the FPNCC, to expel another ethnic Shan armed group, the PPST member Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army South (RCSS/SSA) out of Northern Shan State.<sup>74</sup> The northern forces managed to recapture bases in Namtu, Hsipaw, Kyaukme and Kyethi that the RCSS had occupied a few years ago.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, the MNDAA, an ethnic Kokang armed group, took advantage of the current political situation by launching fierce offensives on army positions around the town of Mong Ko on the China border.<sup>76</sup> Although these clashes have made the Northern Shan State a hotbed of intensified conflict after the coup, the main agenda of these northern groups is not to cooperate with the anti-junta forces to topple the military, but to consolidate their hold on these areas and to advance their political interests in autonomy.

Other members of the FPNCC, the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the National Democratic Alliances Army (NDAA) fit most easily into David

Mathieson’s “silence and inaction” typology. In April 2021, the junta’s peace negotiating team visited the UWSA and NDAA to explain their reasons for the coup and the current political situation and asked them not to get involved in the resistance movement against the junta.<sup>77</sup> In fact, both groups have little to no stake in the current movement as their main concern is to inhibit spillover from the political conflicts and crises of other regions into their areas. Thus, they have knowingly ignored the country’s wider plight and shrewdly focused instead on institutionally strengthening their de facto status as semi-independent actors. They are not concerned with federalism or democracy, despite the name of their umbrella group FPNCC starting with “Federal.” Their leaders realize the fact that the federal arrangement that other ethnic leaders have advocated for would not guarantee their current semi-independent status.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, a federal army is not within their political calculus.

Members of the FPNCC, with the exception of the KIO, predominantly concentrate on consolidating their influence at the expense of creating a united military front against the junta. This stance has not precluded the occasional lending of limited support to the anti-junta dissidents, but the odds of joining sides with anti-junta forces are slim.

### *A Twisted Road to Federal Army*

The varied and fluid responses of the ethnic armed groups to the military coup signified the complexity of the ethnic political landscape and the diversity of their interests and political agendas. However, some leaders of the anti-coup resistance movement appear to have undersold this complicity and diversity, as they have been strongly driven by the growing public expectation for a federal army. For example, Dr. Sasa has often voiced his optimism for a federal army: “it is very easy to



integrate existing armed organizations. The Kachin Independence Army could become the federal army in Kachin State. But they will send joint chiefs of staff to Naypyidaw to command under the chief of staff. This is how it has to go, whether we like it or not.”<sup>79</sup>

The reality of the situation is far more complicated than anticipated. The leaders of the ethnic armed outfits understand it quite well. Padoh Saw Taw Nee, head of foreign affairs for KNU, hedged: “We already have armed groups who have their own armies, but it’s very difficult to work together, to have coordination. Ethnic coordination is very, very difficult from the north to the south. They are different in their ideas, their thinking, their nature and history, as well as geographically.”<sup>80</sup> History has witnessed repeated failures of coordination between ethnic armed groups, and worse between ethnic armed groups and Bamar rebels. It is no different now as well. Despite the prevalence of exuberant optimism about the emergence of a federal army amongst the general public and leaders of the resistance movement, the federal army discourse has faded away in the growing tide of armed rebellion.

There are a myriad of reasons underlying the infeasibility to form an integrated federal army in Myanmar. Among them, the most significant reasons are as follows:

1. The five-years of NLD rule created a deep mistrust between the ethnic armed groups and the majority Bamar pro-democratic forces. During its reign, the NLD leaders were seen as aligning with the Sit-Tat in their policy against the ethnic armed groups. The NLD government reportedly directed the military to launch intensive campaigns against the KIA and AA, even the airstrikes.<sup>81</sup>

During peace negotiations, ethnic leaders believed that the NLD government refused to make political concessions, contrary to their expectations. Therefore, AA chief General Twan Mrat Naing said that, “the NLD government after 1988 promised federalism and they pledged this to the ethnic people, but after they came to power, they didn’t keep the promise. So we have learned the lesson and we are not naive anymore.”<sup>82</sup> Even now, major ethnic armed groups which are supporting and collaborating with the NUG, still maintain some doubt, and their growing relations in post-coup period with the members of CRPH and NUG have done little to quell such mistrust. With longstanding mistrust deeply in place, the integration of disparate ethnic armed forces under a monolithic army is an unrealistic expectation. The anti-junta forces later appeared to realize the fact, and instead practically sought bilateral and multilateral coordination for operations with some EAOs. However, a shallow reserve of trust often creates shaky relations between the NLD-led anti-junta forces and its aligned EAOs.

2. Sai Kham Sarm, a spokesperson for the RCSS, told the Southeast Asia Globe that, “without guarantees of federalism, how can we step towards a federal army?”<sup>83</sup> Ethnic political forces have a great deal of concern that Bamar politicians manipulated them into opposing the military coup, and after attaining their own objectives, will follow their predecessors in failing to keep their promises. Amidst this mistrust, political agreements on a shared vision for the future of the country are a necessary prerequisite for an effective federal army. The creation of a federal army should be underpinned by a broad political



consensus on the future arrangement of the political union among its diverse actors. So far, the National Union Consultative Council (NUCC), comprising a wide range of actors from activists to ethnic armed groups, has been diligently but somewhat slowly conducting a series of negotiations on a federal future of the country.<sup>84</sup> But, consensus on how to build up a future federal state is still far away amongst the various participants. Only through incessant dialogue and steadfast guarantees of a realistic federal future can a federal army be progressively crystallized by forces of disparate groups, but this will take time.

3. In a country long dominated by a charismatic leader, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the anti-coup resistance movement boldly claims to practice a collective form of leadership. The National Unity Government (NUG), a shadow government, has been trying to build up an inclusive collective leadership, appointing members of ethnic minorities to top positions and expanding the participation of women and the youth.<sup>85</sup> It promises a new prospect for Myanmar politics, but now the current struggle urgently needs a rapid strengthening in robust collective leadership to navigate the movement effectively in an uncertain environment. In particular, a strong revolutionary collective leadership, formed based on political agreement between the pro-democracy forces and ethnic armed groups, is a “must” to unite disparate armed forces. The creation of a federal army in Myanmar would thus be driven by the emergence of a strong collective leadership, as well as a political consensus on a future federal union.

4. Myanmar’s ethnic rebels have historically been divided by political beliefs, vision, interests, and ethnic identities, as well as geography. Moreover, internal contention and cleavages across most ethnic armed groups have further fragmented the ethnic politics, and the military’s “divide-and-rule” policy has always exacerbated such fragmentation. Therefore, a series of coalition-building and military coordination activities have all been short-lived without substantive outcomes. Accordingly, the ethnic rebels have found themselves trapped in a prisoner’s dilemma. They are naturally reluctant to fully cooperate with each other for fear of betrayal despite being more or less aware that their mutual cooperation will possibly enable them to mount a serious challenge to the military.<sup>86</sup> Such a fragile and fragmented ethnic politics sets back any initiative to form a unified anti-Sit-Tat force.

Although most ethnic armed groups and pro-democratic forces do not differ so much on the need for a federal army for a future federal union, in reality, it is still a “far-off dream.”<sup>87</sup> AA Chief General Twan Mrat Naing thus said, “This idea is good, but in reality, to substantiate this concept is not that easy or practical.”<sup>88</sup> The plausible solution for the creation of a future federal army would be, in the first instance, to form a military coalition and to undertake coordinated military operations while gradually proceeding to the goal through negotiations and building trust. The anti-junta forces and sympathetic armed groups have gradually realized that following this path is the most realistic instead of pursuing an ambitious dream of forming a federal army. For the pro-democracy movement, this dawning realization led to the decision to form the People’s Defense Forces and attempt to wrest control of the central state from the military regime.





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### Section III: The Emergence of Organized Pro-Democracy Forces

Once the CRPH announced the right of self-defense on March 14th, young protesters quickly formed ad-hoc defense teams across the country, while others fled into areas controlled by the established EAOs for military training and equipping. The CRPH soon announced its formal abolition of military's drafted 2008 constitution, and published a Federal Democracy Charter on March 31st.<sup>89</sup> The two-part charter outlines the foundations for a National Unity Government (NUG), formed on April 16th with the aim of bringing together opponents of the military coup.<sup>90</sup> On May 5th, the NUG stated that it formally formed a "People's Defense Force (PDF)."

According to its defense policy and its statement, the NUG said that the PDF is a precursor to establishing a Federal Union Army.<sup>91</sup> It aims to make the PDF its military wing, and later to integrate the PDF and a raft of ethnic armed

groups into the as-yet unrealized federal army. As a first step, the NUG entered discussions with the local defense teams, which proliferated widely once the CRPH announced "the right of self-defense," to transform them into the PDF.<sup>92</sup> The NUG began to form several PDFs, drawing on the youth who had acquired a modicum of military training in EAO-controlled areas, and also locally organized armed outfits with various names popping up across the country.

The PDFs can be classified into two categories: autonomous local PDFs termed "local defense forces (LDFs) and those linked with the NUG's Ministry of Defense (MOD), which are known as "PDFs." Our past report argued that, "LDFs have mostly developed from local defense teams, and they operate in their townships (somewhat) independently and separately from the NUG while remaining outside its command and control. The PDFs on the other hand bear stronger connections to the shadow government – some were formed



by, other recognized by, and a few commanded by the NUG.<sup>93</sup> Beside LDFs and PDFs, there are also People's Defense Teams (PDTs, or *PaKaPha* in Burmese) formed by the NUG. The main task of the PDT is to engage in urban guerrilla warfare, to provide trainings and necessary logistics, to mobilize the public and to coordinate during major offensives with the PDFs.<sup>94</sup>

The NUG initially formed five regional commands: Northern, Eastern, Southern, Central, and Western Regional Commands, but later those regional commands were later merged into three military divisional commands, No. (1) Military Divisional Command, No. (2) Military Divisional Command and No. (3) Military Divisional Command.<sup>95</sup>

The PDFs are formed as battalions under the Military Divisional Commands, and the PDTs are township-based defense forces under the control of the NUG's Ministry of Defense.<sup>96</sup> Most LDFs are also township-based militia groups formed by the local pro-democratic activists, but some were coalesced into district, region, and state-level coalitions. The NUG has also started forming People's Administrative Teams (PATs, *PaAhPha* in Burmese) and People's Security Teams (PSTs, *PaLaPha* in Burmese), of which the former is mainly concerned with administrative activities and the latter with public security duties.

The formal size of a PDF battalion is 200 personnel, but some are up to 500.<sup>97</sup> The NUG Defense Minister officially said that the NUG has already formed 259 PDF battalions across the country trained for combat. While most PDFs under the control of the NUG are closely working with the ethnic armed groups, PDFs in ethnic areas are under the EAO's operational control, for instance, the Kachin People's Defense Force (KPDF) under the command of the KIA and the Karenni National Defense Force (KNDF) under the

command of the KNPP. The PDTs (*PaKaPha*) are already formed in 250 out of 330 townships all over the country,<sup>98</sup> but these are mostly small cells of two or three dozen individuals.

The most difficult task is to compile a list of the LDFs. Some groups exist only on paper, quite a few are inactive, other merged into larger groups and changed into PDFs, a few adopted new names, and many operate secretly due to security concerns. In our report published in November 2021, 309 LDFs/PDFs were recorded based on self-proclamations, media statements, and interviews, but the NUG Defense Minister recently said that there are 401 LDFs in the entire country.<sup>99</sup> According to a NUG's statement, 354 groups out of these 401 are already linked with the NUG's Ministry of Defense, and over 100 have already been transformed into PDF battalions under its control.<sup>100</sup> The sizes of LDF range from larger groups comprising a few thousand personnel to small cells of a couple of dozen individuals. In his recent interview, the leader of the People Revolution Army (PRA) said his army has 32 companies, including 3,028 personnel.<sup>101</sup>

The total number of the PDF/PDT/LDF personnel is difficult to be estimated. We estimated that it hovers around 25,000 in our November report, but we expected that the figures would increase as the initial volunteers passed their basic military lessons on to other young activists.<sup>102</sup> Based on our February 2022 data, the total number of the PDF personnel is now around 40,000, and the number within the PDTs is not much different from that figure. U Ye Mon, the NUG Defense Minister, said that the number of PDFs is between 50,000 and 100,000.<sup>103</sup> Most PDT members are not well-trained like those in PDFs and received their basic military training,



mainly urban guerilla tactics, indirectly from the PDFs. The estimation of the exact number of the LDF is highly unlikely, as most are not registered like the PDF and PDT members. The fluidity of the LDFs makes estimation more difficult, because some members of LDFs joined PDFs or PDTs, some are inactive, and new members are also always increasing. According to our interviews with numerous LDFs, the total number of the LDF personnel is not less than 30,000 across the country.

Unlike the periphery-based ethnic armed groups, the PDFs, PDTs, and LDFs extend throughout the whole country, from Tanintharyi in the south to Kachin in the north and from Karenni and Shan in the east to Chin in the west. Despite their ubiquity, they are unevenly distributed, as Sagaing hosts the largest number and Ayeyarwady and Shan have only a small number. Several groups have been conducting urban guerilla operations, including bombings, the sabotage of military-related facilities and businesses, and targeted assassinations in urban centers, but most have engaged in armed resistance against the Sit-Tat in rural areas. There are also some groups that have joined with the EAOs in sophisticated operations against the military, primarily in ethnic areas in Chin, Kachin, Karenni, and Karen states.

Within a short period of time, the PDFs, PDTs, and LDFs have become a significant new security actor in the changing security landscape of post-coup Myanmar. Contrary to the early prediction that these groups, as rudimentary armed units hastily formed by frustrated young vigilantes, would dwindle in their uphill battle against one of the largest militaries in the region, they have become much stronger and more organized over time.

### *The Evolving Phenomenon of the Armed Defense Forces*

The PDF/PDT/LDF phenomenon is evolving swiftly in Myanmar's complicated security landscape. Despite its full configuration still uncertain, the current analysis reveals a variety of significant features:

1. The NUG and the newly emerging armed groups unanimously assert that they aim to overthrow the junta so as to build up a Federal Democratic Union.<sup>104</sup> It means that their political objective is to seize the central state apparatus that the military illegally seized from the elected government.<sup>105</sup> Thus, their objective essentially mirrors that of the dissolved Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and the original iteration of the All Burma Student's Democratic Front but differs from those of the periphery ethnic armed groups who are primarily concerned with defending and controlling territories in their respective ethnic areas. However, it does not mean that all PDFs/LDFs share the same objective. If the leading political forces fail to navigate the armed resistance forces to the ultimate political goal, separated and isolated war theaters would possibly drive locally based armed forces to concentrate on an expulsion of military from their areas and control their own land instead of undertaking a holistic national objective.
2. Despite little progress in establishing a federal army, the PDFs have so far worked to actively and closely cooperate with the EAOs, but PDTs and most LDFs are operating largely independently. In fact, most of these groups have been mainly formed from volunteers who were trained



by the ethnic armed groups such as the KNU, KIA, CNF and KNPP, and some are equipped by EAOs. Many PDFs have joined forces with EAOs in joint campaigns against the military, primarily in ethnic areas in Chin, Kachin, Karenni, and Karen States, and some are also under the operational control of the local EAOs. The coordinated military operations have positively reshaped relations, as well as built up trust, between “co-belligerents” of the PDFs and its aligned EAOs, but such positive improvement has yet to be materialized into a consolidated and centralized command.

3. After the coup, the junta’s immediate failure to expand its power and the collapse of its basic administrative mechanisms led to a nationwide power vacuum during which anti-coup armed forces were quick to exploit the opportunity. The dissidents’ forces immediately gained a foothold in many places, particularly in rural areas, and until now, the junta has still struggled to reinstitute and consolidate its rule across the country. Since the start of the armed rebellion, the key strategies that resistance forces have persistently applied are “denial” to block the junta’s expansion of power and “sabotage” to undermine its institutionalization. In carrying out those strategies, they apply a variety of guerilla tactics, including ambushes, sabotage, targeted assassinations and hit-and-run attacks in rural areas and urban areas.
4. In October 2021, U Naing Htoo Aung, a permanent secretary of the NUG’s Ministry of Defense, said that “it has formed a Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C).”<sup>106</sup> This entity officially operates as a centralized military command structure, including NUG and allied EAOs leaders.<sup>107</sup> It aims to integrate the disparate civil resistance forces, and to coordinate military operations between these forces and allied EAOs. Given that resistance units are diffuse throughout the country, the creation of C3C is underway, but it remains a work in progress. In some areas, the NUG appear to coordinate bilaterally with an individual EAO, instead of going through the C3C. Some military coordination bodies such as Chinland Joint Defense Committee (CJDC) in Chin State and Union Defense and Liberation Alliance (UDLA), comprising of over 90 groups across the country, have come into being. Regardless, if such nascent bodies can be systematically institutionalized, it could serve as a precursor for a future federal army.
5. Our November report found out that “an estimated 30 percent of the PDFs (LDFs) are under the command of the NUG and 40 percent have some links to the NUG, but 30 percent operate independently.”<sup>108</sup> After the creation of the C3C, according to MOD officials, coordination among the PDFs, collaboration between the PDFs and allied EAOs, and cooperation with LDFs has been smoother and effective.<sup>109</sup> Due to the size, scale and nature of the armed struggle across the country, and the reluctance of some EAOs to fully coordinate under the supreme command system, the C3C does not appear to be in overall command, but it does have increased an effective command over its fully-controlled PDFs. Likewise, an estimated 25 percent of the LDFs are still operating independently, and 75 percent are linked with the NUG. Linkage does not imply a complete acceptance of the NUG command, however.



6. A weak centralized command and autonomous armed entities entails operational disadvantages against the well-established military, as well as an ineffectual management of limited resources. It is indisputable that intense fighting has impelled armed resistance forces to mature into more organized formations and coordination in a short time. However, without a strong centralized command structure, the splintering resistance forces will struggle to defeat the institutionalized military and thus run the risk of being restricted within their own areas or being whittled down one by one over the course of years.<sup>110</sup> In addition to operational disadvantages, a weak centralized command and a plethora of autonomous armed entities often lead to a loose adherence to a military code of ethic and discipline. Although the NUG issued military codes of conduct, repeatedly insisted that the PDFs to follow them,<sup>111</sup> a weak command structure cannot ensure effective enforcement amongst the disparate forces. This lack of command and control likely contributed to the Yinmarbin massacre.<sup>112</sup>
7. The other main challenge is to acquire arms and ammunition. So far, the NUG and EAOs have managed to procure only around 10,000 small arms for the PDFs, while it is estimated that approximately 5,000 rifles were purchased on the black market by individual PDFs and LDFs, with the support of public donations and with their own money. The 15,000 small arms represent only 20 to 25 percent of all the weapons needed by all the anti-junta combatants. Most resistance forces therefore rely on homemade firearms produced by the local arms-manufacturing facilities. According to my findings, there are about 70 weapons manufacturing workshops, of which 10 to 12 percent can produce semi-automatic rifles, including 3-D printing productions,<sup>113</sup> but most are still rudimentary. These homemade firearms serve about 30 to 40 percent of localized armed requirements.
8. In addition to a significant shortage of small arms, the resistance forces severely lack heavy armaments. Photos and video footages frequently posted on social media demonstrates that some forces have acquired more advanced weapons, such as machine guns, rocket propelled grenade launchers and mortars, but these are in very limited numbers. Throughout the past several months, the Sit-Tat has been launching heavy offensives against the PDFs with air-power, artillery, and armored-vehicles, and countermeasures such as artillery, anti-air, and anti-armor capabilities are still unavailable to anti-junta forces. Although some EAOs possessed heavy equipment, such as China-made man portable air defense systems,<sup>114</sup> they are reluctant to hand them over to the newly-founded armed outfits. Without a countermeasure against the military's heavy equipment and aerial power, the NUG and PDF will struggle to take sizable territory even if they have potential to seize remote rural areas.<sup>115</sup>
9. Despite the considerable mismatch in armaments, the volunteers in the resistance forces seem determined to sacrifice their lives to fight the Sit-Tat. Several combatants said that "they joined, without any weapons, their battalions on the





perilous battlefields in the hope of collecting weapons from the fallen enemies.”<sup>116</sup> A 24-year-old volunteer affirmed that “our enemy is clueless about why they are fighting and for whom, but we are fighting for the restoration of democracy and for our people. Thus, we firmly believe that we will ultimately prevail.”<sup>117</sup> Public support is one of the key factors that keep the anti-coup dissidents motivated, as it continues unabated after a year of the coup. Morale, although difficult to measure, remains high in contrast to the junta’s troops.

10. Overburdened by unprecedented public hatred against the military and sprawling armed resistance, morale amongst the junta’s troops has been dramatically declining, as has its manpower. At the start of the armed rebellion in last year, some analysts jumped to easy conclusion that the Sit-Tat, one of the largest standing forces in region, will comfortably prevail over new armed resistance, but now the armed rebellion has been progressively gaining momentum. Despite obvious inferiority in weaponry, one-year armed struggle has gradually tipped military balance in favor of the anti-junta forces. Contrary to its leader’s claim, in reality, the Sit-Tat has already lost all prospects of completely annihilating its new enemies. However, due to a lack of centralized command, unified troops and a dearth of arms, the newly-founded PDFs will still struggle to attain a decisive victory over the Sit-Tat in the foreseeable future.

In short, since their inception, the anti-coup armed forces have grown rapidly, and taken shape within a number of months. As an evolving phenomenon, it is still in progress, and it is

unclear to what extent it can be fully configured as a unified fighting force. However, it is increasingly clear that it will not fade away easily, and the junta faces a serious enemy.

### *Declaration of a People’s Defensive War*

After the NUG formally launched the PDFs, attacks on the junta’s security forces, its supporters and military-linked facilities increased. Most did not appear to be operationally coordinated by the NUG and instead conducted autonomously by individual groups. Meanwhile, the NUG has delivered several basic military training courses to an eclectic mix of students, activists, and workers who had fled the military’s repression to ethnic-controlled areas. The NUG formally released a video of a graduation ceremony commemorating the completion of military training for its first batch of recruits on May 28th, 2021.<sup>118</sup> Likewise, a number of fundraising campaigns have sprung up to finance the newly-founded PDFs and its military activities.<sup>119</sup> People inside and outside Myanmar have also enthusiastically supported and donated to the NUG and the PDFs via several programs, such as Go Fund Me, Raffle Tickets, and a Spring Lottery.<sup>120</sup> The NUG minister of defense said that it has acquired 34 million US dollars from donations, of which 85 percent was spent on equipping.<sup>121</sup>

Four months after officially forming the PDFs, the NUG declared a “people’s defensive war” against the military junta on September 7th, 2021. During his video address, Acting President Duwa Lashi La called on all citizens to revolt against the military rule in every corner of the country. He asserted that “with the responsibility to protect life and properties of the people, the National Unity Government...launched a people’s defensive war against the military junta.”<sup>122</sup> It formally marked a new phase in the people’s revolution that



began with peaceful and non-violent resistances. Surprisingly, the people of Myanmar exuberantly welcomed the declaration despite the obvious risks. Demonstrative of this mood, a Yangon resident described the announcement as “a people’s revolutionary war.”

The junta responded the declaration as an attempted distraction to the United Nations credentialing decision ongoing at that time.<sup>123</sup> However, the junta’s spokesperson admitted that attacks on the Sit-Tat intensified immediately following the NUG’s announcement, particularly in urban centers such as Yangon and Mandalay. Although at least 15 attacks targeting the junta’s security forces were recorded per day in March and April across the country, it declined in August. Before September 7th, there were days when a single incident of attack did not occur, but the declaration of the people’s defensive war led to a nationwide surge in attacks by resistance forces.<sup>124</sup> Most of the attacks were conducted by individual resistance units, and some were coordinated amongst the PDF/LDFs, as well as between PDF/LDFs and some EAOs.

According to our data, there were 1447 recorded attacks by resistance forces, including bomb attacks, sabotage and assassinations, 438 clashes between the civil resistance forces and the Sit-Tat, and also 523 clashes between the EAOs, also joined by the PDFs, and the Sit-Tat from the September to the end of March. The total number of attacks/clashes was 2,408 throughout the country within six-months, and the actual number would be much higher than other recorded data as some information of clashes have not been

available, and the EAOs rarely published the exact number of all battles.

Regardless, this data clearly represents a strong upward trend in combat compared to the clashes before September 7th and in previous years. 217 and 58 clashes were recorded respectively, over the same period in 2019-20 and 2020-21, primarily in Rakhine and Northern Shan state. The coup clearly transformed the security landscape of Myanmar, with the sharp escalation of clashes, attacks, assassinations and bomb explosions. Our data indicated that there were 174 clashes and 249 mine/IED-related incidents across the country during seven months from February to August 2021, but this number has been up sharply after the September 7th declaration. By the end of April 2022, clashes and/or attacks have erupted in 266 townships out of 330 in the whole country, of which some in 64 quiet townships may have witnessed unrecorded clashes. In the conflict-ridden 266 townships, according to our data, there are 181 townships where the PDF attacked and fought with the Sit-Tat, 56 townships where EAOs and PDFs jointly battled the Sit-Tat, 22 townships where the EAOs combated the Sit-Tat, and 7 townships where the EAOs fought against each other.

The NUG’s declaration signified that Myanmar has entered a new phase of civil war. Heavy clashes have been revived in areas, such as Karen, which have not experienced significant fighting in over a decade, new conflicts have emerged in areas such as Sagaing and Magway, and in some regions such as northern Shan state, post-September 7th marked an intensification.



## Section IV: Conflict Hotspots in the Armed Rebellion

After the NUG's declaration of "people's defensive war," several conflict hotspots throughout the country could be discerned: Anyar, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni and Shan State conflict theaters. Each theater, alongside guerilla movement in urban areas and the conflict-simmering Rakhine state, would be briefly examined in this section. The armed conflicts in each theater have developed with their own peculiar features, and most seldom overlap. However, analysis of all theaters can reveal, to some extent, the trend and trajectory of the current conflicts in Myanmar.

### 1. Anyar Theater

"Anyar" refers the central plains of the Upper Myanmar, comprising the regions of Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay predominantly inhabited by the majority Burmese people. After the coup, Anyar became the prime center of public resistance.

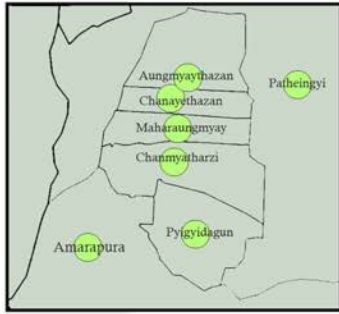
A vast area of Anyar theater borders Kachin to the north, Shan to the east, and Chin and Rakhine to the west where the strong ethnic armed outfits of the KIA, TNLA, and AA are active. Some analysts thus refer to the Anyar theater as part of a broad corridor connecting major insurgents in the northern Kachin State and the western Rakhine State on the Bay of Bengal seaboard, even comparing it with the Ho Chi Minh trail.<sup>125</sup> Both KIA and AA whose leaders are primarily based in the KIA capital of Laiza appear to regard that land corridor as a key strategic asset for

their military advancement. For the KIA, Sagaing could block the military's free incursions into its area, and for the AA, the Anyar theater could serve a logistic conduit through which arms from the north could freely flow into its area – especially considering that the Northern Alliance acquires most of its arms from China. Thus, in addition to politically siding with the anti-coup movement, the KIA practically assist nearby civilian resistance forces, mainly PDFs in the upper part of Sagaing, with arms, training, and even tactical guidance, as do the AA to the forces based in western part of Anyar theater bordering Rakhine State.

Despite initially relying on improvised landmines and homemade rifles, the PDF/LDFs in this theater have become progressively better equipped with advanced weapons, which have come from three main sources – the EAOs, the NUG and public donations. Resistance forces have also increased the production of weapons in local blacksmith workshops, but most of them are still of rudimentary quality. Anyar theater lies in the precinct of No. (1) Military Divisional Command, which are supposed to be under the leash of the KIA. The whole theater hosts several battle fronts from the northern part of Sagaing to the western part of Magway, and of these fronts, four areas are militarily significant; the northern part close to Kachin state, the Shwebo valley, the confluence between the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers, and the Western part of Anyar theater which include areas of Sagaing and Magway Regions bordering Chin State.



# Conflict Map of Anyar Theater within a Year of Armed Rebellion (February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022)



Mandalay City

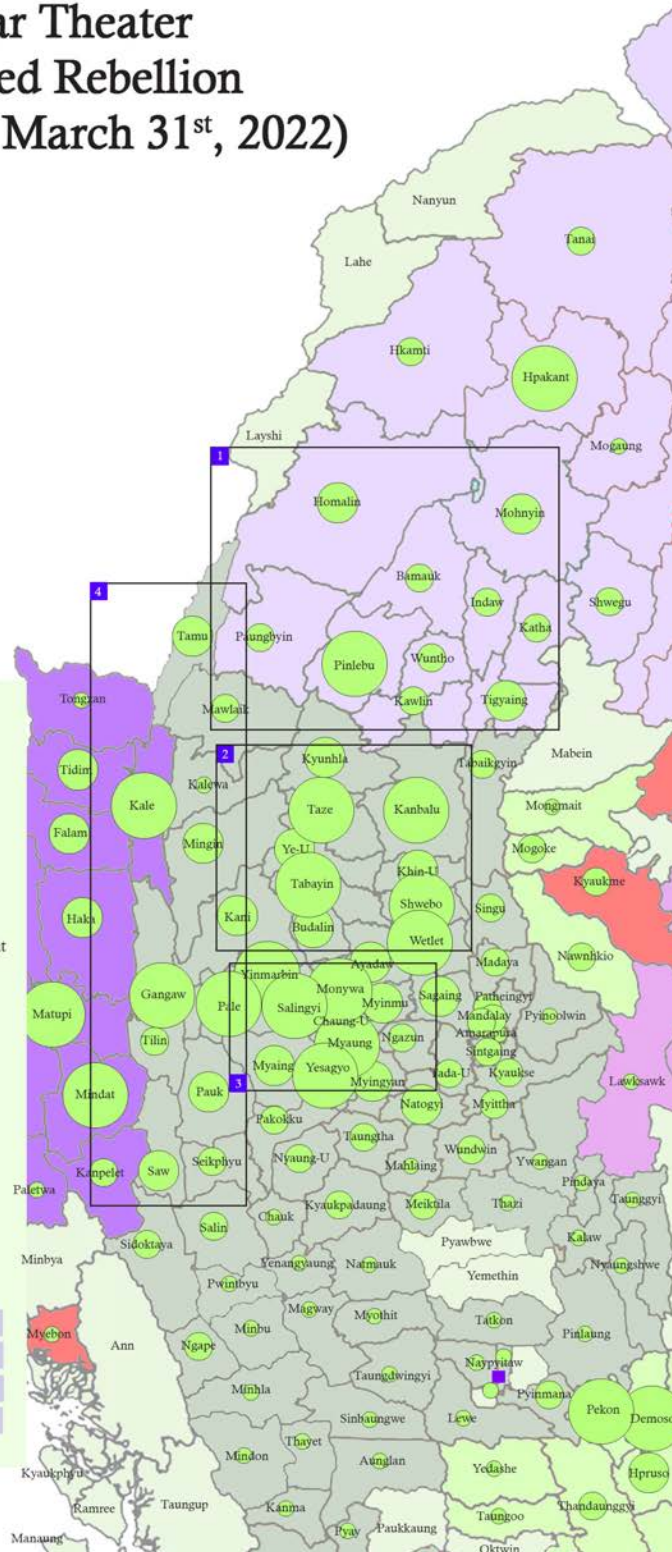
## Legend

- Areas of No Significant Clashes
- Clashes between PDF and the Sit-Tat
- Clashes between KIA+PDF and the Sit-Tat in Kachin and Anyar Theater
- Clashes between Other EAOs+PDF and the Sit-Tat in Chin Theater and Kale
- Clashes between Other EAOs+PDF and the Sit-Tat in Karen, Karenni and Shan Theaters
- Clashes between EAOs and the Sit-Tat in Kachin, Shan Theaters and Rakhine
- Clashes between EAOs against each other

- Few Incidents of Conflict
- Sporadic Conflicts
- Regular Conflicts
- High-intensity of Combats

1. Northern Part of Anyar Theater
2. Shwebo Valley
3. Confluence of Ayawaddy and Chindwin River
4. Western part of Anyar Theater

\* Clash includes attacks, bomb blasts, sabotage and assassinations.



Looking at these four fronts, resistance forces in the north received the strongest support from the KIA, in terms of equipment and tactical guidance, and coordinated campaigns between the KIAs and PDF/LDFs mainly occurs in this area. Recently, the KIA and PDFs launched a joint-operations in Pinlebu, in northern part of Anyar theater, with aim of holding the ground in the town. The central Shwebo valley hosts the high-density of resistance units, and the junta views dissident forces in this area as serious threats to its power base in central heartland of Myanmar, so the Sit-Tat is currently concentrating its major offensives on this valley. The confluence area of Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers including Monywa, Chaung U, Myinmu, Myaung, and Yesagyo, is a strategically and logistically pivot area that connects the western part of Anyar theater spreading to Chin State, the Shwebo Valley in the north and Myingyan District of Mandalay Region in the east. The PDFs have become strong enough to move, and sometimes temporarily control, main waterway and road transport routes in this area, and in late 2021 Myaung PDF seized two boats, an oil vessel and a cargo ship, passing along Chindwin River for “those on board were unable to demonstrate that the vessels did not belong to the junta.”<sup>126</sup>

The western part of Anyar theater encompasses Gangaw District in Magway Region and Kalay District in Sagaing Region in which the local resistance forces operationally relate to each other. Moreover, given its physical proximity to Chin State, the PDF/LDF groups in the western part of the Anyar theater have secured strong alliances with the defense forces of the Chin state, and often launched coordinated attacks against the junta’s

troops.<sup>127</sup> Despite not being as significant as these four fronts, in Sidoktaya and Ngape of the Minbu District, the western part of Magway bordering the Rakhine State, the local PDFs have obviously become active with the material and tactical support of the AA.

Based on our data and numerous interviews in this area, it is estimated that there are no less than 15,000 PDF and 20,000 LDF combatants in Anyar theater. Resistance forces have thus far managed to control wide swaths of rural country where the military regime has failed to extend its authority. This has led to a breakdown of the basic administrative mechanism and the increasing silencing of its major supporters such as informants, veterans, and members of Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Hit-and-run tactics and landmine attacks have effectively blocked the military’s incursion into this area, and severely restricted its troop movement. While effectively resisting the Sit-Tat’s series of offensives, now the PDFs in some areas have gradually shifted to an “active defense,” employing limited offensive actions and counterattacks against the military’s soft targets and administrative infrastructures. The unexpectedly relentless resistance, especially with the strong support of local population, has so far denied the military’s massive efforts to regain their foothold in Anyar theater.

In late September 2021, the military reportedly prepared to launch major offensives, including “Operation Anawrahta” against the newly-formed resistance forces along the western flank of Myanmar.<sup>128</sup> Since last October, the junta has been stepping up its major offensives to impose its control over the Shwebo valley, but with a limited success



until now. A significant portion of its combat forces were deployed there with mechanized units, artillery pieces and armored vehicles. Currently, according to our data, around 35 battalions of the 22nd Light Infantry Division (LID) the 44th, the 88th, the 101th, Military Operation Command (MOC) No. 4, No.10, and North Western Regional Command are scattered throughout the Sagaing and Magway Regions, with several battalions of the 33rd LID deploying both to the northern part of Sagaing and the adjacent Kachin areas. The military also formed a number of local militias, known as the “Pyu-Saw-Htee,”<sup>129</sup> in Anyar theater, and according to the meeting minutes of the military regime, 77 local militia groups have been formed and equipped with 2,080 small arms in Sagaing region.<sup>130</sup> Moreover, the staff of pro-junta administration, as well as the ultranationalist monks of Ma-Ba-Tha (the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion) have been provided with military training and weaponry there.<sup>131</sup>

The military’s immediate goal is to reassert its control over the Shwebo valley and key strategic areas in Anyar theater before monsoon season that will start at the end of May. To start, the junta blockaded the whole area, cutting internet access in 30 out of 34 townships in Sagaing Region, with the exceptions being Monywa, Kalay, Sagaing, and Shwebo.<sup>132</sup> The Sit-Tat’s current strategy is to deploy troops encircling the Shwebo valley, mainly Kyunhla in the north to cut off the trickles of arms and support from the KIA, and to conduct “a rolling series of separate but interlocking offensives” supported by artillery, armored vehicles and airstrikes to systematically clear the resistance forces in the valley.<sup>133</sup> In essence a clear and hold

operation. In the confluence and western part of Chindwin River that connects the heartland battle fronts to the west of Anyar theater and Chin State, the Sit-Tat has launched intermittent offensives so as to cut off the linkage between these two fronts and hold strategic areas. Recognizing the impossibility of immediately eliminating a plethora of resistance groups benefiting from strong local support, the junta’s troops are also endeavoring to push the resistance forces into the jungles and mountains away from the population. In classic counterinsurgency manner, the Sit-Tat aims to separate the armed units from the population at large by conducting scorched earth tactics, burning down and clearing villages that are supposed to provide shelter and support to the guerillas,<sup>134</sup> and reinstating its rule in cleared areas through the aid of junta supporters and militias.

So far, the Sit-Tat’s operations have had a mixed result. Despite executing a series of heavy offensives, local resistance forces remain highly active in the Anyar theater. With the support of the KIA in the north, and Chin co-belligerents in the west, the defense of local resistance forces has grown stronger and more solid in Anyar theater. The local population has not stopped supporting the resistance forces, albeit suffering a heavy loss under the Sit-Tat’s scorched earth campaign. Now, the PDFs have managed to survive the Sit-Tat’s massive offensives, and even counterattack the military’s offensives at their bases. Repeated failures to clear the area led the junta to replace two key commanders who were responsible for overseeing operations in this theater, Lt. General Than Hlaing, chief of the Bureau of Special Operation and Maj. General Phyo Thant, the northwestern regional



commander,<sup>135</sup> because operations under their leash faltered.

Despite launching a series of brutal offensives, in the current situation, the military's target to control the Shwebo valley and neutralize resistance forces across the Anyar theater before monsoon season will be hard to achieve. Sprawling resistance in almost every corner of the Anyar theater overstretch the limited resources of the Sit-Tat, rendering it impossible to concentrate its troops on one or two battle fronts. Although the local PDF/LDF forces have undergone a severe onslaught, they are striving to retain their grip on the areas before monsoon season when the military's airstrikes will be curtailed due to poor weather. The local resistance forces aim to consolidate military and administrative bases during the rainy season, so they are relentlessly resisting the military's fierce campaigns at great cost now. However, scattered resistance forces across the theater needs more combination and cooperation so as to perform dual task of expelling the military and consolidating their authority in the strategic areas of Anyar theater. The upcoming rainy season would possibly decide the military balancing of the Anyar theater, and it would have a significant impact on the entire resistance movement. It will come as no surprise if the anti-junta armed forces are able to gain a certain extent of control, even if not a consolidated level of control, over some territories in Anyar theater, particularly in upper Sagaing region, in upcoming rainy season.

## **2. Chin Theater**

Days after Kalay battle on March 28th, newly-formed resistance cells in Chin State established the Chinland Defense Forces

(CDF) on April 4th, 2021.<sup>136</sup> The mountainous Chin State is located on the western flank of the country, bordering India. It is sparsely populated and remains Myanmar's least developed region with few transportation links and little infrastructures. After the coup, as in other parts of the country, Chin State was very active in opposing the military coup, and with the junta's increasingly brutal crackdown, young people resolved to set up the CDF in order to protect the civilians from the military's crackdown. On April 24th, clashes soon erupted between local protesters and the junta's forces in Mindat, a southern town in the Chin State, and it paved the way for the armed struggle in this theater, which had not seen an active conflict in decades.

Local dissidents were lightly equipped with traditional hunting rifles, known as "Tumi guns," to fight back against the battle-hardened military, but they were able to respond effectively to the military's "unilateral killing" as they had experience in using these rifles for hunting and had an intimate knowledge of the local terrain. However, the military launched a ferocious military campaign against these local dissidents by declaring martial law and identifying those defying its authority as terrorists. Suffering from ambushes on treacherous mountain passes towards Chin State, the junta used helicopter for reinforcement, and heavily deployed "weapons of war," including helicopter gunships, against small pockets of resistance.<sup>137</sup> The junta's forces ultimately prevailed in Mindat after several weeks of hard fighting, as local resistance forces retreated from the town to spare it from total destruction by the Sit-Tat's indiscriminate shelling. However, armed resistance rapidly spread to other towns of the Chin State.







The Chin National Front (CNF), an ethnic armed organization based in Chin State, has provided military training to anti-junta youth seeking to combat the military. According to the CNF's spokesperson, the CNF has conducted military training of urban and rural guerilla warfare to nearly 10,000 new civilian combatants, including via remote training in central Burma, where they have sent trainers.<sup>138</sup> Moreover, in late May, the CNF became the first ethnic armed outfit to formally signed deal with the NUG to cooperate in their fight against the military junta, and Dr. Lian Hmung Sakhong, the vice chair of the CNF, was duly appointed Federal Union Affairs Minister of the NUG in mid-April.<sup>139</sup> With spread of fight across the state, several CDF units sprang up in all the towns of Chinland.

Currently, there is fighting in all the nine townships in Chin, ranging from active and heavy fighting to smaller skirmishes. The total number of the CDF and CNF hovers around 10,000 in Chin State, but so far, only some could be equipped with advance combat weapons. The Chinland Joint Defense Committee (CJDC) was formed to coordinate the disparate defense forces and to cooperate military operations in Chin State. The key strategy of resistance forces is primarily focused on "denial" to block the Sit-Tat's penetration into their area, "restriction" to obstruct enemy troop movement, "sabotage" to destroy military-linked facilities and its infrastructure, and "attrition" to impose a constant strain on junta units. Throughout this effort, they have also sought to gain a solid footing across the state. The key advantage held by the civil resistance forces is the virtual collapse of the central administrative mechanism in Chin State. Over 70 percent

of government servants joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).<sup>140</sup> The resistance forces are, according to local resistance forces, able to control around 80 percent of Chin State. Though difficult to verify, almost all hard-to-reach rural areas are now under the control of resistance forces. The key obstacles for the anti-junta resistance forces are a lack of weaponry and central command overseeing all disparate and sometimes divided armed forces sprawling across Chin State. A spokesperson of the CDF-Mindat said that two-thirds of the weapons they purchased from black market were seized by the junta en route.<sup>141</sup>

Looking at each township, in Tongzan, Mindat and Paletwa, resistance forces control the rural areas and the Sit-Tat is the strongest in the cities, but, as it was a site of intense conflict between the military and the Arakan Army (AA) before the coup,<sup>142</sup> a vast swath of Paletawa is also under the control of the AA. In Haka, Falam, Matupi, Tedim and Thantlang, based on our interviews with local residents, resistance forces are easily and freely able to move in the cities, as well assert control over rural areas. A member of CDF said that "although we could easily attack the terrorist military forces in urban areas, we, the resistance forces, are overwhelmed by concern about the military's indiscriminate reprisal targeting the civilians and the neighborhood. They have no compunction about shelling the civilian areas, and torching the houses." Following a clash with the CDF, the military shelled and burned residential buildings in Thantlang, a mountain-top town in Chin state, which suffered eight fires and the loss of about 600 of the town's 2,000 buildings.<sup>143</sup>



As in other theaters, the military has deliberately deployed “a scorched earth campaign as part of its intensifying reign of terror.”<sup>144</sup> The Myanmar military is notorious for its campaigns against ethnic minorities, including the alleged genocide against the Rohingya.<sup>145</sup> It is primarily intended to “displace the population, wipe out the area so they have physical control, deprive the resistance of supplies,” and demoralize resistance forces and supporters. Kaung Thu Win, a CDM soldier who served at the Tactical Command Post in the Chin State town of Matupi, told the CNN that, “during fighting, they would assume whoever they saw as enemies and shoot them,” and to control the region, “villages are burned to stop the resistances from using the houses as a base to attack military posts or as an act of revenge for heavy casualties.”<sup>146</sup>

Based on our data, the military deployed over two dozen of battalions from the 11th Light Infantry Division (LID) and 55th LID, in addition to troops from locally-based Tactical Operations Command, in mainly Mindat, Matupi, Haka, Paletwa and other townships, and three battalions are also operating on the border of Chin state and Sagaing Region. The Sit-Tat normally would send a convoy of reinforcements, surrounded by armored vehicles in order to protect the infantry from ambushes along the way, to its Matupi base of tactical operation from which it can then spread out troops to other townships in Chin State.<sup>147</sup> However, such reinforcement convoys have suffered severe attacks along the road, and it has made it hard for the military to rapidly reinforce in Chin State. It is estimated that there are about 1,300 military personnel across Chin State. In the current

situation, the military will predominantly focus on controlling urban areas in Chin State, and it seems ready to retaliate by torching the residential buildings and shelling and air-striking civilian areas if the resistance forces attack them in the cities and towns.

Recently, the Chinland Defense Forces replaced the Myanmar flag with their own flag at the India-Myanmar border, but the military launched an offensive at the CDF base there, and re-hoisted the Myanmar flag the following day.<sup>148</sup> This demonstrates the extent of the resistance forces’ contestation of military’s rule in the rural and border areas, but contestation has not yet become control. The key challenge for the military is that they cannot make their authority omnipotent across the Chin State, due to the collapse of basic administration mechanisms and limited manpower. Chin State’s mountainous terrains, narrow roads zigzagging through mountain passes and precipitous slopes and ridges hinder its rapid mobilization. Moreover, as all the defiant local people never share any information with the Sit-Tat, but only with the resistance forces about its movement, the Sit-Tat has to take a great risk to move around.

The upcoming monsoon season will make it harder for offensives, airstrikes, transportation, and reinforcement for the military. Even in summer, a military helicopter, which carried exam papers for matriculation tests, recently crashed in mountainous Hakha.<sup>149</sup> Therefore, it looks like that the military is seeking to deploy its troops so as to hold its ground in cities and towns prior to the rainy season, while resistance forces are also possibly preparing for offensives during the upcoming wet season. If the resistance forces could



maneuver to launch coordinated operations amongst locally-autonomous armed units across Chin State, they would possibly step-up consolidation of their sway on territories after July 2022. It is highly likely that the military balance in the Chin theater will be tilted towards the resistance forces during the upcoming monsoon season.

### **3. Kachin Theater**

As described above, clashes between the KIA and the Sit-Tat have continued since February 2021, and as the military's crackdown on the peaceful protesters intensified in March, so did the KIA's offensives against the military. Fighting occurred not only in Kachin state, but also in Northern Shan State where some KIA brigades are based. The clashes culminated when the KIA captured the strategic military base of Alaw Bum in Momauk township on March 25th, 2021. It is a strategic hill, located about 30 kilometers south of KIA's headquarters in Laiza, which the military had controlled since 1987.<sup>150</sup> The military has painstakingly sought to retake the hill, deploying numerous troops and launching a series of major offensives with the support of heavy artilleries and airstrikes. However, the KIA has managed to retain control over Alaw Bum, with the junta's forces reportedly suffering heavy losses.<sup>151</sup> The KIA had mounted further offensives across Kachin State and the northern part of Shan State, which overran military bases and police stations in Hpakant, Mogaung, Waingmaw, Putao, Tanai and others in northern Shan State.<sup>152</sup>

Since March 2021, the KIA has cooperated with the anti-junta forces. It has provided sanctuary to the pro-democracy activists

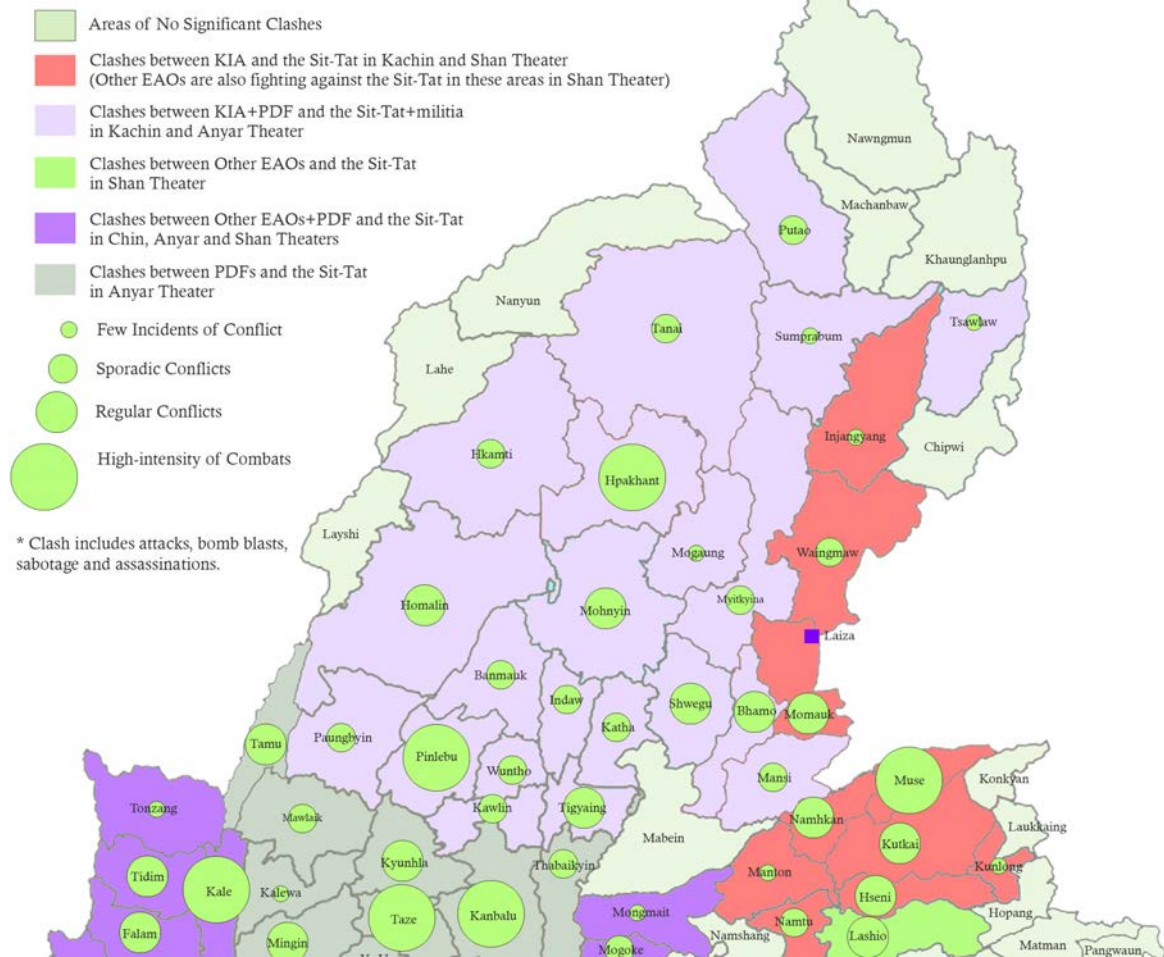
and ousted parliamentary members, and, like some other EAOs, offered military training for young volunteers, especially from Anyar region.<sup>153</sup> In mid-March, the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team (KPICT) was established with the inclusion of KIO representatives, aiming "to end authoritarianism and promulgate a genuine Federal Union."<sup>154</sup> When forming a National Unity Government, certain positions were taken up by ethnic Kachin, including Duwa Lashi La, the Vice-President and later Acting President,<sup>155</sup> and following a series of negotiations, the CRPH and KPICT signed an interim deal on May 27.<sup>156</sup>

The KIA has also extended its organizational, material and tactical support for PDFs operating in Sagaing Region,<sup>157</sup> and frequently launched coordinated attacks in the areas on the border of Sagaing Region and Kachin State.<sup>158</sup> Consequently, the KIA has widened its areas of operation into the northern Sagaing Region, a strategically crucial area to block and cut off the military's supply lines into Kachin State. The KIA is thus involved in clashes in Katha, Indaw, Homlin, Pinlebu, Kawlin, Wuntho and Tigyaing of the upper Sagaing Region, and regime riverine vessels, carrying troops and weapons up the Ayeyarwaddy River, are frequently attacked by combined KIA and PDF forces in northern part of Sagaing. Moreover, the KIA commands the PDFs in Kachin State, known as the Kachin People's Defense Forces (KPDF). According to informed sources, these consists of no less than 5,000 personnel. Different from the PDFs/LDFs in other regions, the KPDFs are assumed to be under the full command and control of the KIA.



# Conflict Map of Kachin Theater within a Year of Armed Rebellion (February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 to March 31<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

## Legend



The KIA spreads its military brigades not only in Kachin State, but also in northern Shan State. The 1st Brigade of the KIA is based in Putao, Sumprabum, the 7th Brigade in Chipwi, Hpunre, the 2nd Brigade in Tanai, Shingbwiyang, the 9th Brigade in Hpakant, the 8th Brigade in Mohnyin, Namsi Awng, the 3rd Brigade in Bhamo and the 5th Brigade in Sadon. The KIA is present in northern Shan State, with the 4th Brigade in

the southern part of the Lashio-Muse Road, the 6th Brigade in the northern part of the Kukai-Muse Road, and the 10th Brigade perches along the Hseni-Kunlong road. It also maintains a Light Infantry Brigade and Central Guard Brigade, and the total number of battalions under the twelve brigades is 52. According to informed sources, the KIA has about 20,000 personnel, including volunteers from its militias. Now, the KIA



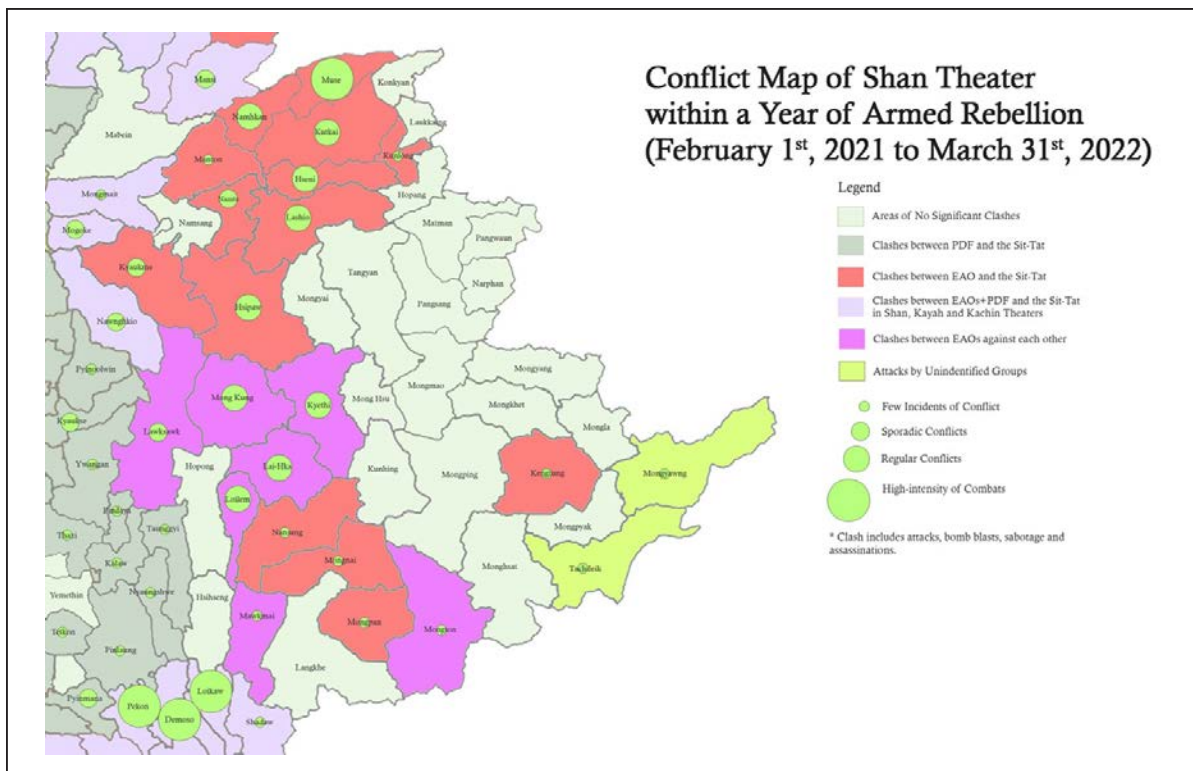
operates jointly with PDFs in most areas in Kachin, as well as separately in other places. KIA's strategy seems to focus on cutting off the key routes for the military's logistics and reinforcement routes into the Kachin State, weakening the military's existing strength through a series of operations, capturing the military's strategic outposts, locking down the economically vital areas under its control, and ultimately building up its strength in Kachin State.

There are currently several conflict hotspots in Shwegu, Mohnyin, Momauk, Dawthponeyan, Bhamo, Mansi, Hpakant, and Tanai in Kachin State. Strategically, Shwegu-Katha-Namsi Awng area connects Kachin State and Sagaing Region, and as a logistic conduit between these two areas, the KIA and PDFs are striving to control this area. The KPDF and KIA are particularly active in the Mohnyin-Nan Mar-Hopin-Mogaung area which could constitute a strategic threat to Myitkyina, the capital of the Kachin State under the control of the military. Momauk is a logistic pivot for Lwegel, and Dawthponeyan, a key strategic checkpoint on the way to the KIA's central headquarters in Laiza. Bhamo-Mansi is an important connecting area between the Shan and Kachin states, and Hpakant and Tanai are commercially vital areas, with the former the epicenter of the region's lucrative jade mining and the latter the site of gold and amber mining. Besides these areas, the KIA and PDF forces have jointly operated in Putao, Sumprabum and Myitkyina, and on his visit to Kachin's capital in September 2021, the junta's chief cancelled his scheduled trip to Putao due to security concerns.<sup>159</sup>

Since March 2021, the Sit-Tat has launched a series of offensives to retake Alaw Bum, but failed repeatedly with even a helicopter gunship being shot down.<sup>160</sup> With spreading revolts in other parts of the country and the arrival of the monsoon, the military's offensives clearly failed in Kachin State by mid-2021. Now, the military's strategy shifted to a primarily defensive one focused on keeping control of the cities, strengthening its bases, deploying a number of troops to strategic areas, and launching operations primarily in areas adjacent to the Sagaing region in order to sever the link between the KIA and PDFs there. Based on our data, the military currently deploys no less than 65 battalions in the whole Kachin State and areas on the border of Sagaing and Kachin, mainly from the 33rd Light Infantry Division (LID), the 88th LID, MOC No. 3 and No. 21, in addition to battalions of Regional Command and Tanai Regional Operations Command (ROC).

Despite the current lull in offensives, whenever confronted with a serious attack by the KIA in other parts of the state, the military typically launches retributive attacks with heavy artillery attacks on the KIA's headquarters in Laiza from its own nearby base, and shells occasionally land in Chinese territory on the other side of the town.<sup>161</sup> Amidst growing resistances and overstretch of its troops across the country, the military may be unable to ratchet up costly operations in Kachin state. The KIA also tended to strategically consolidate its positions and undermine the junta's sway in the near future instead of unnecessarily mounting attacks. Therefore, amongst the six theaters, conflicts could simmer in the Kachin theater for a moment.





#### 4. Shan State Theater

The Shan Theater could be seen as the most complicated, with not only high-intensified clashes between the EAOs and the Sit-Tat, but also intra-and inter-ethnic conflicts. In post-coup Shan State, six ethnic armed groups that have not signed the NCA – the UWSA, NDAA, MNDAA, TNLA, SSPP, and KIA – operate in the State’s northern and north-eastern parts. Of these, the TNLA, MNDAA, and KIA had engaged in active fighting against the Sit-Tat. Besides these groups, the NCA-signatories, RCSS and PNLO, are located mostly in southern Shan State. This is in addition to a plethora of militia groups dispersed throughout the state.

Throughout the post-coup period, the combined forces of the SSPP and TNLA, with the support of other FPNCC members,

primarily the powerful UWSA, have fought on-and-off clashes with the RCSS to jostle for control of territories in northern Shan State, which the latter occupied after 2012. The struggle has intensified since the distraction of the coup, ultimately culminating in the RCSS’s withdrawal to the south and the Northern groups’ gaining ground in the vacuum.

In hindsight, after signing bilateral ceasefires in 2012 and the NCA in 2015, alongside the military’s fight against the non-signatory SSPP and TNLA, the RCSS took advantage to expand and consolidate its territories to the north. Then, in Kyaukme, it was confronted with an armed backlash of the TNLA staving off the RCSS’s northward advance. In Namtu, where the KIA, RCSS and SSPP are entrenched, the RCSS’s expansion also suffered serious setbacks. According to some analysts, the Chinese government did not desire the RCSS,



considered as a proxy of Thailand and the West, to be based in the northern part of Shan State adjacent to the Chinese border, so its aligned FPNCC members sought to roll it back out of the northern areas.<sup>162</sup> The SSPP and TNLA have mainly led the southward push of the RCSS, with strong support and subsequent direct involvement of the UWSA. Outgunned, outnumbered and outmaneuvered, the RCSS has virtually lost all its expanded territories in the north, including its northern headquarters in Kyaukme, and strategic positions at Loi Hung hill in Kyaukme and Loi Sang Hill in Mong Kung.<sup>163</sup> The retreat of the RCSS was followed by the southbound intrusion of the TNLA and SSPP, which have fortified in the RCSS's lost territories.

Alongside offering military support to its ally during the fight between the two Shan State Armies, the China-aligned UWSA has intruded to the west of the Salween River and asserted itself in the areas of Mong Kung, Mong Hsu, Kyaukgu, Lai-Hka, and Kyethi. Anthony Davis observed that this marks a shift in the UWSA's strategy shift from "forward defense," which it has consistently practiced since the 2010s to deny the military control over areas surrounding its base with a series of its supported and equipped proxy EAOs resisting the Sit-Tat, to "forward offense," which aims to expand its sway in Shan State.<sup>164</sup> An informed analyst estimates that about 3,000 personnel are deployed by the UWSA in its new foothold areas, along with heavy artillery.<sup>165</sup> Moreover, it heavily redeployed troops in early 2022 from its military region 171 in Khamlong to the south, which is adjacent to the RCSS's headquarters of Loi Tai Leng, near the Thai border. The UWSA-run Chinese language Wa State TV broadcasted the deployment of these troops,

including "elite commando units and artillery," and described them as aimed at "repulsing any incursions into military region 171."<sup>166</sup> However, the UWSA's move in reality intended to pin the RCSS down near its headquarters and cut off its main logistic arteries, revenue streams, and access to the local population. Some went further, claiming that it is realizing its longstanding objective of consolidating the northern part of Wa State with southern part into "a single, contiguous Wa State" which would "underpin the security of Chinese infrastructure projects in Shan state and facilitate overland connectivity between China and Thailand."<sup>167</sup> Even if a single, contiguous Wa State is highly unlikely, the UWSA's strong presence between China and Thailand could help underpin the security of China's infrastructure projects and future economic plans in Shan State. At the least, the UWSA's foothold in west of Salween River could serve as blockade to the Sit-Tat's troops if the latter attacks Wa State on the other side of the river.

Confronted with heavy losses in Shan State, the RCSS, which early on expressed its support for the anti-coup movement, now leans towards the junta. The RCSS ejected its trained PDFs out of its area starting in mid-2021.<sup>168</sup> Local news reports alleged that "the RCSS and the junta held talks in Thailand in which the former agreed to transport much-needed aviation fuel for the latter, but the RCSS side categorically denied it."<sup>169</sup> However, talks between the RCSS and the junta seemed to be underway, and it became apparent in a March 28th meeting of five signatory EAOs with the junta when RCSS representatives formally asserted that the current meeting would be a prelude to future political dialogue,<sup>170</sup> signaling its departure



from its previous position of “no-political dialogue with the junta.”<sup>171</sup> Three days later, the junta’s peace negotiation team met with the other Shan group, SSPP, in Naypyidaw, and demanded it withdraw its troops from Hsanhin hill in Panglong and redoubts in Mong Hsu under the threat of possible Tatmadaw operations in these areas, but the SSPP reportedly refused.<sup>172</sup> Local residents said that the SSPP and UWSA reinforced its existing troops in these areas instead of withdrawing.

Burdened and overstretched, the Sit-Tat however refrained from opening a new battlefield with a strong and well-equipped armed coalition led by the UWSA. Although the tension has heightened several days, the military withdrew its troops deployed around Hsanhin hill and opened blocked roads in late April,<sup>173</sup> following the junta chief’s calls for peace talks. The Sit-Tat’s strategy in this war is to mollify the ethnic armed groups with peace negotiations while crushing the newly formed PDFs and LDFs and strictly controlling restive urban areas. To this end, the regional commander of the Sit-Tat’s triangle regional command was seen attending the public memorial service for Peng Jiasheng,<sup>174</sup> the recently deceased leader of the Kokang rebel group, MNDA, which was locked in fierce fighting with the Sit-Tat in the far northeastern corner of Shan state during mid-2021.

This outreach by the Sit-Tat is significant, as the Kokang have been an intractable foe of the military for years. The MNDA, which was driven out of its Kokang Self-Administered Zone in 2009,<sup>175</sup> and denied participation in the NCA by the Sit-Tat in 2015,<sup>176</sup> has been engaging in on-and-off fighting with the Myanmar military since 2015 to retake its lost

Kokang homeland. In its uphill struggle against one of the Southeast Asia’s largest standing armies, the MNDA joined several military and political fronts: the Northern Alliance with the KIA, AA, and TNLA; the Three Brotherhood Alliance with the AA and TNLA, and the FPNCC with non-signatory EAOs. In particular, the Northern Alliance inflicted significant losses on the Sit-Tat in northern Shan State.

The coup prompted the MNDA to take advantage of the instability to advance its control over strategic areas in northern Shan State, particularly around Mong Ko. Since mid-2021, the MNDA has sought to solidify its hold in Mong Ko and Hpawng Hseng to the west of the Salween River, which could serve as a springboard to reenter and recapture the Kokang areas east of the river. In the complicated landscape of the northern Shan state, the ethnic armed groups are intermingled, and the KIA has also operated and fought separately against the military in the Mong Ko area.<sup>177</sup> This area has been a stronghold of the KIA since soon after its founding in 1961, and it later became an important war zone under the control of the Communist Party of Burma in 1968.<sup>178</sup> Last year, the MNDA reportedly sent a letter to the KIA outlining its plan to set up its own administration in the town, but the Kachin side is reluctant to allow the Kokang group to acquire a solid hold over an area it considers as historically its own.<sup>179</sup>

Elsewhere, the MNDA and KIA also control the Hseni-Kun Lone Road, a key route heading toward the Kokang area. In the Northern Shan State, the MNDA set up Kokang District Administration based on its 311th Brigade, Mong Ko District Administration based on





its 511<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Mong Ko-Hpawng Hseng area, Mupan (Hseni) District Administration based on its 211<sup>th</sup> Brigade along Hseni-Kun Lone Road, and recently, Kutkai District Administration based on its newly-founded 611<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Kutkai.<sup>180</sup>

If the MNDAA can prevail in both Hseni-Kun Lone Road and Mong Ko area, it could blockade the military's logistics and supply lines entering the Kokang area. Despite being currently overwhelmed by the military and its militias, cutting reinforcement and supplies could serve as a good opportunity for the Kokang rebel group to reenter its own homeland. The MNDAA has therefore actively fought the Sit-Tat in these areas, inflicting severe losses on its enemies. According to informed sources, heavy casualties in these clashes prompted the 77<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Division to retreat to its command bases to reorganize. The Kokang side claimed that from July to December 2021, there were 263 clashes between the MNDAA and the Sit-Tat in Mong Ko, during which 198 junta soldiers died and some 700 were injured.<sup>181</sup> Despite initially confirming minor skirmishes with the MNDAA, the junta' spokesperson later admitted that the Kokang group deployed increasing firepower and had expended around 200,000 bullets, 5,300 rocket-propelled grenades, and more than 40 107 mm shells, questioning how a non-state armed group obtained such large amounts of arms and ammunition.<sup>182</sup> Fighting has recently resumed between the MNDAA and the Sit-Tat after a hiatus during the funeral of Peng Jiasheng,<sup>183</sup> and continued clashes are likely in the near future.

In other parts of the northern Shan state, TNLA claims a foothold in Shweli valley,

which, according to the informed sources, is difficult for the Sit-Tat to infiltrate. The KIA also has three brigades in northern Shan State – the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade in Mong Ko-Mong Paw, the 10<sup>th</sup> in Hseni-Kun Lon, and 4<sup>th</sup> in Muse-Kutkai – and has been very active across the region. Both EAOs have overseen the creation of PDFs and occasionally allowed these PDFs to attack the Sit-Tat in northern Shan State, although the TNLA's involvement in the broader resistance movement is limited compared to KIA, KNU, KNPP, and CNF.<sup>184</sup> During its infiltration into the Mogok, Nawngkhio, Mongmit areas, the TNLA is suspected to have launched coordinated attacks alongside PDFs,<sup>185</sup> who likely see these areas as crucial to reenter the Mandalay region. Local residents said that the KIA and the PDFs are also jointly operating in Kutkai and Namtu areas, which has seen a rash of clashes.

In addition to numerous locally-based troops, the military has added heavy deployment of its troops in northern Shan State. According to our data there are over 70 battalions of the 99<sup>th</sup> Light Infantry Division, the 101<sup>st</sup>, Military Operations Commands No. 1, 2, 7, 12, 16, and 17, together with battalions from Regional Military Commands across the Shan State. Local news recently reported increasing deployments in southern Shan state. Despite facing widespread resistance across the country, the military's strategists are predominantly concerned with the threats in northern Shan State, which hosts a plethora of non-state armed outfits capable of deploying substantial firepower. While attempting to contain these ethnic rebel groups, the scale and intensity of the Sit-Tat's confrontations with EAOs is significant. The



EAOs' freedom of movement in Shan State clearly exhibit how far the Sit-Tat's coercive power has fallen in many outlying areas and in parts of EAO-controlled areas.

However, in the end, most EAOs in Shan State are not aligned with the NUG or the wider pro-democratic movement, and despite several attempts by the NUG to talk with the powerful EAOs such as UWSA, there is still little progress. Although the UWSA, SSPP, and MNDAA accepted the junta chief's peace invitation, they do not seem to be ready to enter meaningful political negotiation with the junta regarding their political futures. Recent developments have clearly evidenced that they focus more on advancing their own political agendas and interests, namely acquiring territories, consolidating their authorities, and in the next step, possibly securing their own quasi-independence.

They were quick and strategically savvy enough to exploit the political crisis in Myanmar's center to their advantage, and there is no reason for them, especially the powerful UWSA and its allies, to roll back their gains in the future. Even if they do, their plan to deal with the junta in the current peace talks primarily aims at consolidating their gains. A weakened junta has little to no option but to soothe them with generous concessions. Accordingly, the ethnic armed groups will likely consolidate their authority in Shan State. In this way, the Shan State theater could better exemplify how the military coup has resulted in the fragmentation of central authority, already weakened by decades of conflicts, and shattered the already fragile state-building and nation-building project.

## **5. Karenni Theater**

Karenni theater is currently a hotbed of resistance against the junta. The Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) was formed by members of parliaments, EAOs, civil society, and women organizations on April 9th, 2021,<sup>186</sup> with the aim of practicing political, executive, legislative, and judiciary power in Karenni theater during the interim period and to cooperate with the NUG on the national level.<sup>187</sup> When the NUG was formally established on April 16th, 2021, three leaders from Karenni – Khu Hte Bu from KNPP, Khun Bedu from Kayan National Party (KNP), and Marnu Ei Chit Tun from the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF) – were appointed as deputy ministers of the NUG. The NUG's formal announcement of forming the People's Defense Forces on May 5th was followed by the creation of PDF (Demoso) on May 6th and the Karenni People's Defense Forces (KPDF) the following day.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, PDF groups sprang up in almost every township in Karenni State.

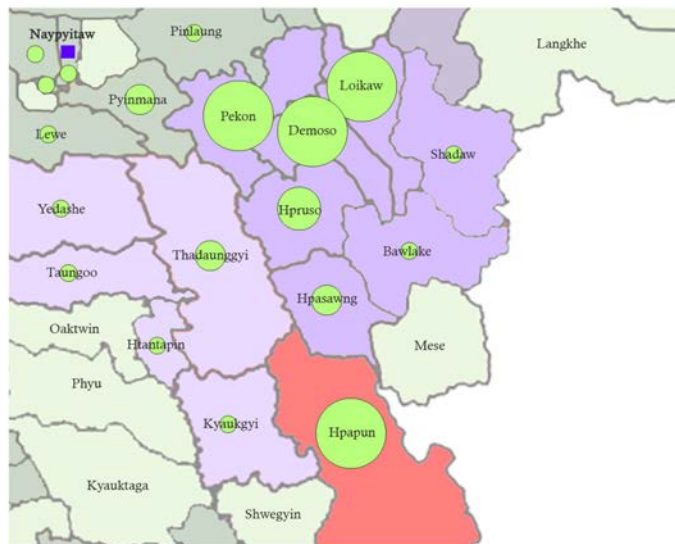
As the junta's lethal crackdown on the peaceful protests escalated, a new battlefield inevitably opened in Karenni theater in late May 2021. On May 20th, the first exchange of fire broke out between the Karenni Army (KA), the armed wing of the KNPP EAO, and the Sit-Tat in Hpaswang Township.<sup>189</sup> A day later, when the junta's troops fired on residential areas in Demoso, the local defense team, primarily composed of young people, launched an armed response to those attacks. The KPDF appeared to be well-prepared for armed response, as its forces soon attacked and seized regime security outposts with the help of the KA in Demoso and Bawlakhe on the same day.<sup>190</sup>



## Conflict Map of Karenni Theater within a Year of Armed Rebellion (February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 to March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2022)

### Legend

- Areas of No Significant Clashes
  - Clashes between EAO+PDF and the Sit-Tat in Karenni Theater
  - Clashes between EAO and the Sit-Tat outside Karenni Theater
  - Clashes between PDF and Sit-Tat
  - Clashes between EAO against each other in Shan Theater
  - Clashes between EAOs+PDF and the Sit-Tat outside Karenni theater
  - Few Incidents of Conflict
  - Sporadic Conflicts
  - Regular Conflicts
  - High-intensity of Combats
- \* Clash includes attacks, bomb blasts, sabotage and assassinations.



In a short time, hostilities had dramatically escalated, with several raids on junta security outposts by resistance forces and the spread of fighting into other parts of Karenni and extending into southern Shan State.<sup>191</sup> Moreover, the increasingly deadly battles spurred the local resistance forces organize, and, within a week of fighting, the Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces (KNDF) was formed by merging five existing PDFs in Karenni and Shan States.<sup>192</sup> Karenni theater has thus become an attractive haven for pro-democratic activists who have snuck into places held by civilian defense teams, obtained military training from the EAOs and local PDFs, and formed their own militia groups.

The KNDF had rapidly grown in size, commanding 19 battalions in August 2021, and, despite its autonomy, cooperated

closely with the KA.<sup>193</sup> Initially armed mostly with homemade rifles, the PDFs in Karenni have progressively become equipped with assault rifles through support of EAOs, the NUG, and public donations. Anthony Davis observed that “since mid-2021, the UWSA has shipped consignments of weaponry to anti-Tatmadaw (Sit-Tat) resistance forces in neighboring Kayah (Karenni) State.” The Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (KNPLF), a former communist force which was transformed into a Sit-Tat-sanctioned Border Guard Force in 2009, has historical links to the UWSA and turned its guns on the Myanmar military. Furthermore, Anthony Davis claims that UWSA-supported munitions have reached KNPLF and allied Karenni factions and included at least “light automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG).”<sup>194</sup>



Although it is hard to prove, the growing relations between Karenni resistance forces and the northern groups have become more apparent. Khun Bedu, a NUG Deputy Minister and a leader of the KNDF, was recently seen attending the memorial services of Peng Jiasheng, together with leaders of some northern groups.<sup>195</sup> According to informed sources, there are no less than 20,000 combatants across the various anti-junta groups in the small Karenni theater, of which only 10 percent are equipped with automatic assault weapons with most depending on homemade rifles. The KNDF alone reportedly consists of 18 battalions (according to its latest report despite initially having 19 battalions in August 2021)<sup>196</sup> and 6,277 soldiers as of February 2022,<sup>197</sup> and according to some reports, they have progressively become equipped with assault rifles and RPGs.<sup>198</sup> In Karenni theater, the NUG also has its own PDFs and *PaKaPha* with about 8,000 troops and a variety of LDFs are estimated to have around 3,000 volunteers in total.<sup>199</sup> Instead of integrating into the KNDF, several LDF groups formed a military alliance, called the Karenni Revolution Union (KRU).<sup>200</sup>

Currently, fighting in this theater has mainly occurred in Demoso, Hpruso, Loikaw in Karenni and adjacent Pekon, and Moby in southern Shan State despite sporadic clashes across the whole of Karenni theater. Demoso can be regarded as a conflict center where numerous PDFs operate and control a vast swathe of rural areas. It is only about 200 km east of the capital, Naypyidaw. In late 2021 and early 2022, the PDF forces launched several offensives in the city

of Loikaw, and the military responded with indiscriminate artillery and aerial bombardment, which forced, according to the United Nations, half the city's population to flee their homes.<sup>201</sup> Due to the failure to contain the growing armed resistance, the commander of the Regional Operations Command (ROC-Loikaw) and deputy-commander of the No. 7 Military Operations Command (MOC) were replaced, and in early February, Lt. Senior General Soe Win, a high-ranking leader in the junta, visited Bawlakhe and Loikaw to encourage its troops to increase operations.<sup>202</sup>

After February, the junta's troops ramped up heavy aerial bombardment and continuous artillery attacks, even deploying multi-rocket launchers (MRL). Contrary to prior operations, which featured a handful of artillery attacks from only one or two locations, the military spread its artillery units out to encircle operational areas and fired over 50 to 100 artillery rounds per day into targeted areas, with the intention of preventing resistance forces from acquiring permanent bases.

The junta's troops have now regained a modicum of dominance over Loikaw, pushing resistance forces out of the city with excessive use of force and brutal operations. However, the limited resources and heavy casualties of its ground troops and a lack of public support prevent the Sit-Tat from holding full sway in these areas. More recently, while the junta's troops have been able to consolidate its bases and exert some control in important urban areas such as Loikaw and its strategic supply routes, anti-junta forces have been freely mobilizing



and moving towards the outskirts of Loikaw, Demoso, Moby, Pekon and Hpruso, particularly in rural areas. In Shadaw and Mese where the KNPP and KNPLF primarily operate and in Bawlakhe and Hpaswang where the military has strong bases, there has not been active fighting apart from sporadic skirmishes.

The KNDF claims that 90 percent of the junta's administration has ceased, and the people's administrative groups and civilian resistance forces are filling the vacuum and running public services, such as opening schools and clinics in 400 out of the total 700 villages in Karenni.<sup>203</sup> Although this claim is hard to verify, it is indisputable that the junta's administrative is crippled and ineffective across the Karenni theater. In the current situation, the junta will likely aim at consolidating its military bases, artillery positions in strategic locations, and urban areas and their key transportation routes. In addition to locally-based battalions, the military has deployed no less than 25 battalions of the 55th Light Infantry Division, the 66th, 101th, MOC No. 7, and some battalions of MOC No. 20 in the areas between Karenni, Bago, and Karen where the KNU also operates. The total number of these ground troops pales in comparison with the PDF's approximately 20,000 troops despite the Tatmadaw's clear superiority in firepower and weaponry.

The Sit-Tat has also sought to enlist the support of its controlled Border Guards Forces and militia groups to reinforce its operations and regain its grip in Karenni. In March 2022, the commander of Eastern

Command, Major General Ni Lin Aung, met a variety of militia groups based in Karenni and southern Shan State, such as Mawchi militia, Kayan National Guard, Karenni National Peace and Development Party militia, Loilem Lay militia, Karenni National Solidarity Organization militia, and the Kayan New Land Party military. Consequently, according to field reports, some militia groups are now fighting alongside regime troops while others act as guides.<sup>204</sup> Employing various tactics to prevail over the resistance forces, the Sit-Tat has demonstrated no compunctions about brutalizing civilians and committing war crimes. Launching a barrage of airstrikes and artillery attacks on residential areas, torching civilian houses, and arresting and killing civilians are normal tactics that the military has persistently deployed in Karenni. The brutality of the military's tactics are evidenced by the Mo So massacre, during which soldiers killed and burned over 35 civilians – including aid workers and children – in the beds of several burnt-out trucks in Mo So village, Hpruso Township on Christmas Eve.<sup>205</sup>

No doubt the Sit-Tat will continue to employ these tactics, but it will undermine its actual objective of imposing control, as its brutality arguably enflames public sentiment against the military. The military's brutal campaigns have driven the people to join the public resistance movement which has gradually grown stronger despite heavy military pressure.

However, on the other hand, the anti-junta forces require more coordination,



consolidation, and centralization, as well as a readily available supply of arms and ammunitions in order to rival the institutionalized military. Although the KNDF is a strong centralized grouping of defense forces, its leading official admitted that existence of numerous units and a lack of centralized command prove the serious problem in Karenni theater. He reported: “an armed force is predicated on three basic principles of discipline, command and obedience, but as there is a plethora of armed units, commander of a troop could not command another. It’s the most serious issue and key weakness.”<sup>206</sup> However, an official from the KRU said it is difficult to unite disparate groups on the ground despite being easy to call for unity.<sup>207</sup> Reman Htoo, a member of permanent central committee of the KNPP, thus pointed out that divide of numerous anti-junta forces and shortage of arms are key obstacles to success of armed revolution in Karenni theater.<sup>208</sup>

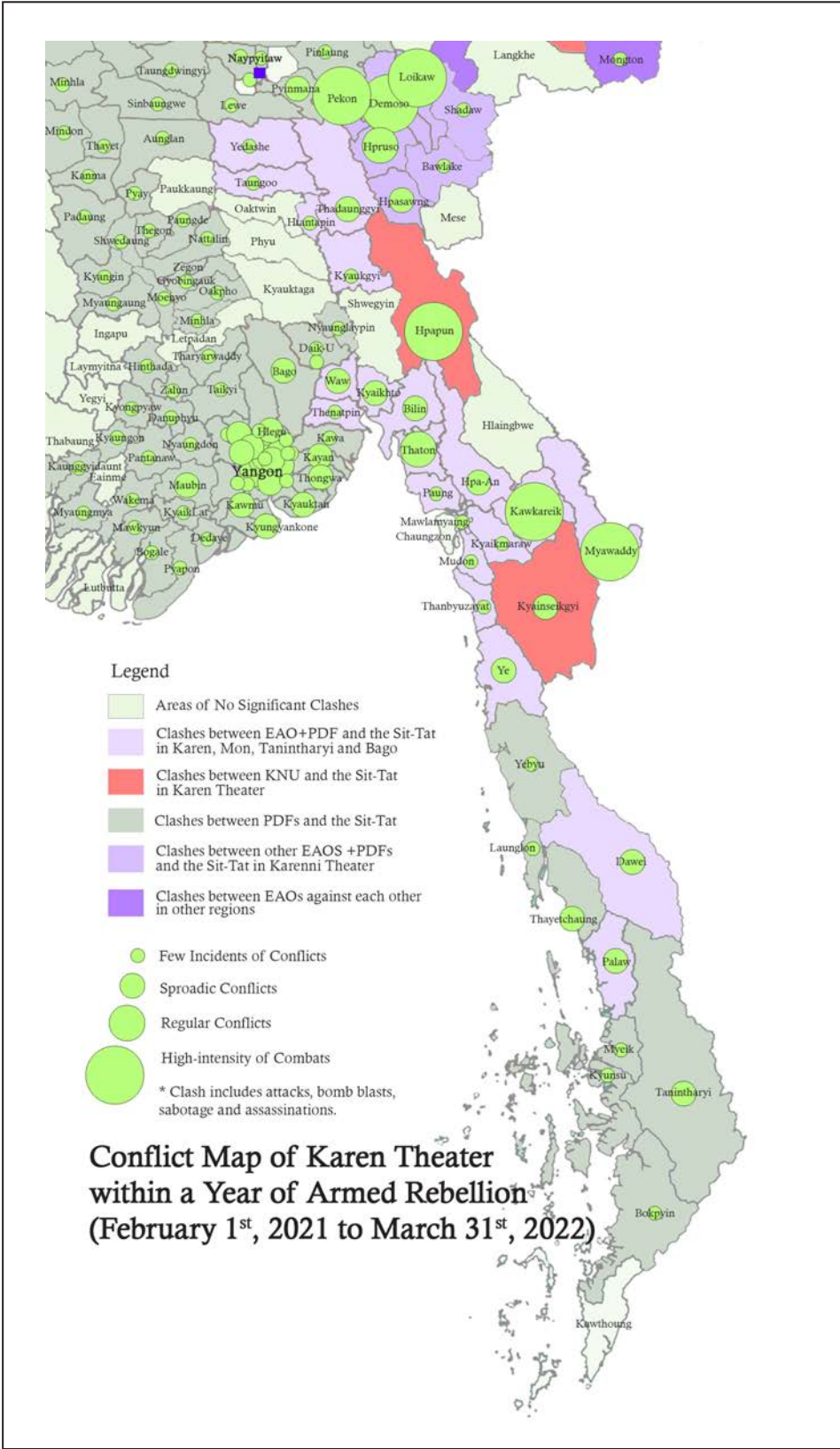
With a lack of strong centralized command and a serious dearth of arms, a KNDF official assessed, based on the recent Loikaw operations, that it would be highly unlikely to wrestle control of urban areas such as Loikaw.<sup>209</sup> Likewise, due to a lack of information and support from local people, the overstretched junta’s troops would be unable to forcefully extend its sway beyond the urban cities and its based areas, but only solidifying its currently controlled areas. In upcoming rainy season, the resistance forces would seek to forcefully contest the junta’s control on urban areas, and it would lead more intensified conflicts across the Karenni theater.

## **6. Karen Theater**

Although the KNU is a NCA signatory, military tension had increased between the Sit-Tat and some brigades of the KNLA since early 2018 when the Myanmar military started constructing a road connecting Kyaukkyi township of Bago Region and Hpapun Township in Karen State. The KNU viewed the road construction as the military’s strategic expansion into their zone despite the official justification being regional development. After a brief pause due to military tensions, renewed construction triggered further tensions on November 11th, 2019.<sup>210</sup> Fighting primarily broke out between the Sit-Tat and some battalions of the 3rd and 5th Brigades of the KNLA in the districts of Hpapun (Mutraw) and Nyaung Lay Bin (Kler Lwe Htu). This conflict has significantly intensified following the 2020 elections.<sup>211</sup>

When the military seized power on February 1st, 2021, the KNU was one of the first ethnic armed groups to demonstrate its opposition and support for the anti-coup movement. A day after the coup, the KNU issued a statement condemning the coup. When peaceful protests unfolded across the country, soldiers of the KNLA were seen providing security for protesters on its territory, which led to, in some instances, armed clashes with the regime’s forces.<sup>212</sup> As the junta stepped up arrests of dissidents, many activists, protesters, CDM government employees, politicians, and even celebrities fled to KNU controlled areas. Likewise, when the protests morphed into armed resistance, most young vigilantes snuck out to the KNU areas to obtain military training. In this way, the KNU has stood in solidarity with the anti-coup movement in the current revolution.





On the other hand, the KNLA 5th Brigade ramped up its attack on the junta's security forces in its own controlled area, with some other brigades also engaging in sporadic clashes in the first half of 2021. As mentioned before, on March 27th, 2021, the KNLA 5th Brigade launched an attack and seized a military outpost in Hpapun, thus triggering a rapid escalation of clashes between KNLA 5th Brigade and the Sit-Tat. According to the KNU side, from March 27th to early May, there were 407 clashes during which the Sit-Tat launched 27 airstrikes and 47 artillery bombardments, while 194 soldiers of the junta's troops were killed and 220 others were wounded.<sup>213</sup> Moreover, 5th Brigade demanded the Sit-Tat remove all of its eighty-one military bases stationed in its areas,<sup>214</sup> while also blocking food supplies to those bases. Cutting-off the food supply placed enormous pressure on the military, which tried in vain to acquire rice from Thailand,<sup>215</sup> and it has significantly weakened the junta's troops in this area. The fighting remains unabated, and in early 2022, the KNLA 5th Brigade announced that it fought 2,692 clashes, inflicting 1,364 deaths, including commander-level officers, and 1,313 wounded throughout 2021.<sup>216</sup>

Beside the 5th Brigade, other KNLA brigades have engaged in fighting, mostly in the 1st Brigade in Thaton (Khu Thahtu) and the 3rd Brigade in Nyaung Lay Bin district, joined later in Dooطلا district by the 6th Brigade. In April 2021, the KNU reported that 200 battles, mostly skirmishes, broke out across all seven brigades of the KNU since the coup.<sup>217</sup> Later, other Karen armed organizations, such as the Democratic

Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) splinter groups, joined the KNU in its fight against the junta's troops, and the conflict zone has gradually expanded across Karen State.<sup>218</sup> However, owing to the divided leadership of the KNU and geographical differences of each Brigades, the clashes in Karen State were patchy and the military has been able to concentrate its limited resources in some conflict areas, particularly against the 5th Brigade.

The junta has long practiced a divide-and-conquer policy in its dealings with the ethnic armed groups. When the KNLA 5th Brigade seized a military outpost on March 27th, 2021, the junta singled out Lt. Gen. Baw Kyaw Hae as being impelled by narrow Karen ethnic-nationalism to launch the attack without orders from central KNU headquarters.<sup>219</sup> Aware that the KNU was plagued by divisive politics, the military sought to exploit this weakness by driving a wedge between its headquarters and its relatively decentralized districts.

In fact, high-ranking members of the KNU publicly disagree on how to respond to the coup and how to involve itself in the people's revolution. At a time of heightened military clashes with the 5th Brigade, KNU Chairman Padoh Saw Mutu Say Poe "rejected armed revolution, saying the KNU will uphold the principle of resolving conflicts via dialogue." Likewise, "Padoh Saw Shwe Maung, chairman of Dooطلا District, instructed his subordinates not to accept PDF fighters into their territory."<sup>220</sup> However, clashes are still ongoing, the anti-junta forces remain active moving in and out of KNU area. In spite of some internal





disagreements, the KNU as a whole is supportive and cooperative with the wider resistance movement.

In mid-2021 when the military ramped up its campaigns to wipe out the PDFs, the military took the strategic decision to cut off the arms and logistic supplies to the disparate resistance pockets. Accordingly, while it sought to block the link between the KIA and resistance forces in Sagaing, the military made several attempts to raid the sanctuaries of anti-junta activists in KNU-controlled areas. In December 2021, regime troops assaulted KNLAs 6th Brigade-controlled Lay Kay Kaw village, which had sheltered pro-democratic dissidents, and arrested 32 people, including an ousted member of parliament for the NLD, anti-coup protesters, and CDM members.<sup>221</sup> That incident decisively escalated into a full-blown conflict in Lay Kay Kaw area, and consequently forced the KNU to involve itself more directly in the fray.

The Sit-Tat's decision to open a new battlefield in KNU is surprising because its troops are stretched thin across numerous fronts throughout the country. This move has two plausible explanations: 1), Sit-Tat commanders took risks to clear out a perceived breeding ground for the armed resistance in Thailand border, or 2), the junta unrealistically expected to contain the KNU with the NCA after clearing out PDF-active areas. Regardless, the Sit-Tat is now entangled in another round of conflict with the oldest rebel group in Myanmar.

As a consequence, fierce fighting has been raging in the areas of the 5th, 6th, and 1st

Brigades, with frequent skirmishes in areas of the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Brigades. The total number of anti-junta forces is estimated at about 30,000 combatants, combining approximately 20,000 members of the Karen EAOs and 10,000 PDFs. As in other theaters, anti-junta forces face a chronic insufficiency of arms and ammunitions, and less than 30 percent of the total combatants are fully equipped for fighting.

The Sit-Tat has deployed over fifty battalions of the 11th Light Infantry Division, the 22nd, the 44th, the 66th, MOC No. 6, 8, 13, 19 and 20, in addition to battalions from South East Regional Command, Coastal Regional Command, and its controlled Border Guard Forces. It is difficult to estimate the exact extent of fighting in Karen theater as the KNU, particularly the 5th Brigade, rarely disclose all the details of its armed confrontations outside of large battles for security reasons. Based on our data and interviews, there have been an average of no less than ten armed interactions per day, despite a decrease in January and February 2022 in the Karen theater after the Lay Kay Kaw incident.

Once the KNU Dooplaya district sent a letter on March 7th to the commander of the Tatmadaw's South East Regional Command to withdraw its troops stationed in Lay Kay Kaw and southern Kawkareik within three days to allow displaced villagers to return to their villages,<sup>222</sup> tensions have dramatically escalated. The Sit-Tat responded to the KNU's letter by reinforcing its troops instead of withdrawing, as the areas of 6th Brigade are strategically important for its highway



through Myawaddy, Myanmar's key gateway to Thailand. Thus, armed clashes have inevitably resumed. On March 17th, the Dooplaya district issued a notice warning government staff to resign from the positions, which were also released by the Hpapun district and Thaton district respectively.<sup>223</sup>

While continuously sending heavy reinforcements, the SAC's Kayin State Military Council formed a negotiation team to prevent fighting and invited the KNU to join it as part of its carrot and stick strategy, but to no avail.<sup>224</sup> With a surge in fighting, the military, as usual, employed a heavy barrage of airstrikes and artillery, but its ground troops have suffered heavy casualties as the KNU side is intimately knowledgeable of the terrain and highly experienced in guerrilla warfare. Going forward, the military will seek to maintain control over strategic strongpoints, including Asia highway and east of Daw Na mountains by relying on firepower and reinforcing its overstretched ground troops, while, on the other hand, undermining the unity of its opposition by offering negotiations and ceasefires. The KNU-led resistance forces appear determined to continue its war of attrition through guerrilla tactics by expanding its operational areas into Myawaddy-Kawkareik, Hpapun-Kamamaung, and Thaton-Belin.

The KNU has been striving to rebuild its military power and to advance its political vision, alongside working together with the pro-democratic forces and fighting against the military. If a new leadership emerges in the long-awaited congress – which has

been repeatedly postponed – the strategic direction of the oldest revolutionary group would be clearly and forcefully pursued. A KNU member told the *Frontier* that “we have high hopes that strong, decisive political leaders will return through (the upcoming) congress instead of weak central committee members still considering talking about the NCA and going with the NCA process.” The speculation is also circulating that if the anti-NCA faction of the KNU come back, “this would likely indicate a shift by the KNU towards more openly embracing conflict with the military.”<sup>225</sup> Even in the current situation, the KNU's anti-junta stance has become deeply entrenched, and the KNU central committee formally rejected the military's invitation to peace talks on May 9.<sup>226</sup>

An upward trend in clashes is thus inevitable in Karen theater in the near future. As the current struggle implies not only the fighting against the military dictatorship, but also the revival of a Karen political vision after a decades-long enmeshment in a futile peace process, the conflict in this region's future trajectory will be hardly straightforward but instead driven by a complexity of interests and aspirations. Nevertheless, the ebb and flow of clashes in Karen theater will have a large impact on military balance of other theaters, especially Karenni and Sagaing theaters as the intensified conflicts in this theater will likely consume the lion's share of the military's resources.

## **7. Urban Guerillas**

In the current armed rebellion, the anti-junta resistance forces have been most



successful in rural areas and ethnic minority regions. Despite facing ruthless repression, rural guerrilla forces have not diminished as they enjoy freedom of movement amongst a friendly population and rough terrain. Guerrilla warfare — hit-and-run tactics, land-mines attacks, ambushes, depredations, and other forms of *petite guerre* — extensively employed by the EAOs and PDFs has thus far proven effective to the extent of exhausting the limited resources of the Sit-Tat, denying it footing in their areas, and expanding resistance operational areas.

Since the start of the armed rebellion, successive waves of PDFs have also been endeavoring to infiltrate and operate in urban areas, such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. Some of the underground urban guerillas are under the direct command of the NUG, but most appear to operate autonomously under their own direction. These groups' tactics range from bomb attack, sabotage, and skirmishes to targeted killing. In the modern history of Myanmar, the current armed rebellion movement has witnessed the greatest intensity of urban guerilla attacks, as the heightened moment of civil war in 1948-1950 did not even have urban attacks of this breadth. The recent urban attacks have appeared in waves, and it has progressively undermined the security infrastructure of Myanmar's cities. Despite most attacks still in low level of sophistication, some recent incidents display improvement of planning, scouting, targeting and operation. However, they are also costly, as poor intelligence and effective Sit-Tat counterintelligence, the limited experience of the guerrilla fighters,

and tight security responses by the junta's troops have also led to a high numbers of raids and arrests of urban guerillas.

In September 2021, the NUG's Yangon Division Command launched an extensive urban guerilla operation, dubbed "Pyan Hlwar Aung (Victorious Swallow)," following the declaration of a resistance war.<sup>227</sup> The operation oversaw a variety of urban attacks from bomb detonations to targeted assassinations. The urban guerillas generally communicated their activities to the public, frequently publicizing several video footages of their attacks through social media, and it became an effective means of stirring up public support. The Sit-Tat has naturally sought to tighten its control in urban areas by strengthening its intelligence networks, upgrading tracing and surveillance technology, and actively hunting down the guerilla networks. In order to clamp down on their resistance hideouts, the junta pressures those who rent houses or provide shelter to members of the opposition military forces by threatening them with prosecution and property seizure.<sup>228</sup>

According to the Tatmadaw's security plans in some urban areas that the author viewed, the junta has three layers of security in urban areas: its primary security forces, its reserve forces, and a mix of support groups of administration, local security, and informants. The first layer of primary security forces consists of military and police forces, of which around 100 personnel are deployed in every township in urban areas, and the second layer is made up of reserve forces comprising local



police forces and the spouses of soldiers, as well as local militia groups, veterans, and firefighters. The third layer is formed of informants distributed in each township, particularly in cities, and support groups of administrative bureaucrats and local security units mostly based in wards and villages. Whenever an attack or a flash protest occurs in an area, it is arranged that a chain of information flows from the third layer to the first, in order to immediately respond and control the situation.

In an example of its type of response, the junta's troops apprehended Ko Kyaw Min Yu (Ko Jimmy) and Ko Phyo Zayar Thaw, two leaders of the people's resistance movement, who were accused of leading and planning guerilla attacks in Yangon in October and November 2021.<sup>229</sup> The arrests were viewed as a decapitating strike against the urban guerilla movement, possibly substantially weakening underground activities in Yangon. However, activity soon resurged despite a brief de-escalation following the arrests and heightened crackdown, and recent operations culminated in the assassination of a deputy governor of the junta-controlled Central Bank of Myanmar at her home.<sup>230</sup> With this assassination of a high-level official, anti-junta forces declared the accomplishment of the Pyan Hlwar Aung Operation, and according to their announcement, seven months fighting resulted in a total of 1,128 attacks on 443 administrative and 587 military targets and 98 military-owned businesses, killing 253 enemies and injuring nearly 300.<sup>231</sup> Apart from the NUG's operations, a variety of disparate other groups have

undertaken separate attacks in urban areas. For example, People's Forces (Yangon) reportedly damaged two Russia-made YAK-130 fighter jets by detonating remote-controlled bombs in tightly secured Hmawbi airbase.<sup>232</sup> Likewise, People's Defense Forces (Naypyidaw) carried out a bomb attack at the office of the military's Directorate of Procurement in October 2021.<sup>233</sup>

Such attacks were likely only possible with the collaboration of military insiders, and they have aroused anxiety within the military's leadership. Therefore, the military has conducted a campaign of what they call "watermelon suppression" in order to trace and crack down on security personnel sympathetic to the pro-democratic movement. The term "watermelon" refers to members of the security forces whose cover is "green" — the color typically associated with the military — and their internal inclinations towards the National league for Democracy, represent by the color red.<sup>234</sup> Despite its severe suppression, it is difficult to control the entire institution.

Immediately after completion of the Pyan Hlwar Aung Operation, the anti-junta resistance forces announced a second wave operation, called Nan Htike Aung (Throne-Deserved Victory), which has seen a slew of attacks in a short period, ranging from mortar attacks on the Mingalardon airbase and the targeted assassination of Major Kaday Phyo Aung, the military administration officer for Yangon's Landmadaw Township located in downtown,<sup>235</sup> to attacks on the security outpost at ministers' residential compounds in Yangon.<sup>236</sup> During Thingyan



(the Water Festival period), there were several incidents of bomb blasts, skirmishes, and targeted assassinations in urban areas stretching from Myitkyina in Kachin state to Mandalay and Yangon.

Due to fierce suppression, and high numbers of underground fighters arrested and killed by the Sit-Tat, urban guerrilla warfare in larger towns and cities has been costly for the resistance, and the guerrillas have struggled to gain a foothold and sustain their operations in the big cities. However, a tidal wave of underground guerrillas has painfully but successfully infiltrated into the capital and major cities, passing through an extensive surveillance system and many tight checkpoints. Attacks in capitals and cities across the country are thus highly unlikely to decrease in the future despite the military's best efforts to impose a tight control over urban areas and carry out a ferocious crackdown.

### **8. Rakhine's Fragile Ceasefire**

Besides these aforementioned theaters, the military is still deploying a significant number of troops to Rakhine State despite its fragile ceasefire with the Arakan Army (AA). According to our data, over 60 battalions including locally-based troops are deployed across Rakhine State and Paletwa in Chin State where the AA is very active. Rakhine has been relatively calm since late 2020 when the military and the AA reached a tacit ceasefire after a prolonged period of warfare. Consequently, Rakhine State has been relatively quiet in the post-coup period. The AA chief Twan Mrat Naing said that he does not want the

pro-democratic CDM movement and street protests spreading to Rakhine State.<sup>237</sup> In exchange for this tacit neutrality, the junta lifted the world's longest internet shutdown in Rakhine state,<sup>238</sup> delisted the AA as a terrorist organization,<sup>239</sup> and released Rakhine political prisoners, including prominent figures such as Dr. Aye Maung and the AA chief's relatives.<sup>240</sup> Yet, these mutual appeasement policies have not resolved the underlying political problems between the AA and the military.

The AA has clearly asserted that it is unwaveringly implementing its own way of "Rakhita" which promises a "struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan sovereignty, lost by the invasion and colonization of the Bamar's Kobaung Dynasty in 1784, to the people of Arakan."<sup>241</sup> The way of Rakhita is totally unacceptable for the military, which perceives themselves as the protector of Myanmar sovereignty. The AA continues to reiterate its position following the coup, and Twan Mrat Naing enunciated in an interview that "there is no bargaining in our attempt to regain our lost sovereignty of Arakan and there won't be in the future either."<sup>242</sup> Although such claims usually draw censure and condemnation from the Bamar majority and politicians, and serious responses from the Myanmar military, the junta has been surprisingly quiet now. In fact, the AA has been more assertive, not just in words but in deeds. While the military has been occupied with suppressing resistance to the coup, the AA has strategically stepped up to institutionalize its de facto authority in Rakhine. As a first step, the AA quickly



extended its sway to the south from its main power base in northern Rakhine, and it is believed to control around 60 percent of the entire state.<sup>243</sup>

Like other established EAOs, the Arakan Army strategically established its own administrative mechanisms and judiciary,<sup>244</sup> and it has effectively enforced its authority in its controlled areas. A spokesman said that “3,838 cases were filed in 2021 and 1,845 cases in the first quarter of the 2022 to the ULA/AA’s judiciary department, which has already settled 1,900 cases from last year and 1026 cases from this year.”<sup>245</sup> In the past, the military never tolerated such bold attempts at governance by insurgent groups, but it has been only able to pressure the local residents so as to obstruct the functioning of new administrative and judiciary mechanism now. The AA sternly responded to the military’s interference, with the threat that “we could not guarantee the peace if the junta continues to interfere in its Rakhine state.”<sup>246</sup> Despite its reluctance to openly challenge the AA’s expansion of its authority, the military have silently moved its troops to areas where the AA has been consolidating its sway.

Although both sides largely avoided open armed confrontations until now, a few skirmishes have occurred,<sup>247</sup> with the latest one in Myebon Township on April 12<sup>th</sup>, 2022,<sup>248</sup> two days after the AA chief alerted his troops to be ready to go to war when they receive orders from the central command on the 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the AA.<sup>249</sup> Amidst the active mediation of Mr. Yohei Sasakawa, Japan’s Special Envoy for National Reconciliation in Myanmar,<sup>250</sup> tensions remain high. Contrary

to its early reticence about the people’s resistance movement, the AA has become more vocal in its support for anti-junta armed groups. When the spokesman of the Rakhine armed outfit publicly praised the combat capability and determination of the people’s defense forces,<sup>251</sup> anti-junta troops, including the NUG, sent a congratulatory message to it on its 13<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with some newly-founded armed groups disclosing their recent reception of military aid from the AA.<sup>252</sup> Such disclosures certainly angered the military, which has sought to neutralize the AA with ceasefires and appeasement.

However, the junta cannot help but let the AA’s gambit continue unhindered as unnecessarily opening a new front against a heavily armed group could be the final nail in its coffin. During the past year of ceasefire, the AA has become militarily powerful, and Twan Mrat Naing said that it has swelled to 30,000 troops, with more combatants currently being trained.<sup>253</sup> Though it is hard to verify this claim, it is indisputable that the AA has significantly developed in size, strength, and weaponry, alongside its advancement in administration and governance. Despite being initially modest in its political vision, which was mainly premised on a “Wa-style power sharing arrangement in line with the constitution,”<sup>254</sup> the AA has clearly become grander in objective. In his interview with the *Asia Times*, Twan Mrat Naing claimed that unless “a Federal Union of Burma will have a political space for the kind of confederation that our Arakan people aspire for,” it is ready to move towards an independent sovereign state.<sup>255</sup>



The AA's political vision is irreconcilable with the Sit-Tat's self-proclaimed role as the guardian of national unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty, so at some point, a renewed, possibly intensified, armed clash is inevitable. Therefore, the Sit-Tat has retained its troops in Rakhine State despite the high demands for reinforcement in other conflict hotspots. The AA's strategy mainly focuses on capitalizing on the post-coup political turmoil in order to consolidate its de facto authority, to strengthen its military power, and to advance its political objective while avoiding a direct confrontation with the Sit-Tat. At the same time, it has strategically funneled military support to some PDFs who are active in areas bordering northern Rakhine state. People Revolution Alliance (PRA-Magway), which mainly bases in Rakhine Yoma (mountain ranges) between the Rakhine and Magway and operates in nearby areas in western Magway, publicly claimed that it received military aid from the AA.<sup>256</sup>

In the event of open war, fighting will likely not be confined to Paletwa and northern Rakhine State, the site of fierce clashes in the past. Having been alerted to the AA's strategy, the military has recently launched a major operation in the western parts of Magway Region bordering Rakhine State to prevent AA-aligned PDFs from gaining ground there. The AA-supported PRA (Magway) and Asho Chin Defense Forces (ACDF), formed of local ethnic Chin tribe, had reportedly fighting against the Sit-Tat which launched offensives in Ngape and Sidoktaya townships at the foot of Rakhine Yoma.<sup>257</sup> Despite a lull in conflicts in Rakhine State, recent developments clearly indicate a strong likelihood of renewed conflicts,

and if conflict resumes in Rakhine state, a continuous corridor from Kachin State to the Bay of Bengal could be formed by linking the Kachin, Chin, Anyar, and Rakhine theaters in the western part of the country.

### ***An Overview of Combat Theaters***

Analysis of all conflict hotspots portends an upward trend in clashes across the country in the foreseeable future. The Sit-Tat's limited resources have been overstretched across all theaters, with its chances of bringing the whole country under its control progressively eroding. Contrary to its ambitious claims of an imminent annihilation of resistance forces, the junta has gradually restrained its objectives to focus on consolidating its control over urban and strategic areas, neutralizing immediate threats, and preparing for a more defensive posture in its bases. Likewise, the military regime has sought to contain the EAOs to inhibit the spread of fighting and to dissuade them from aligning with the NUG and PDFs.

However, developments in all theaters clearly evidence a military fiasco both tactically and strategically. On the tactical level, the Sit-Tat is performing extraordinarily poorly, and on the strategic level, it has done little to achieve its objectives of annihilating resistance forces and imposing its control. The upcoming monsoon season may prove tremendously costly for the Sit-Tat's capability and resiliency. It may even struggle to retain its hold in strategic areas, particularly cities and towns in conflict hotspots when airstrikes will be curtailed by adverse weather conditions.



The sprawling and decentralized resistance movement across the country have achieved rapidly accelerated momentum over the first year. Within a short period, the armed resistance forces have undoubtedly matured into more organized formations, and in some areas, particularly through cooperation with the EAOs, into battle-hardened troops. However, analysis of all theaters clearly demonstrates that the quickly developed armed resistance required strong coordination, consolidation, and centralization amongst the anti-junta forces, as well as a more reliable supply of arms and ammunitions, particularly heavy armaments, in order to wrestle control of the state from the junta. The NUG and EAOs have built up multilateral and bilateral chains of command to integrate disparate armed units and to strengthen coordinated operations. In all theaters, the resistance forces have progressively been able to strengthen their positions and gain a cutting edge over enemies on the tactical level amidst fierce suppression by the Sit-Tat.

But, in order to accomplish their long-term strategic goal of seizing the state and short-term strategic goal of holding and consolidating control over highly populated rural and urban areas, pro-democracy forces need a strong centralized command; vigorous coordination with the EAOs, particularly the powerful outfits; and more reliable access to weaponry. The NUG Defense Minister's repeated emphasis on the plan to consolidate chain of commands and effort for strong coordination between the MOD and its allied EAOs in his recent interviews<sup>258</sup> is also reflective of its acute necessity on the ground. In addition, comprehensive strategy

for all theaters, robust intelligence networks, and enhanced logistics and communication systema are all necessary to increase their chances of victory.

In the current rebellion, although the Bamar-majority rise up to fight against the military and new conflict hotspots emerges in the central plains of Myanmar, an analysis of all theaters displays that the major battlefronts still lie in ethnic areas. The Sit-Tat is still engaging fierce fighting with ethnic armed groups in Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni and Karen theaters, and the possibility of renewed conflict is high in Rakhine State. Despite the complicated dynamics of ethnic politics and their inter- and intra-ethnic divergences, the ethnic armed groups, particularly the powerful major outfits, have played crucial roles in the current movement in terms of supporting the anti-junta forces and exerting enormous military pressure on the Sit-Tat.

If fighting resumes in Rakhine State, and the UWSA provides, or sells, weaponry to the resistance, the military balance would dramatically tilt towards anti-junta forces. However, the powerful ethnic armed groups, the AA in Rakhine State and almost all outfits in Shan theater, have maneuvered to press the current situation to their advantages of expanding their controlled areas and consolidating their authorities. As the total strength of those groups equals around half of all fighting forces opposed to the military regime, they are relatively well-equipped compared to other anti-junta troops, and they are in the position to effectively pursue their objectives, the direct military involvement of those groups could substantially upend the current conflict trajectory in Myanmar.







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## Section V: The Point of No Return

On the anniversary of its establishment, the National Unity Government issued a press release in which it claimed that the territory controlled by the NUG's PDFs, LDFs, and ethnic armed groups now covers 50 percent of the whole country.<sup>259</sup> Though it is hard to verify, anti-junta armed forces have striven to extend their sway across a vast swathe of rural areas in the aforementioned conflict areas by setting up local administrative mechanisms and initiating the provision of health and education services. According to the NUG's release, it has started to grant health services in its controlled areas by opening 51 hospitals, 55 clinics, 167 mobile clinics, and a nursing university. Moreover, it also reported the establishment of education boards in 286 townships, the launch of online learning

programs, and the opening of schools in certain controlled areas.<sup>260</sup>

Some shadow administration groups publicly proclaim the extent of their control. For instance, a member of the Mindat People's Administration said that it had established control over "95 percent of the area," with the exception of the township seat,<sup>261</sup> while CDF-Thantalang also announced that it has started running local administrations in 51 villages following the election of village administrators.<sup>262</sup> Likewise, local administration groups and defense forces frequently establish local governance and provide services in Chin, Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni.<sup>263</sup> In areas controlled by EAOs in Kachin, Shan, and Karen, local governance systems and the provision of basic services are already in place, best exemplified by recent efforts by the



AA to provide administrative, judiciary, and social services in Rakhine state. The NUG's claimed number of 50 percent control of the whole country is hard to assess, but it is clear that the junta's basic administration is not enforced in at least 50 percent of the country's territory.

The NUG's strategy is primarily predicated on a mix of negotiating with ethnic political forces to find a political common ground, seeking formal recognition of the international community, increasing and institutionalizing military collaboration with the EAOs, disrupting the military's rule, expanding its operation areas through urban and rural guerilla warfare, establishing interim administrative and judicial mechanisms, and granting basic social services in controlled areas. Anti-junta forces have entered political negotiations with various ethnic political forces through the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC),<sup>264</sup> as well as bilateral talks with certain ethnic armed groups not involved in the NUCC process.<sup>265</sup> A quiet sort of informal and unofficial recognition has been reserved to the NUG through the UN's decision to retain U Kyaw Moe Tun as the Representative of Myanmar,<sup>266</sup> the recognition by some foreign entities including the French Senate<sup>267</sup> and European Parliament,<sup>268</sup> and an official designation of support from U.S. Congress.<sup>269</sup> Finally, the institutionalization of formal collaboration with various ethnic armed groups has begun under the purview of the Central Command and Coordination Committee (C3C).

Yet, in the current situation, despite being a fundamentally inclusive platform aimed at reconciling different stances and interests to form a future federal democratic state in Myanmar, the

NUCC's progress has necessarily been hampered by skepticism and distrust prevalent between pro-democratic Bamar-dominated forces and the ethnic political forces, and by an inefficient and overly consensus-based approach.<sup>270</sup>

Likewise, despite mollifying anti-junta forces through informal engagements, lofty statements, and targeted sanctions, the international community, especially the West, have done little to act to support the pro-democratic movement and to counter in coup in Myanmar. So far, official recognition of the NUG is unlikely, and lethal aid and effective actions to curb the military's unrestrained power are out of question for the United States and its allies and partners.<sup>271</sup>

The military factor is also fraught with several impediments, such as a nascent and loosely-centralized command and control structure, the lack of heavy armaments to effectively counter the Sit-Tat's firing capabilities, a lack of investment in intelligence capacity and strategy, and a shortage of arms and ammunition to sufficiently equip all combatants.<sup>272</sup>

However, despite such setbacks, slow progress, and serious deficits, it is indisputable that the anti-junta forces are progressively building up a serious challenge to the military. However, the movement has a long road ahead to achieve its objectives of overthrowing the military and building an inclusive federal democratic state.

For its part, the junta is applying a similar playbook enacted by previous military dictators to consolidate its illegitimate power by compelling the people to submit to its rule through the excessive and brutal use of coercive power, normalization of the post-coup's abnormality, and the prolonging of its grip on power with the



“3Cs tactics”: 1) “controlling” urban centers, 2) “containing and coopting” the ethnic armed forces through peace negotiation, and 3) “crushing” the newly formed armed resistance.

Since day one of the coup, the junta held little compunction about brutally and sometimes wantonly employing excessive force and brutal tactics in its fight against its own people. The military regime has so far killed at least 1,835 civilians, including women and children, 200 of whom were tortured and killed in custody, and arrested 10,631 people until May 15, 2022.<sup>273</sup> The junta’s troops have also widely targeted and arrested family members, including children, of anti-junta activists as hostages in its crackdown on the resistance movement and armed rebellion.<sup>274</sup> In order to demoralize the dissidents, it has also seized over 547 houses and properties belonging to anti-regime activists up to April 15, 2022.<sup>275</sup> The worst is the burning of houses and villages, the indiscriminate shelling of residential areas, and the excessive use of aerial attacks. According to media reports collated by Data for Myanmar, Myanmar’s military has razed over 11,417 civilian buildings to suppress opposition to its rule from the start of the coup to the end of April.<sup>276</sup> It has also deployed air power to militarily prevail over the lightly armed and largely light infantry-based resistance forces. According to ISP Myanmar, the Sit-Tat launched no less than 123 airstrikes in areas of active rebellion across the country during May 21st to April 30th 2022, of which 95 strikes were in Demoso.<sup>277</sup>

But, the junta has been unable to bring the recalcitrant people to accept its rule, and instead, it has provoked an increasing level of resistance. The junta has sought to normalize its rule with various tactics, including organizing big festivals

and forcing people to return to a modicum of normal life. It recently tried to host a large event for the Thingyan water festival and mobilize people to celebrate it with exuberance. But, with the opposition’s calling for a boycott of the celebrations, armed groups’ warning of attacks on its military targets, and people’s continued defiance against the junta’s rule, this year’s water festival was uncharacteristically quiet.<sup>278</sup> The junta has also striven to consolidate its rule with its 3C tactics. In its crackdown on the resistance movement since the coup, the junta has strategically attempted to regain full control of the urban centers, key administrative and economic facilities, transportation and communication routes, as well as deploy all of its resources so as not to lose its tight control over these strategic places and infrastructures. However, distinctly from the post-1988 scenario, this time the junta’s control is contested by a widespread armed resistance, which has even infiltrated into urban areas.

Containing the ethnic armed outfits with the repeated peace offers has also been of limited success as most major EAOs distrust the military,<sup>279</sup> are siding with the people’s resistance, or are advancing their own interests. On April 22<sup>th</sup> 2022, the junta chief delivered a televised speech, calling for face-to-face peace talks with the ethnic armed groups. He invited leaders of ethnic armed groups to reply by May 9<sup>th</sup>, adding that he would meet them personally.<sup>280</sup> However, his call was met with suspicion and rejection, and only ten groups, mostly small and splinter groups, accepted the invitation. Of the powerful EAOs, the UWSA, SSPP and NDAA agreed to join the peace talks with the junta because they aim to consolidate their gains and advance their interests instead



of entering meaningful political dialogue, and, as expected, the RCSS, which has suffered heavy military pressure from the northern groups and dissociated from the resistance, will send its delegates to Naypyidaw. However, the KNU, KIA, KNPP, and CNF, which are currently engaging armed conflicts with the Sit-Tat, rejected the invitation.<sup>281</sup> The military has thus far achieved little, and the fires of rebellion continue unabated.

Moreover, the Sit-Tat, typically described in the past decade as the strongest institution in Myanmar able to hold effective control over all sphere of state power for several decades, has been long debilitated by a complex mix of the money-and-power-hungry generals, demoralized soldiers, the hollowing out of its structures, and its virtual deprivation of public support since before the coup. After the coup, these issues have only worsened. The ill-judged coup has now irretrievably dragged the Sit-Tat into a political “*Zugzwang*,”<sup>282</sup> during which any move disastrously undermines its position and strength. In addition, unprecedented massive defections deal a significant blow to military cohesion to the extent that military leaders have resorted to extensive propaganda, persuasion, and pressure.<sup>283</sup> At the international level, its deficiency of authority and legitimacy is critically exacerbated by its limited recognition within the international community.<sup>284</sup>

In this context, it is practically impossible for the military to bring the county back under its control and to normalize its reign, as it did in 1962 and 1988. The ferocious resistance movement led the junta to switch its strategy from “how to control” to “how to survive.”<sup>285</sup> In its struggle for survival, the junta has

intentionally created anarchy throughout the country. In retaliation against the anti-junta forces’ targeted assassinations, pro-junta forces formed some dead squad, including “Myanmar Comrade,” which distributed death threats to the family members of pro-democratic dissidents, including the media, and it recently attacked and killed the grandfather of an actor who joined the PDF.<sup>286</sup> Moreover, the junta recently announced its plan to set up a “People’s Security System” to provide military training and equipment to its civilian supporters to fight against the PDFs.<sup>287</sup> The BBC Burmese reported that an apparent increase in the massacres of civilians against each other took place in Sagaing Region, following this announcement.<sup>288</sup>

In this way, post-coup Myanmar has progressively witnessed the proliferation of violent conflict across the country, the deterioration of its security infrastructure, and the prolonging of multifaceted crises. With neither the pro-democratic forces led by the NUG nor the Sit-Tat so far able to prevail, the gradual disintegration of central authority has consequently become obvious. In these circumstances, the ethnic armed groups, particularly the major ethnic armed groups, have become the most important players that both Bamar-dominated belligerents aim to pull to their sides. The longer the resistance movement rages, the more the EAOs’ positions gradually solidify.

The EAOs naturally differ in size and strength, as well as diverge in interests, positions and visions. In the current quick-changing political dynamic, static categorization of EAOs as NCA-signatories of non-signatories, is no longer relevant, and the oversimplification of all EAOs under one category obscures the complicated and fluid nature of



ethnic politics. Within a year, the initial responses of the EAOs to the coup needed reassessment and redesignation, as most groups quickly repositioned in the evolving situation.

Iterating on David Mathieson's early classification of three categories of EAO responses to the coup, there are now three groups: the first group is actively joining forces with the resistance movement, the second is aligning with the junta, and the last is steadfastly advancing their political visions. Although some are still hesitant to publicize their positions, EAOs such as the KNU, KIA, KNPP, and CNF are allying themselves with the people's resistance movement. Some members of the PPST, especially the RCSS, ALP, and PNLO have openly exposed their gradual alignment with the junta,<sup>289</sup> while most members of the FPNCC, particularly the AA and UWSA, have adroitly maneuvered to further their political interest, agendas, and visions. Amongst these three groups, the third unaligned group is the strongest uncommitted player.

Their alignment could very well shift the balance of power. Distancing themselves from the NUG's federal democratic vision and the junta's military-dominated future polity, members of the third groups are perhaps best described as moving towards a loosely confederated political arrangement, with some groups such as the AA preferring complete independence. While the Sit-Tat is seeking to convince the EAOs to accept its invitation of peace talks, the NUG is also striving to meet with the unaligned EAOs. The NUG also published a press release of its official meeting with the AA, significantly with Acting President Duwa Lashi La referring to the latter as the "Arakan People's Government."<sup>290</sup> In this way, the positions of these unaligned groups have become well-established.

Given the ascendancy of these centrifugal groups, the assertive advancement of the anti-junta forces, and an uncontrollable escalation in the nationwide conflict, Myanmar's polity has reached a point of no return for the pre-coup status quo ante.

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**It is practically impossible for the military to bring the country back under its full control and to normalize its reign, as it did in 1962 and 1988.**

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## Section VI: One Year On and the Future

The ill-judged military coup has opened up a Pandora's Box in Myanmar, out of which a series of unexpected crises, conflicts, and calamities have chaotically swirled. Even the coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing once admitted that he did not expect such a scenario, particularly the hugely popular resistance to his illegitimate seizure of power.<sup>291</sup> However, in hindsight, the Sit-Tat's imprudent and myopic seizure of power, its unhinged brutalizing and massacring of the people, and its unyielding grab for power all undoubtedly led the country into these unprecedented crises, conflicts and calamities.

Now, the coup has failed to consolidate control over the past year, and the armed rebellion has dramatically gained momentum with the emergence of new security actors and a

resurgence in largescale conflicts. Myanmar's civil wars, until now confined mainly to peripheral ethnic regions, has spread to the country's heartland and urban areas. Long-established ethnic armed groups have repositioned themselves in the new environment brought about by the post-coup turmoil, and some armed groups are pressing their advantage in this vacuum. Consequently, fierce clashes have revived in some ethnic areas which had enjoyed a relatively peaceful period over the past decade, and simmering conflicts in some areas are now boiling over into open and intensified hostilities. Looking back over the one-year period of the coup, the conflict has become the only game in town, and its outcome will determine the future trajectory of the country.

With this in mind, the situation is dynamic and quickly changing over time. Against this backdrop, uncertainty is hovering around the whole



landscape. But, an analysis of the whole dynamic landscape starting from our current understanding of the conflict and the military balance points to several possible outcomes facing Myanmar:

The first scenario is that the junta successfully manages to bring the whole country under its control by annihilating the pro-democracy resistance forces while containing or coopting the EAOs. During previous outbreaks of conflict in Myanmar's modern history, the central authority always managed to prevail in imposing its control, or at the least partial control, over the whole country (despite some setbacks, such as the continued autonomy of some EAOs), but it is less clear that it can do so this time. The Sit-Tat has been extremely brutal towards its own people, and this violence unleashed a storm of anti-Sit-Tat sentiment amongst the public, which makes submission unlikely in the foreseeable future. The junta is overstretched and essentially fighting several distinct wars simultaneously, all while remaining unable to reliably command the loyalty of the Bamar majority and perhaps even its own troops. The Sit-Tat acquiring firm control and returning to its pre-2011 dominance of Myanmar's political space is increasingly remote and may even be impossible given the escalating violence.

Another scenario is a negotiated settlement between the anti-junta forces and the military regime, as anticipated and hoped for by most in the international community. Yet, historically, political negotiation has never been in the DNA of the Myanmar military, which knows only the language of force.<sup>292</sup> Although the junta is calling for peace talks with the EAOs, it would never assent to a settlement that deprives it of its political role, because this would expose the generals to accountability mechanisms for their

crimes. Indeed, as the military can be said to have "already crossed the Rubicon, it is likely to do everything to stay in power,"<sup>293</sup> even if it brings utter devastation to its institution and the country. On the other hand, the junta's cruel and gratuitous violence pushed the people, particularly the youth, into a bitter hatred of the military, and negotiation with a brutal regime is not in their calculations now. Furthermore, the most likely international mechanism, ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, is effectively a non-starter with little appetite within the Southeast Asian bloc and in Myanmar. Moreover, even if international-mediated negotiation is possible, the junta's position would be irreconcilable with the pro-democratic forces, and its recourse to another military-dominated political arrangement akin to the 2008 Constitution would be unacceptable to all stakeholders. Who could reasonably accept a return to a power-sharing arrangement with the military which has already overturned the political game and reset it to zero as soon as it found a democratic result disagreeable? Thus, a negotiated settlement is as similarly remote as a complete Sit-Tat victory.

The third scenario is that the pro-democracy forces could forge effective political agreements with the ethnic armed groups to form the foundations for a genuine federal democratic union, and through centralized military command and coordinated operations, the resistance movement could militarily gain an advantage over the military, consolidate governmental control over a vast swath of territory, and attain a conventional victory over the military. Currently, the anti-junta forces hope to advance this scenario through the NUCC, NUG, and coordinated military commands such as the C3C. In the current situation, the resistance doggedly continues to militarily challenge



the junta, obstruct the administration of the government and economy, and derail efforts by the junta to consolidate international support, as well as continuously negotiate with the ethnic armed forces to find a political common ground in the NUCC. Indeed, it is undisputable that the resistance movement has been gaining military strength, and in some theaters, resistance forces are prepared to go further to claim control over territory. Yet, pro-democracy forces are still divided amongst themselves and most EAOs, particularly the most powerful outfits, appear reluctant to ally themselves to the still Bamar-dominated NUG and CRPH considering their historic distaste for the NLD and central governmental authority. For all of the PDFs' advantages in morale, they lack command and control, reliable logistics, heavy equipment, and the ability to hold urban areas. Therefore, this scenario is still far off in the current context.

The last scenario is that the country could territorially fragment after a protracted cycle of conflict, perhaps lasting years. In this scenario, the junta does not defeat the NUG completely, and, even if it does, will not easily be able to reign in the now de facto independent EAOs. At the same time, the NUG is unlikely to defeat the Tatmadaw on the battlefield or persuade the EAOs to join it politically. Both actors would be exhausted, divided, and largely spent forces, while Myanmar's economic development and the people's livelihoods devastated. The powerful EAOs would effectively pursue their objectives of more autonomy and, for some, complete independence. Meanwhile, the disparate resistance units would attempt to assert more control over their own territories in the current conflict hotspots but not necessarily join with the NUG. In this type of outcome, the NUG may find itself gradually sidelined into irrelevance even

among pro-democracy forces due to its lack of real, on-the-ground material power. If so, it could lead to the emergence of several distinct polities surrounding a devastated and failed state, instead of one Myanmar. This context has prompted some analysts to describe it as "balkanization."<sup>294</sup>

In the current dynamic and fluid situation, it is impossibly hard to predict which scenario will prevail in the future of Myanmar. But, an overarching analysis of the current conflict landscape finds the following observations in the foreseeable future.

1. The country has now become locked in a cycle of conflict. The security infrastructure has progressively crumbled all over country. Myanmar will witness a continued upward trend in conflict in the near future, and new conflict hotspots could spring up in every corner of the country. With the proliferation of armed conflict and the gradual collapse of security infrastructure, basic administration, and economy, the country is currently devolving into a failed state.
2. The military has obviously become frail, and its rule, despite the excessive use of coercive power, is also fragile. It has virtually lost all support amongst the people, even amongst the Bamar majority in the country's heartland areas. It is extremely improbable that, in the present situation, the junta can subsume the country and people under its complete control. The regime is therefore likely to escalate its level of extreme violence in order to impose control through coercive power. Yet, as it does so, it is liable to find stiffened resistance amongst all quarters.





3. At the same time, despite gaining widespread popular support, the NUG and the PDFs are still far off from achieving their key objective of seizing the state from the regime. Yet, there is hope that in the upcoming monsoon season the anti-junta forces have a good chance to acquire control over some strategic areas in the current conflict hotspots. If they can cement a broad alliance with the ethnic armed groups, especially the strongest uncommitted groups, establish a strong centralized command encompassing all armed resistance groups, and acquire a reliable source of heavy weaponry, the anti-junta forces may be on the right path for the progressive realization of its objective.
4. The powerful major ethnic armed groups have become the kingmakers in Myanmar's conflict, as well as some now becoming the primary beneficiaries of the current crisis. Most of the EAOs will likely remain cautious and adroitly hedge between the NUG and the Sit-Tat in furtherance of their objective of gaining greater control over territory and political autonomy. In this context, a much-expected federal army is a distant dream despite the tenuous formation of military alliances and cooperation between the NUG/PDFs and some EAOs. Furthermore, the strongest ethnic armed groups which have aligned with neither the junta nor the pro-democratic forces will continue to play their own game.
5. Finally, with the quick escalation, intensification, and expansion of conflict, and the effective and forceful advancement of some powerful ethnic armed outfits, Myanmar cannot revert to its pre-coup status quo ante. A primary concern surrounding this current trajectory is that protracted, multifaceted conflict puts the country at risk of dividing into several distinct polities and serious territorial fragmentation, as in scenario four. In such an outcome, Myanmar could be overwhelmed by anarchy and warlordism, even transcending the scenario of a failed state. In both the event of a Sit-Tat victory or this type of territorial fragmentation, the violence that now plagues Myanmar's people is likely to continue indefinitely, strangling the fading promise of a country once on the path to democracy and development.

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**The ill-judged military coup has opened up a Pandora's Box in Myanmar, out of which a series of unexpected crises, conflicts, and calamities have chaotically swirled.**

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