



Pathways ahead for Myanmar: Assessing the Challenges and Opportunities

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Executive Summary

The post-coup impasse in Myanmar – where the military finds itself weakened but not defeated and the resistance forces stronger yet fractured – has radically altered the political space, though the political settlement is yet to crystallise. In this dynamically evolving context, power, interests and legitimacy of different actors, including the peoples defence forces (PDFs), ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), and the state, are constantly being negotiated both by battlefield realities but also the ability of different groups to deliver services, foster inclusion, and attain legitimacy. Amongst this broad set of actors opposed to the coup, there is a recognition that beyond the shared objective of defeating the military regime, there needs to be a greater level of granularity on shared strategies for the interim period, including the emerging challenges of supporting the new governance mechanisms being incepted across the country. Along with the need to build trust between the opposition groups, there is also an acknowledgement of the need to sequence different sets of conversations – first amongst the broader opposition, and then ultimately with the military on issues such as accountability for human rights violations. Yet ongoing extreme violence, new conscription laws introduced by the military in February 2024, failed dialogue processes of the past, and a lack of trust that the military will abide by the terms of any future agreements are all reasons why engaging in 'dialogue' with the military remains distant for many of the anti-military opposition. While elite-level discussion has centred on issues such as federalism and constitution writing, the need for ensuring inclusivity beyond ethnicity is increasingly highlighted in these conversations, notably with regards to issues around women's representation in the senior leadership of ethnic movements, and non-dominant minorities.

Along with the complexity of cohering varied interests and priorities domestically, the anti-coup coalition also faces a fragmented international landscape which has impeded the success of steps being taken to address conflict fragmentation in the country. Demands of competing regional and international powers have led domestic actors to construct different sets of advocacy messages to suit these different audiences, with some parties shying away from committing to dialogue platforms as doing so might contravene the interests of competing powers. This focus on managing and appeasing the expectations and interests of multiple external audiences may risk time and energy being taken away from what is genuinely needed for conflict parties to successfully navigate the change that is needed in Myanmar.

This brief summarises key findings drawn from praxis-based research in the form of a Study Group on Myanmar, led by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) based at the University of Edinburgh Law School. Between 2021-2024, PeaceRep convened 12 Study Group sessions, including two in-person sessions in Thailand in 2024, under Chatham House Rule. The sessions involved a range of stakeholders, including civil society, ethnic resistance movements, PDFs, scholars and practitioners in a neutral space for discussion, and were organised with the objective of engendering a shared perspective on political developments in the country. The sessions offered participants an opportunity to discuss emerging themes in the political space in Myanmar, including emerging forms of governance, ASEAN's role, ideas of human rights during the revolution, and prospects for a broad-based dialogue within the opposition, amongst others.

Key Findings

- 1. Discussions on immediate strategies and pathways in managing the political transition, beyond the broader objective of 'winning the revolution', appear urgently needed. Discussions on pathways need examination at a greater level of granularity and to connect with emerging challenges on the ground, such as interim measures to support the new governance mechanisms being incepted across the country.**

Our conversations with stakeholders reveal varied perspectives on the possible scenarios that may emerge to break the post-coup impasse in Myanmar. One assessment holds that conflict in the country will become more 'internationalised' with direct intervention by external states, including neighbouring countries, enhancing the complexity of the conflict. A second considers that the military may give up fighting in ethnic areas and instead seek to consolidate in the Bamar regions, as most ethnic resistance movements are focused on expelling the military from ethnic areas. This in turn may lead either to (i) the Bamar PDF alliance overpowering the military, or (ii) the Bamar PDF alliances being coopted by the military, enhancing and consolidating the junta's power, and leading the junta to dominate once more in Bamar regions. If the first outcome prevails, with the junta overthrown, a key question amongst the anti-coup opposition is how to deal with a potential power vacuum in the days immediately after, including what would happen to many thousands of pro-military militias. Stakeholders also raised concerns more broadly about how PDFs add to the current complexity of the conflict. Lastly, the most popular scenario raised remains that the resistance forces make further territorial gains, building on the success of Operation 1027. This in turn may lead to further retreats by the military junta, with the ultimate outcome that the junta is defeated by the anti-coup coalition.

Amongst conversations of potential pathways out of the current impasse, the stakeholders did not discuss 'dialogue' or talks with the military regime as a priority, which highlights that a 'peace process' – the dominant pathway typically taken out of such transitions from a global perspective – is unlikely to have elite or public buy-in in Myanmar at present. The Myanmar military continues to be seen as a primary agent of instability (Hein 2024), rather than a party to any future solutions. Ongoing extreme violence, new conscription laws introduced by the military in February 2024, failed dialogue processes of the past leading to 'peace process fatigue', and a lack of trust that the military will abide by the terms of any future agreements are all reasons why engaging in 'dialogue' with the military appears distant for many of the anti-military coalition.

However, there is also a recognition that – even in the context of a possible future military victory by the anti-coup coalition – it will be necessary to talk to the military about some practical matters of transition, such as the process for withdrawal of junta forces, disbanding paramilitary groups, as well as justice and accountability measures. In the short term, some parts of the anti-coup opposition have publicly articulated that if there is to be dialogue with the military, it must only take place after certain 'pre-conditions' have been met. The two immediate conditions that have been publicly articulated are that the State Administration Council (SAC) immediately cease violence and enable humanitarian aid without disruption.

Equally, there is recognition of a need to sequence different sets of dialogue: first amongst the broader opposition, and then ultimately with the military as well. Such articulation around sequencing and preconditions indicates that the peace talks called for and being undertaken by the military, including the Chinese-brokered peace talks in Mongla, are unlikely to gain traction across the country, or be seen as legitimate until there is persistent de-escalation of junta violence and a clear signal of their willingness to compromise on wide-ranging issues. While the multiplicity of ethnic conflicts, and their intersection with an authoritarian polity and democratic opposition, provides a unique context in Myanmar, global evidence can offer Myanmar stakeholders some indication of the challenges and prospects of 'rebel' victory.¹ Between one-fifth and one-third of conflicts – depending on the definition used – have ended in rebel victory, involving capture of the central state or secession (Toft 2009).² In multi-party conflicts, rebel victory is considered more likely when the number of rebel groups the state has to confront simultaneously is high, or when these groups cooperate against their common enemy (Akcinaroglu 2012), highlighting the importance of inter-group coherence amongst state opposition. In Myanmar, the need for greater coherence, as will be discussed below, has been recognised by the anti-coup opposition, and bodies like the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) have sought to bring different groups together. Agreements on shared commitment to principles of federalism, civilian supremacy, and non-involvement of armed forces in politics, articulated in frameworks like the Federal Democratic Charter (FDC), have been central to coalescing the anti-military opposition. The focus within the wider anti-junta coalition has been to broaden the coalition subscribing to these agreements by bringing more Ethnic Armed/Resistance Organisations (EA/ROs) into the fold.

There is, however, also a recognition that the dynamism of post-coup political developments necessitates outlining the related practical measures in granular detail. In particular, there is a need to articulate how shared political aspirations for federalism and democracy anchor to the emerging governance mechanisms being incepted by EAOs and PDFs on the ground, and the challenges these actors face, notably with regards to funding, institutionalising and ensuring inclusivity. Global evidence indicates that rebel victories can pose immediate challenges to the effective management of domestic risks and consolidation of state power, alongside longer-term challenges for statebuilding, democratisation and inclusivity. Moreover, rebel victories following state collapse or secession also require 'statebuilding or state reconstitution' (building or rearrangement of an existing state). This is often characterized by three distinct processes: i) 'institutionalisation' or the making or revising of social, political and economic institutions (such as legislatures, the executive, the judiciary, and civil society associations, accountable and transparent banking systems); ii) 'bureaucratisation' or the rule by administrative offices marked by the promotion of professionalism and meritocracy, and iii) 'democratization' (Bereketeab 2013).

The absence of detail in how to implement broader commitments is also attributed by some stakeholders to differences in views on how to 'sequence' the political transition. There is a sense from some sections within the National Unity Government (NUG) that the focus needs to be on toppling the dictatorship and that dialogue on broader issues can come later, whilst amongst other ethnic and civic communities, there is a sense that granular conversations on governance and institution-building need to be discussed alongside military strategies against the SAC.

Discussions on governance could provide a platform for shared learning and lead to incepting new ways of joint working between anti-military forces. Relatedly, there is growing recognition of and receptivity to 'bottom-up federalism' and emerging 'alternative forms of governance beyond the state' by the NUG (Loyle et al. 2022).

2. **There is a consensus amongst stakeholders that coherence and trust-building amongst the anti-military opposition is crucial for the future political trajectory, yet at the same time emerging realities on and off the battlefield paint a mixed picture on prospects for coherence. Multi-mediation may be a helpful response to the current situation, rather than encouraging or waiting for a 'grand bargain' peace or transition moment, which may not arrive. This approach could be framed as 'sets of conversations' on distinct issues that are built up and connected over time.**

In Myanmar, increasing conversations and networks to build momentum and trust between different sets of stakeholders within the opposition is considered timely. Persisting divisions amongst stakeholders include older tensions between the 'democrats' and 'federalists' or the strategic split between the civilian opposition and the EAOs based on ethno-political grounds, including in bodies like the NUCC. These tensions have recently manifested in a perceived hierarchy between the NUG and ethnic movements, and between different ethnic movements. For example, recent territorial gains by the anti-military opposition since Operation 1027, though seemingly weakening the military's control, have also ignited fresh inter-EAO tensions. In particular, the Ta'ang and Kokang have gained strength and expanded their territory into ethnic Shan areas, while the Arkan Army (AA) has taken control of Paletwa Town in Chin State. The Institute for Strategy and Policy (ISP), a Myanmar think tank, has suggested that pervasive tensions over territorial control and encroachments have led EAOs to consider incepting defence mechanisms to prevent other armed forces from making in-roads into their areas of control areas (Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar 2023).

Global evidence indicates that such localised or issue-based forms of 'peacemaking' that aim to deal with certain challenges or themes, often between specific groups rather than all conflict parties, or in certain parts of the country, are increasingly used to address local-level tensions in many other conflict contexts. This approach derives from two contemporary dynamics. First, domestic conflicts often involve multiple fragmented armed actors with transnational relationships rather than simply a state and a 'big armed opposition' group (Bell and Wise 2022), making comprehensive mediated peace processes difficult to mount.

Second, global fragmentation is marked by increasing numbers of states and international organisations (both governmental and non-governmental) that are crowding the mediation landscape (Hellmüller 2022; Lanz 2011; Crocker, Hampson, and Aall 2015), with multiple types of peacemaking and mediation adaptations being incepted by different actors. Several components characterise this new peacemaking landscape, in what Christine Bell refers to as 'multi-mediation' (Bell 2024a).

- ▶ Localised disaggregated mediation: Domestic and international mediators are now more likely to be engaged in local mediation than they were previously, in part because they operate in contexts where an overarching process is not possible, but also because they recognise local conflicts as part of the wider conflict dynamic (Bell and Wise 2022).
- ▶ Disaggregated 'dialogue constellations': Mediation innovation also sees new 'mediation constellations' around particular conflict dyads or issues. A mediation constellation involves international and conflict actors, and sometimes technocrats, who create in essence an ongoing forum for mediating particular conflicts within the conflict system.
- ▶ One-sided pre-process mediation/dialogue: Conflict fragmentation has also created a greater need for 'mini prior peace processes' between constellations of actors that in nation-wide conflict terms are understood as loosely 'on the same side'.
- ▶ Interstate dimensions of dialogue: In addition, a number of international mediation initiatives are often also at play simultaneously.

'Multi-mediation' provides both opportunities and risks. With efforts focused on resolving issues within distinct 'local' spaces or territories within broader conflicts, 'islands of stability' may emerge while comprehensive nationwide processes are difficult to navigate towards. The resulting reduction of violence in these territories or agreements on specific themes relevant to the locality can alleviate human suffering at a local level, lead to the resumption of public services, and allow for humanitarian goods to bring about immediate 'dividends' at the grassroots (Wittke 2023).

However, focusing on short term 'localised' violence reduction may risk longer-term thinking on peace and inclusion, or prioritisation of both short-term violence reduction in different local territories and the forging of issue-specific agreements over efforts to incept comprehensive processes that anchor long-term sustainable conflict transformation (Bell and Wise 2022). Another implication of the contemporary mediation landscape, with the opportunities it presents for multiple processes, is the possibility that conflict parties engage in forum shopping – choosing to engage in forums or processes most favourable to their interests, rather than the likelihood of their leading to sustainable outcomes for peace. Uncertainty around the motivation for engagement by different parties has the capacity to reduce trust in such forums as arenas for genuine resolution of conflict.

Regardless of the type of process incepted to broker dialogue, trust between parties remains central to its likely outcome. Our conversations also identified that the choice of nominated representative for different groups is key for stakeholders to trust any processes of dialogue. In particular, concerns were raised around the deferral of attendance and representation in dialogue forums from core decision-makers to other related 'civic' actors associated with different movements. The attendance of core decision-makers of movements and/or groups is considered crucial due to i) their having the authority to present and make decisions on behalf of their group; ii) the clear signal it sends to others that the group prioritises and is committed to the process; and iii) the encouragement it gives to others to trust and invest in the process as well.

One option for ensuring the involvement of core decision-makers is for parties to engage in secret direct negotiations, at least in the initial stages – supported by external state, academic, civil society and other third parties. This approach provides political cover, is cost-effective, does not require formal recognition of the adversary, and allows for communication with adversaries who do not yet meet preconditions for talks, such as a ceasefire (Pruitt 2008). However, this approach also increases the risk that such talks are not inclusive, which is an important consideration since peace agreements are more durable when forged with broad popular support that does not exclude or silence societal actors (Bramble et al. 2023).

3. Competing narratives of 'fragmentation' and a 'renewed unity' have been articulated to describe the situation in Myanmar, both of which serve strategic purposes of different sets of actors. Though these narratives are contested, the emergence of organic forms of governance and bottom-up statebuilding, together with natural forms of reconciliation, are positive steps that different groups could work to leverage.

While fragmentation is not new in the Myanmar context, its scale and intensity has made it appear more prominent, with descriptors such as 'fragmentation' and 'balkanisation' increasingly used to describe the post-coup context. Some contest these terms, arguing they serve to amplify the narrative used by the military for decades about disintegration of the country (Ring 2024). Further, the idea of fragmentation is also seen to stand at odds with the increasing military coordination, the growing sense of 'shared victimization' (Chew and Jap 2024), and resulting inter-ethnic solidarity between different groups within the opposition (Ryan, Tran, and Htut 2024). Additionally, some view that the authority and legitimacy of the NUG may be dampened when the anti-coup coalition is seen as fragmented, which in turn may impact international community engagement.

However, an assessment of 'unity' also does not reflect on the 'complex interactions and divisions within the resistance movement' (Ya 2024). The post-coup disorder and the 'evolving geographies of war, each distinctive in terms of actors involved and outcomes' with varied economic logics and transnational ties suggests the emergence of 'fragmented sovereignty' (Fumagalli 2023). The fragmentation, and the variable capacity of state and non-state actors across different parts in Myanmar has impacted service delivery, humanitarian assistance, and general economic wellbeing, but it has also allowed some innovative and inclusive forms of governance to emerge and adapt to changing circumstances. For one, while federal aspirations have been central to the discussions of the future of Myanmar, notably amongst ethnic communities, the post-coup governance trajectory has seen bottom-up forms of governance led by EAOs and PDFs emerge and be acknowledged. Marking a radical departure from decades of centralisation, EAOs like the Arakan Army have focused on "implementing a governance mechanism with strong institutions for public administrative affairs including administration, judiciary and public security" (Lin 2024). Similarly, in Sagaing, PeaceRep's ongoing research evidences that NUG's Pa Thone Lone and local PDFs have set up their own system to govern, collect taxes and oversee activities like logging. Such examples highlight how forms of 'federal practice already exist and could be better acknowledged and supported' (South 2022).

Further, with civil disobedience movement leaders and many ethnic Bamars fleeing to ethnic territories, the stakeholders participating in the workshops highlighted that many ethnic communities are working with Bamar people to form clinics and hospitals, teach in schools, and advice on different other forms of governance – forging a natural sense of reconciliation between the dominant majority and the minorities. Our research also reveals that some EAOs are working to revisit their organisational documents, charters or constitutions to accommodate the concerns of and governance of other ethnic groups, in light of population shifts since the coup. A new model for inter-ethnic collaboration thus appears to be emerging across different regions. Though these new forms of bottom-up governance and inclusion that are emerging in Myanmar are recognised by many stakeholders, these models have yet to be prioritised within the wider discussion on institutional modalities of federalism and governance. Much of the discussion within the opposition, and the Federal Democratic Charter, has been top-down and centred on macro level institutions and around division of power between state and centre, and replacing of the constitutions. Though important, these conversations often omit to engage with the most 'local' forms of complex assemblages of 'governance beyond the state' that are emerging and evolving in Myanmar. Such assemblages are defined not only vertically by relationships between armed actors and their constituents but also horizontally by how various armed actors with differing areas of territorial control interact with each other and the state.

Some practical challenges and opportunities stem from these emerging and evolving forms of governance. For the international community it can be difficult to fund and support local, often informal, and rapidly shifting governance mechanisms (Wells and Maung 2024). At the same time, the dynamism of these mechanisms opens up opportunities for the international community to influence the political trajectory towards a federal inclusive system in Myanmar. For EAOs and PDFs, there are opportunities to demonstrate their legitimacy to donors by increasing the inclusivity of mechanisms, and thereby attracting greater funding in the future.

4. The needs for ensuring inclusivity beyond ethnicity, and accountability beyond the military are increasingly being articulated. Amongst post-coup revolutionary groups, there has been some systematic thinking around the need to integrate 'gender' into Myanmar politics. Issues around women's representation in the senior leadership of ethnic movements, as well as the need to address 'patriarchy' embedded within Burmese society, featured as core issues needing to be dealt with. Overall, a lack of women in leadership positions in various groups was seen to have implications for the representativeness of the possible dialogues taking place across anti-coup decision-makers, potentially leading to key underlying issues not being raised in discussions.

While political elites tend to focus on political institutions, federalism, and constitutions as sources of pathways of change at a popular level, there is a demand for broader structural transformation – not only against the authoritarianism of the military junta, but also a broader political culture of authoritarianism that is pervasive across the political system in Myanmar. There is a sense of there being a need not only for accountability by the military but also a reflection by all parties on past mistakes, moving away from 'militarisation' and 'centralisation' towards a more inclusive and just state. Some civil society actors outlined how such systemic transformation will need to address intersections between ethnic conflict, religious conflict, political equality, identity politics, and issues of access to economic and political power. Crucially, they highlighted the need to address 'patriarchy' embedded within Burmese society, which implicated women's representation in broader politics and policy. Alongside the inclusion of women, questions around the representation and inclusion of non-dominant minorities, and religious minorities was also seen to be crucial (Ko et al. 2024). Ensuring the inclusivity of all such groups in discussions on the political transition offers one means of identifying potential 'unknown unknowns' that could derail possible elite-level pacts or plans for peace when brought to the general population.

Of related concern is the relative lack of women in leadership positions amongst anti-coup groups and the implications of digital platforms and technology for women's political participation. Digital technologies have aided pro-democracy activism (Ryan and Tran 2024) and the rise of digital peacebuilding and platforms has provided new avenues for inclusion by opening up new opportunities for women to have a 'seat at the table' in peace and other political processes, as well as enhancing the visibility of the role of women in movements.

However, online spaces can also reproduce and amplify the patriarchal structures, practices, and cultures that exist offline. Moreover, gendered divisions reportedly exist in the division between in-person and online discussions, with women tending to participate in online conversations whilst men more often attending the physical meetings (Bell 2024b). During face-to-face meetings it is easier to understand the other party's perspective and intentions (Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017), read intentions (Wong 2016), transform relationships (Wheeler 2013) and build empathy (Holmes 2018; Holmes and Yarhi-Milo 2017). Thus, women's relative lack of participation in physical discussions has implications for whether issues raised by women are prioritised. Ensuring women's inclusion and representation in the senior leadership of anti-coup groups, and their full participation in discussions is crucial to ensure the representativeness of possible dialogues and to avoid key underlying issues not being raised.

5. Global fragmentation has not only accentuated domestic fragmentation in Myanmar but also impeded the success of steps being taken to address conflict fragmentation in the country.

Fragmentation in the global order is marked by a range of different third-party actors – state, intergovernmental and nongovernmental – intervening in contemporary conflicts (Peter and Rice 2022). In Myanmar, since the coup, much of the discussion on the role and engagement of international actors has centred on the Five Point Consensus (FPC) drafted by ASEAN. While the Indonesian chairmanship of the regional bloc, through 2023, initiated a flurry of engagement with different EAOs and other non-state partners, even by ASEAN's own admission, the FPC has hit a roadblock (Marciel 2022). Not only has violence and repression by the Myanmar military increased, but humanitarian assistance has also faced multiple problems of humanitarian access in some parts, and even concerns about ASEAN's use of the SAC's administrative channel to deliver aid inadvertently legitimising the junta, as well as the scale of aid not matching the needs on the ground. Aside from ASEAN's ineffectiveness, there are also multiple dialogue processes at play in Myanmar – with multiple, distinct dialogue and engagement processes across national and sub-national levels, involving varied regional and international actors bringing their own interests, norms and ways of working to discussions.

Such multiple, often competing, dialogue processes based on different international actors having their own relationships to conflict actors, could provide unique opportunities for back channels and engagement to bring the opposition together. Collectively, external actors have a wide reach to a range of conflict actors, and dialogues addressing parts of the conflict system. However, there is no clear mechanism for bringing these international actors together more strategically.

Instead, fragmentation is impeding steps taken to address the conflict in Myanmar. Some domestic parties are shying away from committing to dialogue platforms as doing so might contravene the interests of competing regional or international powers. In balancing the increasingly varied interests and priorities of a growing number of international actors, the anti-coup coalition has a more difficult and complex decision-making arena in which to navigate. With external engagements increasingly framed as 'pro-China' or 'pro-West', this new division can at times obstruct agreement amongst the alliance of anti-coup actors in early talks.

At the same time, the demands of competing regional or international powers have led domestic actors to construct sets of advocacy messages to suit these different audiences. When ASEAN is the audience, advocacy messages are tailed around regional stability; for regional neighbours like China and India communications must emphasize that cross-border investments will be secured; while for Western states the values of inclusion and democratic accountability are highlighted. The need to focus on managing and appeasing the expectations and interests of multiple external audiences takes time and energy away from what is genuinely needed for conflict parties to successfully navigate the change that is needed in Myanmar.

An implication is that there is a need to develop new ways of coordinating amongst the international community to ensure that domestic parties express what is genuinely needed and to receive support for these genuine needs during the early stages of discussions. At the global level, there is a need for innovation in how to mediate between the mediators, negotiators and facilitators who often intervene with different goals for mediation, and indeed different concepts of what mediation comprises. One option for better cooperation between and across different types of dialogue is the development of mechanisms for information exchange between mediation initiatives and those involved in Myanmar. Doing so could reduce duplication of efforts across concerned external actors, whilst also improving the simplicity of the support systems in place for conflict parties – and the advocacy messages they need to develop – whilst seeking pathways for peace in Myanmar.

Endnotes

¹ The terms 'rebel groups' or 'rebel victories' are definitions used in academic scholarship to refer to armed non-state actors that fight 'to either take control of a state or create a new one, to create state-like governing institutions', often underpinned by various exclusion-related grievances. Here, it is used it as a 'value- neutral' term and not essentially as positive or negative.

² Some examples include Uganda's National Resistance Army (NRA), Chad's Mouvement Patriotique du Salut (MPS), and the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).

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About Us

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civiness Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

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