

Advancing “Government Recognition in Uncontested States” as a Research Agenda: Evidence from Post-Coup Myanmar

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Recent unconstitutional changes of government in Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Venezuela offer a distinct challenge for the international community: How to respond when rival governments contest authority over a state where statehood itself is not in question. Such instances highlight the value of examining “government recognition in uncontested states” as a distinct object of inquiry in International Relations, separate from the well-established literature on state recognition. To advance this new research agenda, we build on scholarship on norms and practices of recognition with an inductive case study of post-coup Myanmar. We argue that the international community has largely pursued a strategy of “(non)recognition” by engaging in ambiguous practices that avoid explicit recognition of any competing authority while maintaining ties with all parties on pragmatic grounds. We argue that such ambiguous practices are interpreted differently across social and political domestic groups, enabling multiple and competing constructions of what government recognition means in practice. This multiplicity of meaning-making produces a form of government recognition defined by three core features: (i) *divided* (a disconnect between international recognition and local legitimacy), (ii) *subjective* (diplomatic practices actively constructed and co-opted by competing domestic actors), and (iii) *co-constituted* (citizens contest and reshape the international community’s recognition decisions).

Los recientes cambios inconstitucionales de Gobierno en Myanmar, Afganistán y Venezuela representan un nuevo y diferente desafío para la comunidad internacional: Cómo se puede responder cuando existen Gobiernos rivales que disputan la autoridad sobre un Estado en aquellos casos donde la condición de Estado en sí misma no está en cuestión. Estos casos ponen de manifiesto la importancia de analizar «el reconocimiento gubernamental en Estados no disputados» como un objeto de investigación distinto en el ámbito de las Relaciones Internacionales, separado de la literatura consolidada en materia de reconocimiento de estados. Para impulsar esta nueva agenda de investigación, nos basamos en trabajos académicos sobre normas y prácticas de reconocimiento con un estudio de caso inductivo de la situación de Myanmar después del golpe de Estado. Argumentamos que la comunidad internacional ha seguido, en gran medida, una estrategia de «(no)reconocimiento» al participar en prácticas ambiguas que evitan el reconocimiento explícito de cualquier autoridad enfrentada mientras mantienen vínculos con todas las partes por motivos pragmáticos. Argumentamos que tales prácticas ambiguas son interpretadas de manera diferente en los distintos grupos sociales y políticos nacionales, lo que permite construcciones múltiples y enfrentadas de lo que el reconocimiento gubernamental significa en la práctica. Esta multiplicidad de creación de significados produce una forma de reconocimiento gubernamental definida por tres características principales: (i) división (una desconexión entre el reconocimiento internacional y la legitimidad local), (ii) subjetividad (prácticas diplomáticas construidas activamente y cooptadas por actores nacionales enfrentados), y (iii) coconstitución (los ciudadanos disputan y remodelan las decisiones en materia de reconocimiento de la comunidad internacional).

De récents changements inconstitutionnels de gouvernement en Birmanie, en Afghanistan et au Venezuela présentent un net défi pour la communauté internationale : quelle réponse apporter quand des gouvernements rivaux remettent en question l'autorité s'agissant d'un État où le statut d'État en lui-même n'est pas débattu. Ce genre d'exemples souligne l'importance de s'intéresser à la reconnaissance d'un gouvernement dans des États incontestés comme un objet distinct d'étude en relations internationales, qui n'appartient pas à la littérature bien établie sur la reconnaissance étatique. Pour promouvoir ce nouveau programme de recherche, nous nous fondons sur la recherche sur les normes et les pratiques de reconnaissance avec une étude de cas inductive de la Birmanie après le coup d'État. Nous affirmons que la communauté internationale a largement poursuivi une stratégie de « (non-)reconnaissance » en adoptant des pratiques ambiguës qui évitent la reconnaissance explicite de toute autorité concurrente, tout en entretenant des liens avec toutes les parties sur des bases pragmatiques. Nous affirmons que ces pratiques ambiguës sont interprétées différemment dans l'ensemble des groupes sociaux et politiques nationaux. Aussi apparaissent plusieurs compréhensions contradictoires de la reconnaissance d'un gouvernement en pratique. Cette multiplicité de production de sens engendre une forme de reconnaissance de gouvernement définie par trois caractéristiques principales : (i) divisé (une déconnexion entre la reconnaissance internationale et la légitimité locale), (ii) subjectif (des pratiques diplomatiques construites et récupérées activement par des acteurs nationaux concurrents) et (iii) co-constitué (les citoyens contestent et reçoivent les décisions de reconnaissance de la communauté internationale).

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tional interventions, and conflict management efforts by Asian states including India, China, and Japan.

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Introduction

In December 2021, the UN General Assembly delayed a decision on who should represent Myanmar at the world body. Since the coup in February 2021, the military backed State Administration Council (SAC) government and the opposition, the National Unity Government (NUG), have both claimed to be the legitimate representatives of the people of Myanmar. The question of who should be recognized as the legitimate government and represent Myanmar in key forums like the International Criminal Court, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the United Nations (UN) brings to the fore questions about the preconditions and consequences of *government recognition in uncontested states*, such as Myanmar. Whilst the focus of international relations scholarship has tended to be on understanding how states and international organizations engage with institutions in contested or unrecognized states, such as Kosovo, Abkhazia, Palestine, or Somaliland, in Myanmar the question is instead whether and how to engage with two competing or rival *governments* that each claim to represent the same *uncontested state*.¹ Apart from the European Parliament and the French Senate, at the time of writing, no other international actor has explicitly recognized either party as the government of Myanmar. Many, however, have avoided explicit formal recognition of any of the rival parties and actions that might lend implicit legitimacy to one party. Indeed, international actors have mostly continued to engage with all parties in everyday diplomatic practices, peacemaking, humanitarian assistance, and in bilateral or multilateral forums. In fragmented Myanmar, different social and political actors understand, interpret and interact with these ambiguous practices in varied ways, leading to multiple meaning making of what constitutes government recognition. While the SAC has strategically framed routine diplomatic practices as “acts of recognition,” citizen groups in Myanmar have urged international agencies not to enter into dialogue with the SAC or deliver humanitarian aid through state institutions to avoid inadvertently legitimising the military junta. Drawing on multiple data sources, we conduct an inductive case study of post-coup Myanmar to examine two inter-related questions: How have external states and international organizations responded to government recognition contests in Myanmar? How are such practices by external states and organizations received by political and social actors in host states like Myanmar?

Beyond Myanmar, international states have faced similar dilemmas relating to “government recognition in uncontested states” in other contexts—ranging from post-Taliban Afghanistan in 2021, Libya in 2011, Egypt in 2013, and Venezuela in 2019—where competing political forces claim to be the “legitimate representative of the people.”² Such instances highlight the value of examining “government recognition in uncontested states” as a distinct object of inquiry in International Relations, separate from the well-established literature on state recognition. Unlike recognition of states, recognition of governments is one of the most unregulated aspects of international law, with the decision to recognize or not left to the discretion of states (2015). These contexts thus present a distinct challenge for the international community: How to respond when rival governments contest authority over a state where statehood itself is not in question.

In this international legal vacuum, states have engaged very differently to government recognition contests, and two policy frameworks have emerged. First, to avoid adjudicating between rival governments, many states have adopted the policy of only “*recognizing states*” and not “*governments*” (2001a; 1983). Second, where states have addressed questions of government recognition in uncontested states, they have largely justified their decisions using two legal criteria—(i) *whether the government has effective control over the majority of the territory* and (ii) *legitimacy* or whether the government has come to power in accordance with the established legal order (2012). However, states apply these criteria selectively and inconsistently with, “different countries applying different criteria when recognizing foreign governments established in extra-constitutional ways. . . even different governments of the same country may have applied inconsistent criteria” (2008). Variation in the application of the criteria exposes the predominantly political nature of recognition, undermining their legal basis.

Recent waves of civil wars, coups, occupation, and the resulting fragmentation of domestic authority in many fragile and conflict-affected states have increased the scholarly and policy salience of government recognition dilemmas and their implications for peacemaking, humanitarian assistance, and representation on multilateral forums. However, the IR scholarship has yet to sufficiently engage with “government recognition in uncontested states” as a concept with unique challenges, despite strides in the related yet distinct scholarship on recognition of states (2001b, 2011; 2018a; 2012; 2020; 2022; Fernández-Molina 2023).

To fill this gap, in this paper we advance “government recognition in uncontested states” as a research agenda. We build on three bodies of scholarship: nascent studies of government recognition, the wider scholarship on recognition of states, and theories of norm contestation and ambiguity. In doing so, we analyze the practices of international engagement with rival government contenders seeking recognition, and their implications for understandings of government recognition practices across domestic social and political groups. We empirically demonstrate that government recognition contests in Myanmar are marked by (*non*)*recognition of governments in uncontested states*, which we define as “*ambiguous sets of practices by the international community that involve avoiding the explicit recognition of any of the competing parties, while continuing to engage in a composite of formal and informal practices with both parties based on pragmatic assessments of needs.*” We find that states engage in such practices due to pragmatic political considerations, foreign policy consequences, and the impracticality of applying the legal criteria.

The (*non*)*recognition* concept builds on existing research on “engagement without recognition” (which investigates how contested states are engaged with, absent formal recognition by other states) (2018b; Ker-Lindsay 2015), “derecognition” of states (2011), as well as the legal scholarship on *de jure* and *de facto* recognition. The article applies insights from these research strands to better understand the set of distinct practices employed by external states engaging with rival factions claiming to be the government of the same uncontested state. Drawing empirically from the case of Myanmar, we argue that the ambiguous practices of (*non*)*recognition of governments* by states and international organizations have enabled diverse and competing interpretations of what government recognition entails. This has led to different social and political groups within domestic contexts to create their own meanings of government recognition, which we refer to as multiple meaning-making processes. Such multiple meaning making, we argue, has led government recognition as

¹Notably, under international law “there can be but one government in the same State at the same time.” (2001b, Pg. 105).

²For more on the unconstitutionality of the coup in Myanmar, refer to Noel (2022).

set of international practices to be defined by three features: *subjective* (everyday practices actively “constructed” and “co-opted” by competing domestic sides), *divided* (disconnect between international recognition and local legitimacy), and *co-constituted* (citizens contest the international community’s decision).

We develop our argument with an inductive case study of the uncontested state of Myanmar, where recognition of rival governments has been contested by its domestic constituents and other states since the 2021 military coup. The empirical analysis draws on 124 press releases issued by competing parties since the coup, 13 focus groups with more than 220 key stakeholders between September 2021 and November 2024, and secondary sources, particularly reports by Burmese sources.

The article makes three key contributions. First, it advances and calls for “government recognition in uncontested states” to be investigated as a distinct subset of inquiry in International Relations. While discussions on how the international community should recognize or engage with governments of contested states such as Kosovo, Taiwan, or Palestine has produced an insightful body of work on *recognition of states*, similar advances in the distinct study of *recognition of governments* is nascent. Second, by conceptualizing the sets of international practices as *(non)recognition of governments in uncontested states*, the article highlights the pervasiveness of varied and ambiguous forms of engagement with external states, which avoids explicit recognition of any party whilst continuing to engage with all sides based on pragmatic assessments. Lastly, while the recent work on government recognition has focused on typologizing a range of practices of (non)recognition by international states and their effects (Fernández-Molina 2023), this article takes the argument further to examine how such practices interact with and are received by competing social and political groups in host states. We suggest this interaction generates multiple meanings of the practice of international recognition, which in turn redefines what constitutes government recognition practices.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the scholarship on government recognition in uncontested states as distinct from state recognition. Then, it presents the theoretical proposal of (non)recognition of governments in uncontested states. The article goes on to present the research design, methodology and data, before empirically examining the response of the international community and external states to government recognition contests in post-coup Myanmar. The article concludes with implications of these features for government recognition in international relations.

Situating “Government Recognition in Uncontested States” in the Literature

Existing scholarship on “recognition” in world politics has centred on the “recognition of states” or state recognition. This literature has moved beyond the legal binaries of recognition or non-recognition to examine practices of engagement, and the motivations of other states to recognize or not, as well as associated ideas of international and domestic legitimacy, (2022; 2015; 2016). Within this insightful scholarship, questions of recognition of governments in uncontested states, where rival political factions claim to be the legitimate representative of the “state” when the state itself is recognized, are largely peripheral, barring some enriching discussions (e.g., 2011; Fernández-Molina 2023). The literature on “recognition of states” identifies “an effective govern-

ment” as one criteria for state recognition (2012). This has led to an assumption in much of the state recognition literature that government recognition is only in question when statehood recognition is in question.

The cases of Libya, Myanmar, and Afghanistan, however, all illustrate that an unconstitutional change of government can lead to questions around which rival government contender to recognize when the state itself is uncontested and recognized but its government is not. While important insights can be applied from the related literature on state recognition (e.g., 2001b, 2011; 2018a; 2012; 2020; 2022; Fernández-Molina 2023), recognition of governments in uncontested states is distinct, as presented in Table 1. There are different challenges and dilemmas for recognizing states, multilateral organizations and the contesting party(s), divergent normative and legal underpinnings, and different conditions under which contests arise.

Unlike state recognition whose legal basis is governed by the Montevideo Convention on the Right and Duties of States, recognition of government is largely unregulated in international law and relies on the unilateral discretion of recognising states (2010). When responding to government recognition contests, recognizing external states have typically used their discretion in two main ways. First, some states, like the United Kingdom, have adopted a stated policy of not recognizing governments but only states. This approach skirts difficult legal questions that could arise from instantly recognizing states with territorial control but no internal legitimacy or vice-versa, as well as the possible normative implications of such decisions (2012; 2023). Yet, deference to recognizing statehood and not governments leaves related practical dilemmas unresolved such as which ambassadors to accredit, whether to, and who can sign agreements, which of the two contending governments gets representation in international bodies like the UN, and which parties to invite for dialogue, diplomacy, and co-ordination of delivery of humanitarian aid (2021).

The second way in which states have responded to government recognition contests is to explicitly evaluate government rivals using two criteria—effective territorial control and democratic legitimacy (2012). Effective control implies, “that the regime claiming to be the government will usually control most if not all the state’s territory. . . at a minimum it must exercise control of the state machinery. . . In addition, effective control requires a certain amount of habitual acceptance of the regime’s authority’ (2019). Legitimacy refers to the constitutionality of changes of government and its democratic credentials (2010). However, while both criteria have established legal precedent, their application by states is not consistent in practice. Effective control can be hard to determine in complex contexts and may be distorted by foreign involvement or sit at odds with popular will (1999; 2023). Likewise, the test of legitimacy tends to be “subjective” on who you ask rather than what it is (1999; 2015). These criteria can also contradict each other—the effective control test for government recognition may sit uncomfortably alongside democratic governance and popular sovereignty (2023). Different countries apply these criteria in distinct ways, and governments within the same country may also apply the criteria differently at separate times (1997).

Indeed, owing to the absence of an international legal regime, unlike other legal regimes such as international human rights or humanitarian law, “recognition of governments” has not evolved into a “robust normative regime” that guides practices by states in the international system. Different policies are adopted by states and international organizations in this normative and legal vacuum. Cumulatively,

Table 1. Differentiating recognition of states from recognition of governments in uncontested states.⁸

	<i>Recognition of contested states</i>	<i>Recognition of governments in uncontested states</i>
Dilemma for states and multilateral organizations	Whether or not a territorial entity is a state, with membership of international society	Which of two or more rival domestic parties is the legitimate government representative of an uncontested state
Conditions under which contest arises	Secession, decolonization of states, partition of states, and annexation of states	Coups, civil wars, and outside intervention
Underpinning norms	Norms of self-determination by emerging states, and norms of territorial integrity by parent state	Democratic and constitutional legitimacy, and territorial control over majority of the state
Legal governance	Regulated by Montevideo Convention on the Right and Duties of States (adopted December 26, 1933, entered into force December 26, 1934), despite being left to discretion of states	Largely unregulated in international law and left to discretion of states and international organisations.
Challenges for the contesting party(es)	Inability of the state in question to carry out normal diplomatic and economic relations, join international institutions and to sign treaties and agreements	Limits government from carrying out normal diplomatic and economic relations, accessing international institutions and signing treaties and agreements with states and international actors that do not recognize the government
Relations between the two	Prior to recognition of the sovereignty of a state its government cannot be recognized or can only be recognized as de facto. Effective government is a condition of recognition of state.	Unconstitutional changes of government can introduce questions of government recognition even while the legal personality of the state continues and state recognition is not an issue.

⁸This table draws on the work of 2012; 2018a; 2011; 2021; ; 2020; Fernández-Molina 2023.

these result in “government recognition” practices that are *varied* in the international system, and often *ambiguous*.

Such variation in practices is evident in the case of Venezuela, where until the US intervention in early 2026, dozens of states, including the United States, the Organization of American States, and the European Parliament, formally recognized the opposition in Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela. In contrast, Russia, China, Iran, and Cuba have publicly affirmed their support of Maduro’s government (2019). Likewise, ambiguity is evident in the German approach, with the German state not recognizing the Taliban government that took control of Afghanistan in 2021, yet maintaining “technical contacts” with the Taliban to manage deportations of Afghan nationals in Germany, and continuing to engage in “fields of humanitarian assistance and basic services” (2025). Ambiguity is apparent here, as though actions by the German government do not constitute formal recognition, their outreach to the Taliban does provide a “substantial diplomatic boost to the Taliban regime” and an “opening” for diplomatic recognition (2025). Fernández-Molina categorizes these diverse sets of practices as declaratory, diplomatic, informal engagement, intergovernmental co-operation, and support practices (Fernández-Molina 2023).

Diversity and ambiguities in the practices of government recognition by external states result from political and foreign policy considerations and have formal and informal dimensions. Formally, as noted in the scholarship on state recognition, such ambiguous practices avoid explicit assertions of recognition, non-recognition, derecognition, or the withdrawing of recognition (2014; 2018). Informally, in practice, recognizing states often continue some level of engagement, at varied bilateral, multilateral, and inter-governmental levels. These ambiguities have led scholars to argue that government recognition is inherently political and thus should be subject to study as a political rather than a legal concept (2013). Despite the political underpinnings of government recognition, and the consequences of international engagement with rival governments in uncontested states,

the scholarship has been largely informed by a small insightful body in international law (2001a; 2019; 2014).

Theoretical Proposal: (Non) Recognition of Governments in Uncontested States

Building on the scholarly consensus on varied and ambiguous sets of practices on government recognition, we explore one facet of such diverse practices by external states, with empirical insights from Myanmar. We conceptualise (*non*)*recognition of governments in uncontested states* as: (1) not explicitly recognizing either of the two contesting parties despite one or the other side either having territorial control or democratic legitimacy; and (2) continuing to engage with all sides on diplomatic, humanitarian, and peace-making initiatives based on pragmatic needs.

Further, we draw on the scholarship on norm contestation and ambiguity to analyze how such practices by external states are received and interpreted in host states. In doing so, we depart from the extant scholarship, which has focused on categorizing and conceptualizing practices by external states but has largely overlooked how such practices are received, engaged with, understood, and even co-opted by social and political actors in host states.

To understand the host state perspective on practices of government recognition, we draw from the literature on norm contestation and ambiguity. We show how the absence of legal consensus and architecture has led to “practice ambiguity” among international states, which has enabled multiple understandings of “government recognition.” The scholarship on norm contestation and ambiguity is instructive, as it highlights how divergent practices foster multiple understandings of the norm, in turn impacting the evolution and definition of the norm itself (Zähringer 2021). Scholarship on norm contestation and ambiguity is highly relevant for understanding government recognition. While a government recognition norm could have emerged in the international system, it has not with, “no single doctrine regulat-

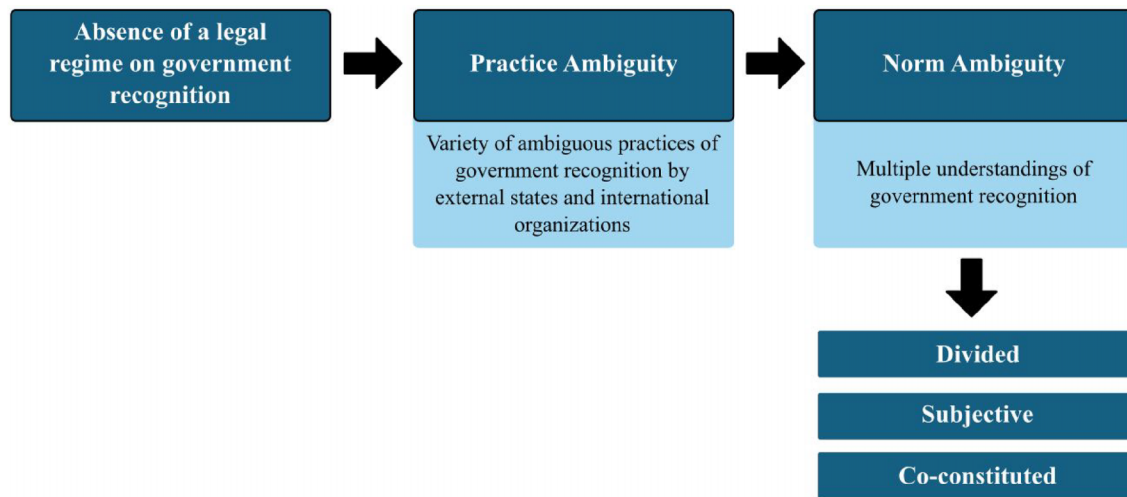


Figure 1. Practice and norm ambiguity of government recognition in uncontested states

ing the international recognition of governments or its withholding” (Fernández-Molina 2023, 6).

Two fundamental inferences from the scholarship on norm ambiguity and contestation are instructive in understanding recognition of government practices: first, norms can have multiple understandings by different actors at the international level, and second, as norms cascade down to domestic levels, they further acquire multiple forms, often even changing the intended meaning of the norm (2021; 2016; 2004).

Norms can have Multiple Understandings by Different Actors

On the first—multiple understandings of norms in the international system—the scholarship on norm ambiguity highlights that even relatively coherent norms like human rights have multiple “meanings-in use,” where different actors in the international system do not agree on shared meanings (2021). Owing to different external and internal normative environments, international actors can differ in their understanding of a norm and, “acknowledge that the diverse ways in which norm meanings are enacted by others are ‘close enough” (2021, 518).

Norm ambiguity is defined as the ability of a norm to be interpreted in varied ways (2015). The work on norm ambiguity emerged as a critique to the initial norm literature, which chronicled how norms arise, are promoted by norm entrepreneurs, diffuse to gain acceptance amongst a “critical mass,” and are then internalized by its recipients (1999; 1998). The critique centred on how this literature presented norms as static in their content, overlooking changing interpretations of norms at a global level (2010; 2012). Scholars have discussed how norms can be perceived differently by different actors, and how ambiguity inherent in a norm allows for consensus, flexibility, and adjustment across different global contexts, in turn leading to its elevation (2012). For instance, while accepting the norm of universality of human rights, China’s understanding has focused on prioritizing economic rights over socio-political ones, despite the norm focusing equally on socio-political and civic rights (2012). Similarly, Chinese understanding of liberal peacebuilding has tended to be distinct from the normative agenda floated within the UN system, with China opposing exter-

nally formulated peace solutions being imposed on conflict-affected states, and instead focusing on incorporating the democratization of the international system into the peacebuilding agenda (2022; 2021).

Applying these insights to government recognition, which has no international legal framework, we consider it likely that there is great variation and ambiguity among state practices. *Multiple* strategies are adopted by different states as there is no regulatory framework to cohere state practices. These practices are likely to be *ambiguous* because there is no “shared moral assessment attached to the observance or non-observance” of certain parameters with no benchmarks as to what is considered good or ideal with regards to government recognition (2010, 355). Accordingly, in different cases from Venezuela to Libya, Western states like the United States have prioritized the “democratic legitimacy” criterion for government recognition, yet non-Western states, who tend to prioritize sovereignty and non-intervention in the affairs of other states, have rarely upheld the same (2011).

Norms Acquire Multiple Forms as they Cascade from International to Domestic Level

The scholarship on norm contestation outlines how norms change their meanings as they spread from global to local contexts, in the process of being “localized” or “contested” by local actors (2004). This scholarship critiqued the assumed linear global–local flow of norms in the initial wave of norm scholarship, which discounted the agency of states and organizations to create new norms or re-interpret norms in different ways (2011; 2016; 2017). Acharya describes localization as a “complex process and outcome by which norm-takers build congruence between transnational norms and local beliefs and practices” (2004, 241). Comparably, Orchard and Wiener define contestation as “how societal actors gain access to shaping these norms in ways that can have both negative and positive effects on how a norm is understood” (2022). Both localization and contestation as frameworks question the static nature of norms and underscore how as norms diffuse from the international system into recipient states they may be interpreted, contested, and localized to suit their political, social, and economic context, leading to changes in the content of norms through their “meaning in use” (2004; 2019). Sometimes, local understandings can also lead to joint

modification of norms by external and domestic actors in a form that differs from global standards (e.g., 2016).

Applied to recognition of governments, where different states and international organizations have their own multiple and ambiguous sets of practices at the international level, there is likely to be more “meaning making” as recipient states engage with these practices. The work on contestation, localization, and “interactive translation of norms,” allows us to infer at least three types of responses to government recognition practices in recipient states.

First, government recognition norms can be “divided,” with practices by external states contested and even rejected by domestic constituencies. Here, the party with greater domestic legitimacy might be different from the one who acquires international recognition as the state’s “legitimate” government representative. An example is Russia’s recognition of the Taliban regime in 2025 contested by Afghan civil rights groups as “legitimizing an authoritarian and misogynistic regime” (Roy-Chaudhury 2025), leading to government recognition practices being “divided” between the international community and domestic groups.

Second, as varied and ambiguous practices by external states intersect with the contested politics of host states, different domestic parties may lay claim to being the legitimate government due to their own “localized” understanding of the practices of external states, resulting in government recognition practices that are *subjective*. Applied to the issue of government recognition, an absence of formal policy and ambiguous practices by the international community mean that high level visits, bilateral meetings and invitations can all be framed as “acts of recognition” by contending political groups. Indeed, in practice, the international community and states are wary of such “accidental recognition”—that their everyday practices may be framed as evidence of recognition, as in the case of ASEAN in Myanmar (2023). Further, Caspersen documents how engagement with contested states is interpreted differently by the contested state to that of the parent state—with the latter seeing engagement as implying the territorial integrity of the contested state (2018b). That mediators acknowledge that groups might instrumentally engage in peace talks to be *recognized*, and that there are challenges in conducting peace talks without implying explicit or implicit recognition to the parties that attend, illustrates how different groups can co-opt everyday diplomatic practices, and other forms of engagement as evidence of their recognition (2015).

Finally, contestation and rejection of some government recognition practices in host states can lead to changes in practices by external states, making government recognition *co-constituted*. Zimmermann’s work on Guatemala demonstrates this “interactive translation of norms,” where domestic contestation and rejection of norms on child rights led external norm makers and domestic stakeholders to jointly undertake a modification of norms, that deviated from international standards (2016). Such co-constitution is evident when citizens of states undergoing recognition contests resist the practices of the international community and promote their own alternatives (2020; 2011). With states and organizations increasingly making decisions based on different criteria or interests, domestic parties have called out, resisted, and even questioned the legitimacy of these international actors as arbiters of recognition (2015). The legitimacy deficit of bodies like the UN in some quarters, and the inability of powerful states to compel the compliance of domestic parties engaged in contested government recognition claims has emboldened citizens and host states to hold external states and institutions to account, contest the UN’s (in)decision and

in some cases evaluate the legitimacy of the UN itself, making recognition iterative, interactive, and multi-directional (2008; 2012; 2018). In this way, government recognition contests not only lead recognizing states to provide legitimacy to contesting claims but can also lead contesting parties to legitimate bodies like the UN, creating a varied understanding of norms of recognition between the global and local level.

Research Design, Methodology, and Data

The Case of Post-Coup Myanmar

To empirically understand how the international community has responded to questions of recognition of governments in uncontested states we conduct an in-depth inductive case study in post-coup Myanmar: an uncontested state where recognition of rival governments is disputed both by its domestic constituents and external states, following the military coup on February 1, 2021. Rather than there being controversy surrounding recognition of the Myanmar state, as is the case for Taiwan, or Kosovo, it is instead its government whose recognition is contested. Since the coup, Myanmar has been subject to both internal and external contention regarding recognition of the military government, the SAC, which was formed after the military overthrew the democratically elected government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). At the same time, the NUG, which coalesces various segments of the anti-coup opposition, including the NLD, is also seeking recognition as the legitimate government. The government of Myanmar is contested whilst the state itself is not.

The Myanmar case is also one in which no single government contender enjoys effective territorial control over the entire state. Over decades, multiple ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), have contested the central state and governed much of the borderlands. While EAOs are not vying for recognition as the central government of Myanmar, they are crucial when mapping territorial control and act as “swing forces” in determining who government recognition is bestowed upon. In contexts of “limited statehood,” such as Myanmar, marked by weak state institutions, the inability of the state to implement and enforce central decisions and uphold a monopoly of the use of force (Börzel and Risse 2021), there are no government contenders that meet both legal criteria (effective territorial control and legitimacy).

Due to the internal fragmentation of Myanmar, the military government, as well as all other rival government actors, lack effective territorial control over the state, with the outcome that both primary contenders—the military-backed SAC and the NUG—lack legal legitimacy according to the criteria typically applied in international law (2012). Myanmar is one of the most internally fragmented of the thirty-four countries identified in the Coup Agency and Mechanisms dataset (2011, 252). This internal fragmentation has been historically marked by a power triangle that has consisted of the armed forces (Tatmadaw), which, under different guises, has ruled the country from 1962 to 2015 (and again since the coup in 2021); the democratic political parties, with the NLD the most prominent and whose members populate much of the NUG, and more than twenty EAOs (2007). EAOs have led insurgencies against the state, demanding the inclusion of ethnic minorities in political decision-making processes, economic and social development in their territories, and the prioritization of cultural rights and religious freedoms (2012). Post-coup while many EAOs have sided with the NUG, others have either continued to engage with the SAC or otherwise have sought to remain neutral. More-

over, since February 2021, Myanmar has witnessed country-wide protests against the military’s SAC by various opposition groups including the civilian government, the NUG, made of up former democratically elected leaders along with other ethnic minority groups, EAOs, and the multiple Peoples Defense Forces (PDFs) that have sprung up to fight the military. Myanmar’s military has argued it is the legitimate government of the country and should have the power to appoint ambassadors to the UN. At the same time, many EAOs continue to fight for a bottom-up vision of federalism.

Sources of Data

To strengthen objectivity and factual accuracy, we build the theory from several sources of empirical data (2004). First are thirteen Myanmar Study Group sessions that were held between November 2021 and March 2023, convened by the Edinburgh Centre for Constitutional Law and Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) (Appendix 1). Convening these online sessions over a period of a year and a half helped to connect us to key stakeholders amongst the anti-coup opposition and develop trusted relationships. Sessions were organized under Chatham House rules and brought together more than 200 participants, including representatives of the NUG and EAOs, civil society, practitioners, scholars, and researchers.

We also conduct a systematic search of all twenty-four press releases by the two government contenders in Myanmar—the SAC and the NUG—and two significant and large EAOs, one in the north of the country and one in the south, that have historically been dominant in shaping patterns of peace and conflict—the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and the Karen National Union (KNU). Though the KIO and the KNU do not seek recognition as the government of Myanmar as a whole, these powerful EAOs exert a significant normative influence over swathes of the population, and we thus include their perspectives to present a broader picture of external practices. We systematically search press releases from these actors since the coup that mention the words: legitimacy, recognition, government, or representation. SAC press releases are drawn from the Global New Light Of Myanmar website, controlled by the military junta (Appendix 2).³ For NUG, we draw from the NUG website.⁴ For KIO, we search Kachin Net,⁵ whilst for KNU we search the KNU website.⁶ We triangulate the Study Group data and the press release data with secondary source data, including news reports, as well as statements and press releases by states and multilateral organizations on the status of government recognition in Myanmar.

Empirical Illustration from Myanmar

Practice Ambiguity by External States

Overall, in Myanmar, we empirically observe that (i) recognizing states have varied practices, often diverging from the legal criteria for recognition in their response to the recognition contest, (ii) most states do not explicitly recognize either of the two contesting parties yet also (iii) continue to engage with all sides on diplomatic, humanitarian, and peace-making initiatives—the diverseness and ambiguity of which we conceptualize as “(non)recognition of governments.”

In Myanmar, some states have engaged with the SAC on grounds of sovereignty or due to pragmatic interests, such as cross-border trade and investments, conferring informal recognition, despite the junta not adhering to the rule of law or attaining power through democratic process. Other external states have criticized the coup, yet also continued to engage. A split between regional Asian states, India, China, and Japan, and Western ones was evident initially. Most Western states have opened multiple communication channels with the NUG or related bodies like the NUCC, whilst being discreet about their engagement with the SAC (MMSG1#17.11.2021). While China and India have not formally recognized the SAC, their actions and engagement with the military junta have been described by the UN’s Expert Committee as “amounting to acts of recognition.” However, while some regional states, such as India, initially refrained from overt engagement with the NUG despite pursuing covert communication channels, in later stages some states initiated public engagement, notably after the junta lost its control in the Rakhine and Chin territories along the Myanmar borders with India and Bangladesh (2024).

The SAC’s most ardent supporter is China, who considers the SAC a source of stability to safeguard its economic projects in the region. This view was signaled by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March 2021, “China will not waver in its commitment to advancing China–Myanmar relations, and will not change the course of promoting friendship and cooperation, no matter how the situation evolves” (2021). China later issued a statement referring to Min Aung Hlaing in June 2021 as, “the leader of Myanmar,” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar 2021) with Wunna Maung Lwin, Myanmar’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, invited to China to meet Wang Yi, China’s Foreign Affairs Minister, in April 2022 (Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the EU 2022). Then, in July 2022, Wang Yi accepted an invitation to meet Wunna Maung Lwin in Myanmar (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Kingdom of Norway 2022). In 2024, China reportedly increased its pressure on EAOs based near the border to stop fighting the regime (2024). Informal recognition of the SAC by China is one implication of holding such normal diplomatic relations.

The actions of a small minority of other states, including Belarus, India, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka may also confer the SAC de facto recognition. Amongst other actions, these states have presented diplomatic credentials to SAC leadership and strengthened their bilateral economic relations with Myanmar after the coup. In addition, Belarus and India publicly engaged with the SAC regarding the elections in 2025 and 2026 that were organized by the junta (2023).

Some states, such as Thailand, have engaged with the NUG under multilateral initiatives organized by ASEAN yet have largely focused on the SAC for bilateral engagements. Thailand organized an informal ASEAN Foreign Minister meeting with the SAC on December 22, 2022, attended by Foreign Ministers from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (2023). Soon after the Royal Thai Armed Forces met with a junta chief on January 19, 2023 in Rakhine State to discuss military cooperation between the countries due to their historical bilateral relationship (Ibid.). Other states have initiated multiple “backchannel” peace-making efforts involving both the NUG and the SAC. For example, Indonesia as Chair of ASEAN in 2023 held over sixty meetings in 2023 with the junta, NUG, and EAOs (2023).

In evaluating each government contender in Myanmar against the legal criteria for government recogni-

³<https://www.gnlm.com.mm/>

⁴<https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/>

⁵<https://www.kachinnet.net/>

⁶<https://knuhq.org/public/en>

tion claims—democratic legitimacy and effective territorial control—we first observe that the NUG enjoys democratic legitimacy, whilst the SAC does not. During free and fair elections held in November 2020, the NLD won 396 of 498 contested seats in Parliament. The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), comprising 80 percent of elected NLD and other parliamentarians, formed the NUG following the coup. In contrast, while the SAC claim the coup was legal under the constitution it drafted in 2008 (SAC Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2022), required parts of article 417 of the constitution were not met (Human Rights Council 2023).⁷ Although the NUG meets the democratic legitimacy criteria, our review of Myanmar Study Group data reveal that since the military coup the NUG has not met the second legal test of effective territorial control. Instead swathes of the country have been controlled by the SAC, various EAOs, or are otherwise contested (MMSG5 2021).

Despite the NUG not meeting both legal criteria, on October 5, 2021, the French Senate passed resolution 647 to formally recognize the NUG as the government of Myanmar with a motion passed to the French National Assembly (2021). Further, regional legislative body the EU adopted a resolution on October 7, 2021 that recognizes the NUG as the legitimate representatives of the Myanmar people (2021). No other international actor has explicitly recognized any contending side.

Most international actors have refrained from formally recognizing either competing party whilst also seeking to avoid accidentally conferring informal recognition. ASEAN does not currently invite any political representative of the SAC to its summits or meetings of foreign and defense ministers, limiting SAC participation to that of “non-political representative” (2023). European states, such as Finland and Switzerland, have not recognized either party and have condemned the coup. While the two are not significant European powers, both states were central to aiding peace process and development initiatives in Myanmar, and their actions remain important both for international practices and how domestic actors perceive and construe these practices. Responding to the post-coup context, the Swiss Embassy in Myanmar re-adjusted its co-operation programme so as, “not to legitimize the coup” (2026). In 2022, a SAC representative was barred from the Swiss Development Summit (2022), while the Swiss government iterated its support for the movement for democratic renewal and demanded respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms (2023).

However, these states and organizations have also maintained engagement with the military-backed SAC and the NUG on diplomatic and other thematic areas. For instance, the UN offices in Myanmar have continued to use the SAC’s administrative channels and have engaged the junta for humanitarian aid delivery, generating immense backlash from Myanmar citizens (2022). Likewise, for diplomatic issues ASEAN interacts with Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and embassies, which are under SAC control (2021). Further, in seeking to implement its “Five-point Agreement”—the key regional policy framework of the Myanmar crisis—successive ASEAN chairs have engaged the junta, while maintaining some dialogue with the NUG. Similarly, the Finnish agency, CMI—Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, invited

members of the military’s “Peace Committee” to a secret meeting in Helsinki. The Government of Switzerland, in conjunction with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue and Swisspeace, organized a workshop on the Nationwide Cease-fire Agreement peace process in Naypyitaw from October 16 to 18, 2023 (2023). These states have also sought to provide humanitarian assistance in collaboration with other Western countries (2023). Regional states, such as India and China, have denounced the coup, yet for matters of investment, infrastructure, and security co-operation, continue to engage with the SAC, while leaving channels of communication with the NUG open (2022). These inconsistent practices by recognizing states all indicate the lack of international consensus around government recognition.

Norm Ambiguity—Multiple-Meaning Making of What Constitutes Government Recognition

We empirically observe in Myanmar that these varied and ambiguous practices by recognizing states are interpreted differently across social and political domestic groups, leading to multiple and competing constructions, and a form of government recognition defined by three core features: (i) divided, (ii) subjective, and (iii) co-constituted.

Divided: International actors tend to evaluate government recognition claims against the legal criteria of territorial control and legitimacy, and view the contest in Myanmar as between the NUG and the SAC. However, domestic actors view the binary of NUG–SAC as insufficient to capturing the complexity of Myanmar and instead view the extent of engagement by contenders in peacemaking or humanitarian assistance of greater relevance. Together this indicates a disconnect between international recognition and local legitimacy in Myanmar.

Indeed, the association of “peacemaking” with “government recognition” by domestic actors has brought a significant shift in the way states and international organizations have since engaged with Myanmar. For instance, in January 2022 the UN’s Special Envoy Noeleen Heyzer insisted the military be “included in talks to resolve Myanmar’s crisis,” and described the armed forces as being “in control” of the country (2022). The Envoy in August 2022 also met the SAC Chairman, “to de-escalate the violence, [and] address the multidimensional crisis.” However, in the face of extensive backlash that these actions might legitimate the junta, a UN press release clarified that the “engagement does not in any way confer legitimacy” (2022). Concern that the inclusion of actors in “peacemaking” might confer “government recognition” has led Western states to be discreet about their peacemaking work (MMSG2 2021). Indeed, many avoid using the word “dialogue” to describe their activities to avoid potential backlash and unintentionally conferring legitimacy to the SAC (2024). Yet, this approach differs to how the recognition contest is itself viewed by international actors.

Since the CRPH announced the formation of the NUG on April 16, 2021—comprising members from diverse backgrounds, including former parliamentarians, ethnic minority representatives, and activists—external states and multilateral organizations have tended to consider the contest for government recognition as one between NUG and SAC. However, there has also been bottom-up demand to recognize the significance of EAOs. Many since the early days of independence have commanded vast territories, leading external states and multilateral organizations to broaden their view beyond the “NUG–SAC” binary (2021) and incrementally engage with EAOs as rival government contenders. The shift is illustrated by the change in focus of ASEAN Chair-

⁷According to the 2008 constitution, only the president can declare a state of emergency in consultation with the National Defence and Security Council (NDSC), after informing the Union Parliament. Yet, the president, as well as half of the security council, were detained during the military coup, and the consultative meeting only included the NDSC’s military members. Moreover, Myint Swe declared the state of emergency, yet he was not acting president and so did not have authority to do so (Human Rights Council 2023).

manships, which under Brunei in 2021 and Cambodia in 2022 centered on the NUG and SAC, but in 2023 under the Indonesian Chairmanship involved multiple “backchannel” diplomatic efforts with EAOs (Tucker 2023). The latter inclusion of EAOs by ASEAN into post-coup discussions offers evidence of local norms around government recognition practices flowing from domestic constituencies in Myanmar up to the international system.

From the press release data, we find evidence that some EAOs enjoyed effective territorial control in some sub-state regions of Myanmar, and were key local governance actors, especially in the public health emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic, which conferred local legitimacy. Yet at the same time, the same EAOs lacked both formal and informal international recognition. While international actors frame recognition contests as a tussle between the NUG and SAC, in many parts of Myanmar the NUG does not command any territorial control. Similarly, while the NUG enjoy greater local legitimacy than the military, it is dwarfed by EAOs. Government recognition is often talked about with reference to a centralised state, yet in many territories of Myanmar informal governance arrangements have greater local prominence (MMSG5 2022; MMSG10 2023). EROs enjoy effective control and local legitimacy in many sub-state regions, representing populations that share their own unique language, and employing distinct governance methods. Increasingly the SAC lacks legitimacy and the ability to govern even in the areas over which it has territorial control.

Data from Study Group sessions highlight how in SAC controlled areas—Thingang Kyune, Patheingyi, a ward in Magwe, Pintaya, Hakha, Hpan, Myitkyina, Taungoo, Hinthada, Nyaung Tone, Sittwe, and Taunggyi—public hospitals and rural clinic centres have reportedly poor facilities: lacking oxygen cylinders, medicines, and sufficient nurses and doctors (MMSG5#25.03.2022). People living in SAC controlled areas avoid SAC hospitals due to a deficit of trust in the government health apparatus, with some refusing to have the Covid-19 vaccine due to a stated lack of trust in SAC or a desire to not support SAC programmes (Ibid.). Our review of Myanmar Study Group data also reveals that many civilians in the borderland areas largely rely on civic or EAO networks, and do not see the NUG as legitimate given their inability to provide governance on the ground, despite being formally recognized as the government of Myanmar by some international actors.

Subjective: From our document review, we find evidence of there being a subjective interpretation of the international community’s actions, with routine diplomatic interactions co-opted by both parties as indicators of their being recognised as the legitimate government of Myanmar. Domestic groups, such as the NUG, reference key legal international benchmarks, such as effective territorial control, and adherence to international law when claiming the legitimacy and recognition of the NUG (e.g., MMSG4 2022; NPR#3; NPR#30; NPR#31). Questioning the SAC’s claim for recognition, the NUG highlights that it lacks “control over all or most of the territory of Myanmar,” with “many PDFs who control the territories acting under NUG control” (MMSG4 2022). Similarly, the fact that SAC has continued with repression of its opposition is often raised as evidence of how it has failed to abide by its international obligations (e.g., MMSG4 2022; NPR#90; NPR#95). Another assertion made against the SAC’s claim to legitimacy is the existence of various fronts of opposition against the military, indicating that it is not seen as legitimate by the majority of the Myanmar people (MMSG4 2022).

Differently, SAC press releases project normalcy in their diplomatic interactions with states, for example referencing the SAC’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs using official “diplomatic channels” (SPR#42021; SPR#172022), whilst the NUG has repeatedly appealed to foreign governments to officially recognize and engage with the NUG as the sole legitimate government of Myanmar (e.g., NPR#42021, NPR#62021, NPR#102021, NPR#152021, and NPR#162021). Yet, at the same time, the NUG has also asserted that their recognition can be measured indirectly in terms of diplomatic cooperation and collaboration undertaken by foreign governments with the NUG, as well as directly through public announcements. To this end, NUG press releases catalogue everyday diplomatic meetings between NUG representatives and Ministers, diplomats, and senior government officials from the United States, Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and the European Parliament (NPR#772022).

Statements by NUG representatives to the parliaments of foreign governments and international organizations are also used to project the legitimacy of the NUG. NUG representatives have made addresses to the government of the United States (NPR#12021), the UK Parliament (NPR#42021, NPR#232021), the Parliament of France (NPR#162021), the European Union Parliament (NPR#172021), Japanese Parliamentarians (NPR#192021), New Zealand Parliamentarians (NPR#262021), and the Australian Parliament (NPR#272021). In each address, the NUG positions itself as the legitimate representative of Myanmar; acting “on behalf of the people of Myanmar,” as the “people’s elected National Unity Government,” or “representing the voices of the people of Myanmar.” Moreover, governments are thanked repeatedly for recognizing the NUG as the legitimate government of Myanmar. In the 6 months following the coup, the UK government (NPR#42021), United States (NPR#72021, NPR#182021), Parliament of France (NPR#162021), and the Canadian government (NPR#82021), are all thanked by the NUG for “recognition of CRPH and NUG as important voices of many in this nation.” When reporting on its communications with the head of the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar in May 2021, the press releases project NUG legitimacy by describing themselves as, “the legal representatives of Myanmar (acting through the NUG)” (NPR#92021).

NUG press releases warn international actors against inadvertently legitimising the SAC by being “allowed to be seen at cabinet meetings alongside legitimate governments” (NPR#482021). The SAC is described as “posting photos of every ASEAN engagement to which they are invited to paint an image of legitimacy,” (NPR#802023), with interactions with the junta described as “designed only to win the military sorely needed time and help legitimize them on the world stage” (NPR#322021). The NUG also warn that not recognizing the NUG as the sole legitimate government of Myanmar “brings tacit legitimacy to the military,” (Ibid.) urging governments to “cease and end all diplomatic or economic interaction” (NPR#342021), and “make it illegal to recognize or work with the military and their affiliates” (NPR#532021). The NUG accuse most countries present at the Democracy Summit on December 12, 2021 of continuing “to recognize the military junta as a legitimate government, and its leader Min Aung Hlaing as ‘a legitimate statesman,’ whilst at the same time linking the refusal of NUG recognition to “more innocent lives lost” (NPR#552021) as “the international community has grown ignorant and indifferent” (NPR#602022).

Indeed, review of SAC press releases reveals how the junta projects its legitimacy and the normalcy of its governance though everyday diplomacy with other states and interna-

tional organizations. Press releases repeatedly reference the SAC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs using official "diplomatic channels" (SPR#42021; SPR#172022), "official note verbales through embassies based in the respective countries for its official diplomatic correspondences" (SPR#42021) and sending a "protest note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia" (SPR#212022). On April 27, 2021, the SAC press release details the invitation of Min Aung Hlaing as Chairman of SAC by Sultan of Brunei, Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, and Yang Di-Pertuan, Brunei ASEAN Chair, to the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Indonesia, on April 24, 2021 (SPR#62021). SAC press releases emphasize diplomatic normalcy, with references to their press conferences being "attended by representatives of Myanmar-based foreign embassies" (SPR#112021), and there being "commercial attaches at the Myanmar embassies in the Republic of Korea, Switzerland, Australia, South Africa, Belgium, Germany, India, the United States, Brazil, Singapore, and Thailand" (SPR#122021). Indeed, normalcy is projected through Myanmar's trade and commercial activities. The SAC report on the signing of a 5-year memorandum of understanding between Myanmar and India (SPR#192022) a meeting between the Myanmar Embassy and Viet Nam–Myanmar Friendship Association, in which they, "discussed co-operation in trade sector between the two countries" (SPR#222023). Overall, the NUG and SAC press releases reveal the varied constructions of everyday diplomacy that competing sides have sought to portray as evidence for their claims to recognition or against their competition.

Co-constitutive: Following the varied and ambiguous practices of government recognition by the international community, there has been offline and online resistance by citizens in Myanmar that questions the prevailing norms and practices, as well as the very authority and legitimacy, of international organizations. Online, activists in Myanmar have critiqued the UN for signing a memorandum of understanding with the SAC and not with the NUG (2022), for lending legitimacy to the SAC (2022) and for failing to deal with the crisis (2023). Offline, in January 2023, a series of peaceful protests were organized by the junta against the UNSC resolution on Myanmar, in which twelve members of the Security Council voted in favor of calls for the release of all political prisoners. Protests were held in Yangon, Mandalay, and Tanintharyi regions and Mon, Kachin, and Karen states. Protestors held placards with statements such as "we oppose foreign countries interfering in the internal affairs of Myanmar," "we are against unilateral decisions of the United Nations Security Council," and with photos of former US President Joe Biden with a cross over his face (2023).

After the coup, local civil society organizations called for Myanmar's UN seat be retained by Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun, who was appointed prior to the military coup, and who publicly rejected the military takeover in late February 2021 whilst on the UN floor (Burma Campaign UK 2021). In doing so, civilians promoted their own norms and practices to the UN.

The Myanmar Study Group data also reveal how domestic actors are questioning the legitimacy of the UN and international actors in their engagement with Myanmar. In Myanmar Study Group session 6, a representative from a prominent civil society network in Karen state stated that, "people are sick of what the UN are doing in Burma. We have provided a lot of information to the UN. . . but I'm not sure what we have received in response." Taken together, we find empirical support for co-constituted practices of government recognition in the Myanmar case. While external states and multilateral organizations are central to "recognition of gov-

ernments" their own legitimacy is being questioned due to the ambiguous practices they embrace.

Conclusion and Implications for the Practice of Government Recognition

In this article, we inductively develop a theory in the case of post-coup Myanmar that explains how the lack of an international legal regime for government recognition has resulted in practices of (*non*)*recognition of governments in uncontested states*, which we define as "engaging in ambiguous practices that avoid explicit recognition of any competing side while continuing formal and informal engagement with all based on pragmatic considerations." For this, we draw on data from thirteen Myanmar Study Group sessions with key stakeholders and a systematic search of all press releases by SAC, NUG, KIO, and KNU since the coup.

While the extant scholarship on government recognition has focused on the legal criteria of effective control and democratic legitimacy as the threshold for either recognition or non-recognition of government contenders, existing work has omitted to account for the varied and ambiguous practices of recognizing external states and multilateral organizations. Conceptualized as (*non*)*recognition of governments in uncontested states*, this article has examined how external states pursue varied and ambiguous sets of practices—"practice ambiguity"—based on foreign policy and other related considerations, that do not fit within the binaries of recognition or non-recognition. In post-coup Myanmar, external states have used their discretion to engage in practices, which skirt formally recognizing the contesting parties—the SAC and the NUG—yet at the same time have informally engaged with both. We show how such sets of practices lead to "norm ambiguity," with multiple understandings and meaning making of what constitutes government recognition, resulting in sets of practices that are defined by three core features: (i) divided, (ii) subjective, and (iii) co-constitutive.

The insights from this single study may be applied to other uncontested states, where recognition of rival governments is disputed both by its domestic constituents and other states, following coups, civil wars, or outside intervention. In particular, we anticipate that the theory travels to contexts where no single government contender enjoys effective territorial control over the entire state, as under these conditions the legal direction for recognition is unclear with no single contender meeting both legal criteria (effective territorial control and legitimacy). However, further studies using these scope conditions would be necessary to confirm the generalisability of the theory.

For the anti-coup opposition in Myanmar, the analysis in this article offers a stark warning: that contemporary ambiguous practices of government recognition may support the country's prevailing state of affairs, as long as they serve the interests of members of the international community. The subjective nature of government recognition, with everyday observable practices actively co-opted by the SAC, NUG, and other conflict parties in Myanmar, has seen the SAC increasingly seek to project the legitimacy of their rule from the actions of international actors. The divided nature of legitimacy internal to Myanmar is a further means by which the status quo may be maintained. With centers of legitimacy geographically distributed across Myanmar, aspirations of ethnic groups for regional autonomy can trump the national-level objective of overthrowing the military government. More broadly, the increasingly contested and non-hierarchical international space brings with it greater ambi-

guity and uncertainty around states continuing to follow established norms and legal principles of government recognition, such as the condition of democratic legitimacy. When the democratic credentials of governments are no longer necessary for governments to be recognized, there is a danger that states lack incentives to remain accountable to their people, which may in turn lead to further democratic backsliding worldwide. Indeed, in Myanmar, this feature is likely to bolster the status quo, entrenching and deepening diplomatic networks between the SAC and foreign governments and normalizing the position of the SAC. Meanwhile the constituted nature of government recognition practices reveals broader geopolitical shifts in the international system, with the implication that legitimate sources of recognition are themselves increasingly contested, as the liberal world order remains in flux. This work opens up a new research agenda on the recognition of governments in uncontested states.

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Supplementary Material

Supplementary material is available at [Global Studies Quarterly](#) online.

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