

Policing in Conflict Settings: The Bureaucratization of Civilian Security in Karenni State's Resistance Territories

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Abstract

This paper examines the structure and policing capacity of the Karenni State Police (KSP) across Karenni State's resistance-held territory, assessing how it operates within the Karenni's multi-level inclusive governance system (MIGS) and how its functions shape justice institutions and legitimacy-building processes.

Despite a growing body of research on rebel governance and security sector reform (SSR), including the work of Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly, there remains a significant gap in the literature specifically addressing the development of non-state policing actors during periods of active conflict. Most existing studies on policing in conflict-affected environments are situated within post-conflict or peacebuilding frameworks, focusing on the reconstruction of central state institutions, integration of former combatants, and internationally driven and donor-oriented SSR initiatives. In contrast, the processes and practices through which resistance forces establish, institutionalize, and operate their own policing structures amidst ongoing violence are comparatively understudied and often conceptualised as a temporary, informal, or illegitimate phenomenon.

The paper seeks to address this gap by analysing how the KSP has taken shape as part of Karenni resistance administration. It explores the KSP's organisational structure, decision-making hierarchies, operational divisions, practices, territorial jurisdiction, and interactions with other components of MIGS. Through this, the paper shows how the bureaucratization of security procedures, coordination mechanisms, and basic service provision have been built up despite severe resource constraints and junta's ongoing counterinsurgency operations.

Given the political sensitivity of the subject and its potential security concerns, the research was conducted following consultation with the KSP and the Karenni Interim Executive Council (IEC). This paper is informed by desk research and qualitative field research, including findings from 21 semi-structured interviews in Karenni State and Thailand. The interviews were carried out in person (19) and online (2) with police officers, CSOs, and members of the IEC, between February and March 2026.