

Public Trials, Legal Order, and Rebel Legitimacy in Myanmar's Rebel Lands

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Abstract

While public trials and executions often appear inhumane or anachronistic to external observers, they remain surprisingly popular and performative in several rebel-held territories in northern Myanmar. How should we understand this phenomenon? Drawing on documentary evidence from the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the United Wa State Army (UWSA), and the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA), this paper argues that public trials function as potent markers of legal order in contested spaces. From the perspective of rebel legitimacy, these trials are not merely punitive displays but strategic performances aimed at consolidating authority, deterring dissent, and engaging multiple audiences. The paper introduces the concept of visible legitimacy to describe how rebel legal systems assert control and credibility through highly publicized judicial rituals. These practices not only target local populations but also respond to external demands, particularly from China, thereby producing a dual-facing form of governance that is simultaneously indigenous and externally referential. The study highlights how rebel groups institutionalize public trials as a mechanism to govern effectively, project order, and navigate fragmented political and normative landscapes.