

Filling the Gap or Building the State? Civil Society, Emergent Governance, and the Social Contract in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract

Myanmar's post-coup landscape has produced an evolving and contested array of subnational governance arrangements. Longstanding ethnic resistance organisation-led administrations, newly emergent governance structures, and a residual junta presence compete for legitimacy and control. Amid this complexity, community organisations and civil society have consolidated local decision-making and service provision from the bottom up, while emergent governance actors formalise their systems from the top down, working toward the foundations of a future federal Myanmar.

This generates a tension that existing scholarship has not adequately addressed: as emergent governance actors develop their own administrative, justice, and service delivery capacities, the roles of civil society must be renegotiated. Who delivers services, holds accountability, and what division of responsibilities supports legitimate governance in future? A further gap is these emergent authorities are rarely assessed through frameworks applied to recognised states. Questions of legitimacy, accountability, and the social contract are seldom brought to bear on resistance governance systems, and the role of civil society in strengthening/undermining these qualities remains underexplored.

Drawing on typologies of government-NGO engagement and frameworks from the hybrid governance literature, the paper asks how civil society organisations manage their engagements with emergent governance actors across a spectrum, and what this reveals about construction of legitimacy and the social contract in contexts of contested, bottom-up governance formation.

The paper draws on a base of fieldwork across multiple Myanmar townships, including interviews, community consultations, action research, and stakeholder analysis, and will be supplemented by additional fieldwork to validate findings.

It argues the boundary between civil society and governance in post-coup Myanmar is structurally blurred, with consequences for legitimacy, accountability, and the social contract, offering analytical tools relevant beyond Myanmar to civil society engagement in other contexts of contested state formation.