

Bottom-Up Federalism and the Possibilities of Its Implications on the Minorities within Minorities in Reimagined Myanmar

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Abstract

Following the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the vision of a "Federal Democracy" has gained widespread support among revolutionary forces collectively known as the Myanmar Spring, including key actors such as the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Government (NUG), the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), and various Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs). However, divergent perspectives and interpretations of federal democracy have emerged among these actors. On September 19, 2024, nine ethnic resistance organizations and councils representing various states and nationalities issued a joint statement emphasizing the adoption of a "bottom-up federalism approach" by empowering state-level structures. Since then, institutions advocating the concept of bottom-up federalism have proliferated. The concept of "Bottom-Up Federalism" in Myanmar's contemporary political landscape presents both opportunities and challenges. Historically, Myanmar has operated under a unitary and top-down centralized governance structure since gaining independence in 1948. Despite its deeply divided, multiethnic, and multireligious composition, this centralized model has perpetuated civil conflicts. A bottom-up approach, emphasizing devolution and the division of powers to state-level sovereignty, offers a potential alternative to address these systemic issues. However, the asymmetric power dynamics among ethnic groups pose significant risks, particularly for marginalized communities often referred to as "minorities within minorities." Without equitable safeguards, the focus on bottom-up federalism could exacerbate vulnerabilities among these groups, especially those without strong armed forces or political leverage. This research aims to explore the opportunities and challenges inherent in the application of Bottom-Up Federalism in a reimagined Myanmar. It will identify practical solutions and measures to address these challenges while maximizing the potential benefits of this approach, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on fostering an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable federal democratic union.