

Fragmented Governance and Civilian Protection in Post-Coup Myanmar: Comparative Insights from Shan and Karenni States

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Abstract

Myanmar's current reality is marked by deepening divisions between the junta and various armed groups, unresolved by the 2026 sham election. As military control recedes, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and resistance groups have expanded parallel governance systems providing education, healthcare, and justice. While the dispersal of authority reflects decades of unresolved ethnic conflict, the post-coup period has accelerated this fragmentation. Governing amid ongoing conflict has created major challenges for civilian protection and political coordination, while the rise of multiple autonomous authorities complicates prospects for a cohesive federal union. Despite rhetorical commitments to federalism, some EAOs maintain covert ties with the junta, raising questions about their political intentions. Inter-ethnic conflict and emerging warlordism threaten to further fragment Myanmar's civil war. Territorial disputes among armed groups increasingly reflect competition over border trade, taxation, and natural resources, yet coherent resource governance among resistance forces remains underdeveloped. These tensions now extend beyond ethnic borderlands into central Myanmar, where the Bamar majority has also mobilized against military rule.

Into this landscape of fractured governance, inter-ethnic conflict, and resource competition step the geopolitical calculations of Myanmar's most powerful neighbor – China. Beijing pursues a dual strategy: it engages Myanmar's junta to protect Belt and Road investments while maintaining direct ties with border-based EAOs to secure its strategic and economic interests. By managing rather than resolving Myanmar's fragmentation, China has positioned itself as a key interlocutor between the junta and ethnic armed groups. Its approach—prioritizing stability, economic interests, and flexible engagement with both state and non-state actors—illustrates how external powers navigate and at times deepen Myanmar's fractured political landscape. Examining these intersecting dynamics of fragmented governance, resource competition, and external involvement is therefore essential to understanding Myanmar's increasingly uncertain post-election reality.