

Karen Armed Groups and Contested Governance Along the Asian Highway in Post-2021 Myanmar: Intra-Ethnic and Religious Divisions

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Abstract

Since Myanmar's 2021 military coup, armed group governance has intensified along major infrastructure routes in eastern Karen State, where Asian Highway 1 (AH1) has become a site of conflict, regulation, and political contestation rather than a neutral route of trade and mobility. This article explores how intra-ethnic and religion shape governance contestation among Karen armed groups along the Asian Highway in post-coup Myanmar. I argue that governance along AH1 takes the form of a contested and hybrid political order. Karen armed groups seek to stabilize authority not only through military competition, but also by advancing claims to legitimacy that draw on ethnic and religious identities and take shape through governance practices on the ground. Drawing on scholarship on rebel governance and on work that conceptualizes infrastructure as a political arena, I develop an interpretive framework that links intra-ethnic and religious fragmentation with material practices such as taxation, checkpoint enforcement, and mobility regulation. Based on a qualitative case study of governance along AH1, this study provides grounded empirical evidence on how armed group governance operates along a conflict-affected infrastructure route. Theoretically, this study refines existing accounts of Karen political authority and contested sovereignty and demonstrates that intra-ethnic and religious contestation shapes governance alongside coercion and territorial control.