

A Crisis of Shan Nationalism and the Dual Failures of Shan Armed Leadership

Amporn Jirattikorn

Abstract

Since Myanmar's 2021 military coup, Shan armed organizations have faced renewed criticism as Shan communities grapple with conflict, territorial transformations, and shifting political alliances. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted among Shan communities in both Shan State and northern Thailand, this paper examines popular perceptions of Shan State Army-South/the Restoration Council of Shan State/ (SSA-S/RCSS) and Shan State Army-North/the Shan State Progress Party/ (SSA-N/SSPP). Rather than revealing clear political divisions between Shan living inside and outside Myanmar, this paper finds a more complex landscape of criticism, ambivalence, and selective support. It is a spectrum of disillusionment while some respondents criticize the RCSS for maintaining ceasefire relations with the Myanmar military and prioritizing institutional and economic interests over resistance, others adopt a pragmatic position, viewing the ceasefire as an imperfect but necessary strategy to shield communities from intensified warfare. Criticism of the SSPP, by contrast, centers on its alliances and strategic decisions in northern Shan State, which many respondents often blamed SSPP for its alliances that have allegedly facilitated the expansion of other armed actors into Shan territory, leading to the loss of Shan territorial influence and political authority. The paper argues that contemporary Shan nationalism is increasingly shaped by perceptions of the dual failures of Shan armed leadership. the paper demonstrates how contemporary Shan political opinion reflects a broader crisis of representation within Shan nationalism. At a moment when many Shan perceive themselves as losing political influence within their own homeland, the question is no longer whether the Shan nation should be defended, but who, if anyone, is capable of defending it.