

Shan States' Disintegration Conundrum and Multi-Ethnic Armed Groups Claim

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Abstract

Myanmar is widely characterized as a highly fragile and politically fragmented state, and Shan State—the country's largest and most militarized subnational unit—constitutes a critical microcosm of this condition. This research investigates the nature and motives of inter-ethnic armed conflicts in Shan State, territorial contestation, and examines how ethno-centric enclave-building by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) reshapes governance, conflict dynamics, and coexistence in an already fragmented region. The core puzzle guiding this study asks why, despite prolonged conflict and the erosion of central authority following the 2021 military coup, Shan State has not disintegrated into breakup or full “Balkanization,” yet continues to experience chronic instability and localized violence.

The study is structured around three research questions: (1) What extent does the presence of multiple ethnic armed groups with distinct identities increase the likelihood of political disintegration or Balkanization in Shan State? (2) What underlying motives—historical, political, economic, and strategic—drive inter-ethnic tensions and armed confrontations among EAOs? (3) What are the specific effects of efforts to establish ethnically exclusive zones of control in Northern Shan State, where multi-ethnic communities coexist, and central state authority is in decline?

The findings suggest that the post-coup erosion of Burman-centered state power has not generated a coherent federal alternative but instead intensified fragmented governance and inter-ethnic competition. Ethnic Armed Organizations EAOs have capitalized on power vacuums to consolidate territorially bounded, ethnically defined enclaves. These processes have heightened inter-ethnic tensions, entrenched informal governance systems, and sustained localized conflicts shaped by war economies and historical grievances. However, external constraints—most notably China's intervention in the name of border stability—have limited the likelihood of large-scale breakup, resulting in a prolonged political stalemate rather than outright territorial breakup.

The research employs a mixed qualitative design combining exploratory and explanatory approaches with selected case studies from Northern and Southern Shan State.