

From Resistance to Rule: Checkpoints and Quasi-State Authority in Upper Sagaing

Min Aung Mann

Abstract

This paper examines checkpoints run by People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and Pa Ah Pha in Upper Sagaing since the 2021 coup, using checkpoints as windows into local politics and conflict. Based on online research, political dialogues and interviews with PDF/Pa Ah Pha members, it studies checkpoints along the Mandalay-Myitkyina Road (Shwebo to Kachin border) to understand revolutionary state-building. The paper uses checkpoints as tools to measure power and governance in conflict zones. When many different armed groups compete for control of an area, checkpoint systems become complicated with multiple actors running them. How checkpoints are arranged shows who really controls territory. More importantly, how well authorities manage checkpoints—whether corruption exists, how they collect taxes, whether they can run things properly—directly shows if they can govern effectively. Bad checkpoint management leads to corruption, which hurts ordinary people through unfair taxes and higher prices for daily necessities in local markets. The checkpoints studied along the Shwebo-Kachin border show both strengths and problems. They work as part of a network system, collecting money, controlling trade, and showing the resistance authority. But too many checkpoints create problems: fights over taxation between PDFs, Pa Ka Pha, and Pa Ah Pha burden local people, leading to complaints like "Three feet, one checkpoint." Corruption—illegal taxes, bribes—shows weak administration and directly hurts locals through higher prices and market problems. The paper argues that checkpoint quality in Upper Sagaing shows whether revolutionary state-building can work. As bottom-up federalism develops, checkpoints serve two purposes: they are indicators for measuring the new authority, but they also reveal where governance success or fails. Whether checkpoints move from unfair extraction toward honest administration will decide if Sagaing's new political order can succeed and gain legitimacy—offering a small picture of Myanmar resistance's bigger transformation.