



Governance and Communal Relations in Northern Arakan: A Study of Local Experiences and Perceptions

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List of Acronyms

AA – Arakan Army
APRG – Arakan People's Revolutionary Government
ARSA – Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army
EROs – Ethnic resistance organizations
IDPs – Internally displaced persons
RSO – Rohingya Solidarity Organization
ULA – United League of Arakan

Executive Summary

This report examines governance structures, intercommunal relations, and local peacebuilding efforts in Northern Rakhine State (commonly referred to as Arakan) since the takeover of the resistance government led by United League of Arakan or Arakan Army in Northern Arakan. Since the military coup, the political and security landscape in Rakhine State, the western region at Myanmar's border with Bangladesh, has undergone significant changes. The Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed organization advocating for greater autonomy, has expanded its territorial control and governance structures, distinguishing itself from both the Myanmar military and other resistance groups. Unlike much of Myanmar, where the post-coup resistance is fragmented, Rakhine has seen the steady rise of the Arakan People's Revolutionary Government (APRG), which operates as the administration wing of the AA. The APRG has taken over essential governance functions, including law enforcement, judiciary, and taxation, replacing the Myanmar military's authority in many areas. The AA's territorial expansion began gaining momentum after a ceasefire with the military in late 2020, which allowed it to consolidate control. By 2022, the group had established parallel administrative structures, and by 2023, it had taken full control over key townships, enforcing its own governance model. This shift has reshaped power dynamics in Rakhine, creating a de facto autonomous zone separate from both the junta and Myanmar's broader resistance movement.

The study provides valuable insights for international and local organizations seeking to prevent communal conflicts and foster peaceful coexistence amongst diverse communities in Rakhine State. The research aims to understand how these communities perceive and interact with the 'resistance government' (the de facto authorities overseeing governance and administration in this region), particularly the APRG and the United League of Arakan (ULA) which runs it. It explores the population's experiences with governance, regional stability, and peacebuilding efforts. Using a qualitative methodology, the study used in-depth interviews, field observations, and analysis of community narratives to capture the realities on the ground of Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships located in Northern Rakhine, close to the Bangladesh border. Socioeconomic conditions, historical grievances, intercommunity tensions, and pathways toward inclusive governance are also assessed.

The findings highlight the complexities of governance under a resistance administration and its implications for long-term peace and development:

- Many communities in Northern Arakan face severe economic challenges, relying on remittances and humanitarian aid due to a lack of local employment opportunities. Limited infrastructure and restricted access to essential services exacerbate their struggles.
- The border with Bangladesh is a significant factor contributing to regional instability. Issues such as cross-border movements, smuggling, and territorial disputes impact security dynamics and community interactions.
- The fragile and evolving landscape of interethnic and interreligious relations is shaped by historical grievances, social divisions, and ongoing conflict, though communities express a strong desire for stability, equitable governance, and economic opportunities.
- The ULA's governance efforts are met with mixed reactions. While many recognize its role in providing services and maintaining order, concerns about transparency, inclusivity, and administrative capacity remain. Despite political uncertainty, resource limitations, and social divisions, there is optimism about the future of its leadership in the region.
- While tensions persist, grassroots initiatives for reconciliation and coexistence are emerging. The study identifies various community-driven strategies to strengthen social cohesion, including cultural exchange programs, inclusive governance policies, and collaborative economic projects.

The findings paint a complex but hopeful picture of Northern Arakan. While economic hardship, security concerns, and intercommunal divisions present substantial barriers, there is a shared resilience and commitment to building a peaceful and prosperous future. Addressing these challenges requires inclusive policies, economic investments, and trust-building measures at all levels.

Rakhine's Shifting Power Struggle: Resistance and Conflict Since 2021

Myanmar (also known as Burma) has endured decades of successive, authoritarian and military rule, pervasive economic hardship, and prolonged armed conflicts with ethnic minority groups seeking self-determination.¹ For nearly fifty years, from 1962 to 2011, oppressive military governance shaped a deeply racialized political and social landscape alongside an underdeveloped economy. Additionally, ethnic minority communities faced systematic discrimination, restricted economic prospects, insufficient representation in government, and various abuses perpetrated by the country's military.

Amid these grievances, the United League of Arakan and Arakan Army (ULA/AA) were formed as political and armed resistance organizations in 2009, by a small group of Rakhine youth, with the political purpose of fighting for self-determination, equality, justice, and freedom of the people living inside Rakhine State regardless of their race and religions.² After initially building up experience and strength through operations alongside allied ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) elsewhere in Myanmar, the AA began military operations in Rakhine itself from 2015, which dramatically escalated in 2018, resulting in two years of intense fighting with the Myanmar military. This conflict left more than 230,000 internally displaced, and nearly a thousand injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots, and landmine explosions.³

In February 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup, returning the country to military rule after a decade of quasi-civilian governance, thereby sparking widespread opposition and nationwide resistance. It formed a governing body, the State Administration Council, under the control of the military junta. Initially, Rakhine State benefited from a temporary ceasefire between the ULA and the Myanmar military, and by August 2021, the ULA leader claimed control over 75% of the land area of Rakhine State (including parts of southern Chin State like Paletwa township).⁴ The ceasefire largely held until November 2023, when conflict resumed, resulting in more administrative areas coming under ULA control, particularly in Northern Rakhine.

Following the coup, the military junta's control over much of the country has weakened due to social strikes, resignations of local administrators, widespread public disobedience, boycotts of military products, and notably, extensive armed resistance across the country.⁵ Various armed actors, many of whom have been engaged in decades of political struggle for self-determination, have doubled down on these efforts and established their own administrative systems in areas under their control.⁶ These actors include:

- Long-standing EROs that existed before the coup. In Rakhine State, the Arakan Army (AA) is the most powerful ERO;⁷
- Local coalition councils made up of armed and civilian actors, representing specific regions or ethnic groups, who have established interim state governments, township-level bodies, and People's Defense Forces within a national framework under the National Unity Government (NUG)*; and
- Other township-level People's Administration Bodies, and other local People's Defense Forces operating independently from the NUG and EROs.

Since the coup, Myanmar has become a country with armed conflict actors fighting each other for territorial control and political power, rooted in ethnic tensions, and ideological differences. Bringing together groups with diverse political aspirations and historical grievances has posed significant challenges, as different factions hold varying visions for Myanmar's future governance, autonomy, and resistance strategies. In this context, a range of organizations and bodies have been created to attempt to unify the many local actors resisting junta rule.

A Land of Conflict at Myanmar's Western Border

Rakhine⁹ State, located at Myanmar's western border with Bangladesh, is one of the country's least developed areas, struggling with armed conflict, communal conflicts, and environmental disasters.¹⁰ Despite the shift to quasi-democracy in 2011, the governing system remained highly centralized, and subnational units lacked substantial autonomy. In Rakhine State, tensions between different communities have had negative impacts on social cohesion since at least the 19th century, and these were exacerbated during World War 2 when Rakhine Buddhist and Muslim communities fought on opposing sides for several years.¹¹ These long-standing frictions contributed to large-scale intercommunal violence in 2012 and 2013, which resulted in Muslims largely being displaced from urban areas, with 120,000 internally displaced persons (IDP) and others seeking refuge in Bangladesh.¹²

Since the late 1970s, there have been three major offensives by the Myanmar military against the Muslim population living in Northern Rakhine, most recently the offensives of 2016-17, which killed thousands and caused over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh, where there are now over one million Myanmar refugees in total.¹³ The enduring trauma and consequences of communal conflict among diverse communities in Northern Rakhine persist, compounded by the unresolved repatriation process of the Rohingya community. These challenges are further hindered by the consequences of the 2021 military coup.

Against this backdrop, various armed groups identifying as Rohingya resistance forces have also emerged, further complicating the security landscape in Northern Rakhine.

- The Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which first gained prominence with its attacks on Myanmar military security posts in 2016, claims to be fighting for the rights of the Rohingya people.¹⁴
- The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO), originally active in the 1980s and rearmed after the 2021 coup, similarly advocates for the recognition of the Rohingya community.¹⁵
- A lesser-known group, the Arakan Rohingya Army, has also been reported in the region, although its activities and structure remain obscure.¹⁶

These groups are characterized by their predominantly Muslim membership and their focus on issues affecting Muslim Rohingya communities. Allegations of criminal activities against some members have contributed to tensions between the different communities in Rakhine State.¹⁷ The complex dynamics between the Myanmar military, the ULA/AA, and these armed groups continue to shape the region's fragile security environment.¹⁸

Post-coup violence against civilians in Rakhine State

- More than 170 civilians arrested by the junta, as of mid-December of 2023. ¹⁹
- 179 civilian deaths and 486 injuries due to airstrikes and drone attacks by the Myanmar military, as of March 2024. ²⁰
- Over 300,000 IDPs. ²¹

Armed resistance in Rakhine State has been fierce as local actors seek to take control over the area. In 2023, conflict between the AA and Myanmar military spread to southern Rakhine townships following a fragile ceasefire. The Myanmar military then imposed limitations on crucial transport routes and water passages in various townships, including those linking Arakan with Yangon. These measures have severely restricted civilian mobility, led to steep hikes in the prices of essential goods, caused shortages of gasoline, and obstructed the distribution of humanitarian aid. The AA appears to be gaining momentum amidst fierce armed confrontations with the Myanmar military, which may enable it to continue expanding its territorial control, including in major urban centers. Presently, it claims complete control over Paletwa in Chin State, as well as six townships across Northern and Southern Rakhine State, encompassing Ponnagyun, Kyauktaw, Mrauk U, Minbya, Myaeon, and Rambre. ²²

While the Arakan Army (AA) has made significant gains, tensions among Rakhine State's diverse communities remain high, highlighting the complex and fragile nature of the region's social dynamics. In February 2024, in response to significant defeats by armed resistance groups (both EROs and People's Defense Forces) across Myanmar, the State Administration Council activated the Conscription Law.²³ The law enables the forcible recruitment of young men and women for military service, requiring them to serve for up to five years, with possible extensions during times of emergency. In Rakhine, numerous Rohingya youths are facing the repercussions of this policy, leading to concerns about their forced enlistment or other adverse impacts on their lives.²⁴ Tensions have also escalated following violent incidents, including the burning down of civilian homes and killings by Rohingya armed groups and the Myanmar military.²⁵ ARSA has clashed with the AA over its attempts to establish control in certain areas, and the RSO has reportedly coordinated with Myanmar's military junta to combat the AA.²⁶

The ongoing conflict in Rakhine State is shaped not only by direct clashes between the AA and the Myanmar military but also by complex pre-combat dynamics. Reports indicate that the Myanmar military has, at times, worked with Rohingya armed groups to hinder the AA's advances. Additionally, both sides face accusations of war crimes against civilians, further complicating the region's security and governance landscape.²⁷ Recent investigations highlight the intensity of these incidents, including the events in Buthidaung, underscoring the broader challenges faced by the ULA and local governance actors in navigating both intercommunal tensions and active hostilities.²⁸ These events have raised concerns among both civilians and the international community about the potential resurgence of tensions and violence between the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, highlighting the urgent need for efforts to promote peace and stability in the region.

Resistance Governance in Rakhine State

In 2021, the ULA established the Arakan People's Revolutionary Government as its administrative wing, aiming to build a self-governing system in Rakhine State by implementing its own governance, judicial, and public service structures.²⁹ Reflecting the AA's territorial gains since the coup, its political wing, the ULA, rapidly expanded its administrative bodies and governance system across Arakan, declaring this to be a significant part of their revolutionary state-building process.³⁰ Recent research indicates that in Rakhine State, the various communities, including Rakhine, Rohingya, and other minority groups, generally favor the APRG's administrative and justice systems over those offered by the State Administration Council, for reasons including lower corruption and greater efficiency in public service provision.³¹ A ULA spokesperson affirmed the group's confidence in fostering peaceful coexistence among diverse communities in areas where they provide public services.³²

Before the AA took full control of Buthidaung, there were violent incidents during which Rohingya armed groups, allegedly aligned with the Myanmar military, burned down houses belonging to the Rakhine community. In response, the AA launched intense attacks, leading to accusations of violent crackdowns on Rohingya villages and the forced recruitment of Rohingya soldiers, which the AA has denied. These incidents have created polarized feelings among the diverse communities in Northern Arakan, echoing the unresolved communal conflicts of the past. Despite these tensions, the ULA and APRG have publicly promised to protect all civilians regardless of ethnicity or religion, promote social cohesion, and ensure equal access to public services in areas under their control.

There is limited knowledge about civilians' experience and perceptions of the APRG, a gap which this study aims to address. It is crucial to understand diverse communities' views on key issues such as regional stability, peaceful coexistence, experiences, and perceptions of the APRG, the impact of border area on the relationship between different communities, local efforts toward a peacebuilding mechanism, and their aspirations for the region's future. By amplifying the voices of local civilians, the study seeks to contribute to future good governance and peacebuilding efforts in the region.

About this study

This study focused on two townships in Northern Arakan: Buthidaung and Maungdaw, which are close to the border between Myanmar and Bangladesh and have historically been hotspots of communal conflict between Rakhine and Rohingya communities. They are also areas where various armed groups have tried to establish control, with the AA in the foremost position since 2021. The population in these areas is in the millions, with Rakhine and Rohingya making up the majority, alongside smaller minority groups such as the Chin, Mro, Khimi, Dinnet, Thet, Kaman, Maramargyi, and Hindu communities.

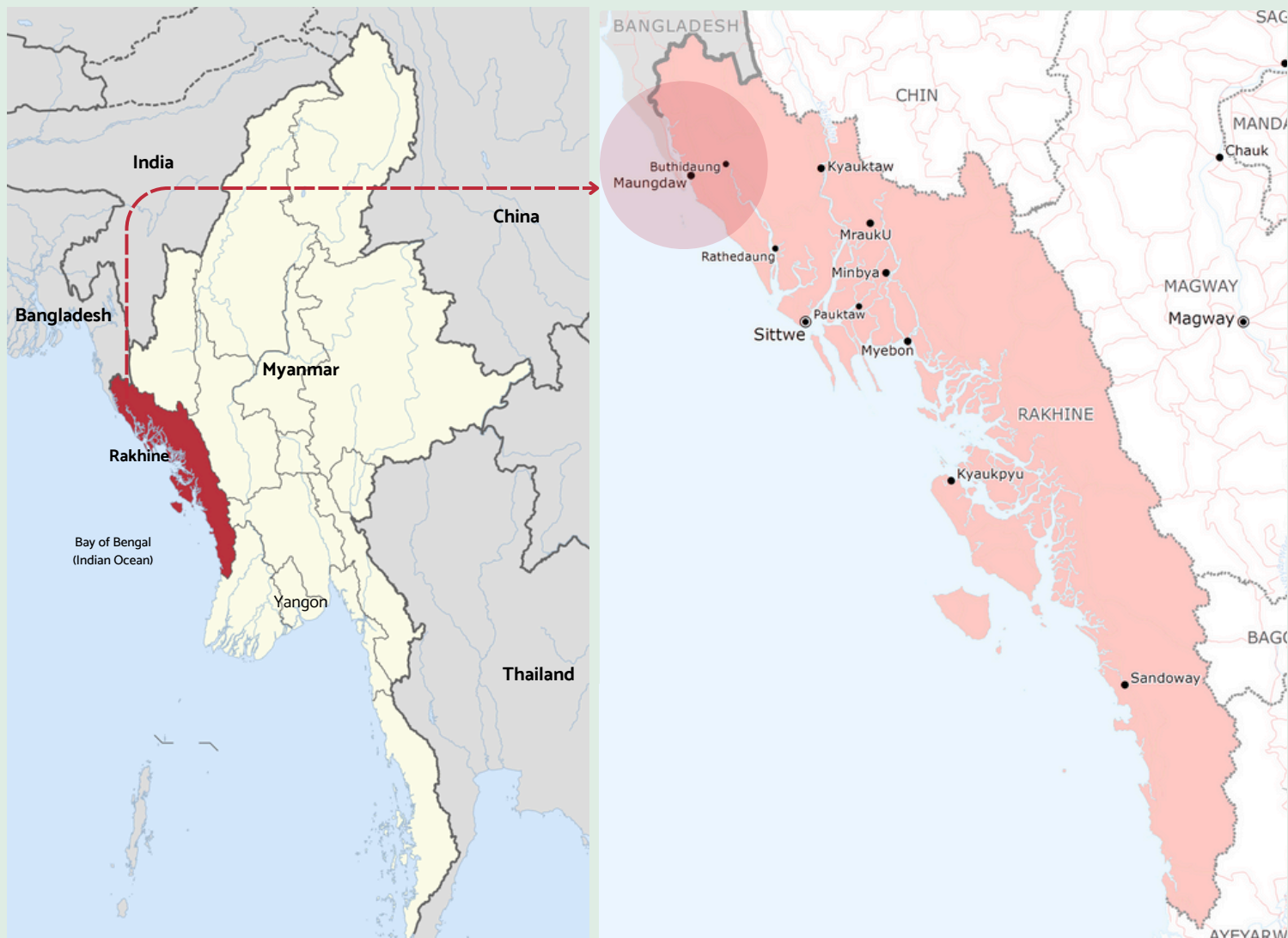


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Figure 1: Research locations: Buthidaung and Maungdaw in Rakhine State, Myanmar

Research Methods

This study used a qualitative research methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of local civilians on resolving communal conflict, promoting peaceful coexistence among diverse ethnicities, their relationship with the resistance government, and their aspirations for the region's future. In-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions focused on the main line of inquiry: *How do diverse communities in Northern Rakhine State perceive and interact with the Arakan People's Revolutionary Government, and what are their experiences regarding governance, regional stability, and peacebuilding?*

Special attention was given to ensuring the inclusion of women, youth, and ethnic minority voices. The interview questions were initially prepared in English and then translated into the Rakhine language for use with participants. The study applied purposive sampling to select participants based on the following specific criteria:

- Local women or youth leaders from different civil society organizations
- Local religious leaders from different religious groups
- Leaders from different ethnicities, including Rakhine, Rohingya, and other ethnic groups.

Table 1: Profile of the participants in the study

Research methods	Key Informant Interviews	Focus Group Discussions
Number of participants	8 participants	21 participants
Gender	M=7, F=1	M=15, F=6
Location	IDP camps in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships	IDP camps in Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships
Ethnic affiliation	3 Rakhine, 2 Khimi, 1 Mro, 1 Hindu, 1 Chakkam/Dinet	Hindu women's camp (6), Muslim camp in Maungdaw (6), Muslim quarter in Buthidaung (8)
Religious affiliation	4 Buddhists, 3 Christians, 1 Hindu	15 Muslims, 6 Hindu
Occupations	Regional administrators of ULA/AA, Baptist pastor, former government mobile operator, local administrators, businesswoman	Teachers, local administrators, Small-scale traders, civil society members, active women

Data Collection and Analysis

Permission for data collection was gained from the local ULA authority, and pilot studies with local community members were conducted to review the relevance of the interview question set. The researcher and two assistants visited Buthidaung and Maungdaw for data collection in October 2024. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of two weeks, with one week spent in each township. All focus group discussions took place in IDP camps and temporary buildings in both locations. Due to security concerns, accessing downtown Maungdaw was not possible, and discussions were held in camps situated closest to the town.

Traveling between locations presented significant challenges, as active armed conflicts were ongoing throughout the data collection period. In some instances, jet fighters operated continuously throughout the night, creating an extremely unsafe environment. Accommodation was arranged in a temporary shelter with the permission of local authorities, but the situation remained highly volatile and risky. One particularly dangerous incident occurred in Buthidaung downtown when an armed clash broke out between the AA and ARSA forces in a nearby village. As a result, travel plans had to be postponed for several days to ensure safety. These security risks and disruptions significantly affected the fieldwork timeline and access to certain areas. Despite these challenges, efforts were made to complete the study within the constraints imposed by the conflict situation.

After the data collection, the data was subsequently transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying patterns and key themes across the interview's answers. Constant comparative analysis was employed to systematically compare and contrast different perspectives, helping to identify both shared views and significant differences.

Ethical considerations

The research adhered to the highest ethical standards, ensuring the protection and well-being of all participants. Prior to participation, individuals were fully informed about the study's purpose, methods, and their rights, and voluntary, informed, verbal consent was obtained. Confidentiality and anonymity were prioritized. Respect for participants was central to the study, with their views valued and their autonomy ensured.

As a local resident deeply affected by the socio-political turmoil in the region, particularly after the 2021 coup, the researcher's identity is closely tied to the context of the study's context. This background fosters a deep understanding of issues related to peace, resistance, and conflict but also introduces potential biases that require careful consideration. Efforts were made to ensure neutrality, build trust, and uphold ethical standards through peer reviews by local experts. Participants included individuals who had witnessed violence, arson, and forced recruitment by the Myanmar military and armed groups such as ARSA and RSO before the ULA took control of Buthidaung's downtown areas. Some were key decision-makers in regional governance, including members of the Arakan People's Revolutionary Government and local administrators within the ULA's administration. Their perspectives provided critical insights into governance and conflict dynamics.



Figure 2: Commodities being traded among various communities at Buthidaung Market
Photo credit: Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office

Study Limitations

This study faced several limitations that affected the diversity and scope of participant representation. One significant challenge was the limited participation of women due to a general lack of interest in the research. Efforts were made to encourage their involvement, but engagement remained low. Additionally, at the time of data collection, a large portion of the local population was displaced due to ongoing armed conflict. As a result, many individuals were primarily concerned with securing humanitarian aid and addressing their immediate survival needs rather than participating in the study. This situation significantly reduced the pool of potential respondents.

At the time of data collection, many people in Buthidaung and Maungdaw had not yet returned to their original homes after the conflict, leading to a scattered and unsettled population. This displacement further limited the number of individuals who showed interest in or were available for the research. Despite these challenges, the study sought to capture diverse perspectives within the constraints of the situation. However, future research could benefit from more stable conditions and targeted efforts to ensure greater inclusivity, particularly among women and displaced populations.

Findings and Discussion

1. Current Socioeconomic Challenges

Episodic violence and instability from protracted conflict has forced many communities in Northern Arakan into precarious economic situations. The absence of stable income opportunities results in a high reliance on remittances from family members in Yangon or abroad, as well as humanitarian aid.³³ The threat of violence from local armed groups restricts mobility and prevents communities from foraging to supplement their food stocks. The ULA/AA administration has made efforts to facilitate informal opportunities, such as through local traders' associations, and trade routes, and to stabilize commodity prices to support immediate food security and longer-term economic recovery. Challenges remain around accessibility and scope of these initiatives, with some ethnic minority research informants reporting their exclusion, making it more difficult for these communities to build collective capital.³⁴



Figure 3: Daily-use commodities on display at Buthidaung Market
Photo credit: Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office

2. Perceptions of Intercommunal Relationships among Diverse Groups

Historical grievances underpin recent conflict experiences to create deep strains in intercommunal relationships, with trust-building likely to be the cornerstone of future peacebuilding efforts in this region. Mistrust and fear towards the Muslim community emerged as a significant theme in key informant interviews and focus group discussions, driven by historical and recent events. Participants recounted incidents where Muslim armed groups, such as ARSA, RSO, and ARA were implicated in violence, arson, and collaboration with the Myanmar military.³⁵ Therefore, the journey to achieving lasting solidarity will require addressing ongoing fears, ensuring inclusivity, and providing adequate support to all communities affected by conflict. Several participants noted that Northern Arakan experienced greater communal harmony before divisive policies were introduced by military regimes, particularly during U Ne Win's³⁶ era. These policies exacerbated distrust and division among ethnic and religious groups, leaving a lasting impact on intercommunal relations.³⁷



Figure 4: Interactions between communities at the market
Photo credit: Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office

Muslim armed groups were frequently mentioned as sources of ongoing tension. Their activities have fueled fears among both non-Muslim communities and the Muslim community, leading to calls for their disarmament. A Mro participant emphasized that peace in the region would remain elusive as long as these groups operate, underscoring many people's assumptions about security threats and the pervasiveness of the groups. Despite the challenges, some participants acknowledged the positive steps taken by the ULA to foster intercommunal solidarity. These efforts include the establishment of ethnic affairs committees³⁸, inclusive evacuation plans, and the inclusion of Muslim community members in ULA administrative roles.³⁹

However, building trust and solidarity among diverse groups remains a challenge. Participants from different communities noted lingering hesitations about and resistance to engaging in state-building processes. For instance, a participant from the Political office in Maungdaw highlighted the reluctance of some ethnicities to collaborate with the ULA/AA due to historical grievances and fears of marginalization. Religious leaders, such as a Christian pastor from the Khimi community, emphasized the importance of preaching social harmony and spreading positive messages despite personal fears and distrust. These voices underline the potential role of faith-based initiatives in bridging divides and promoting dialogue among communities. Participants



Figure 5: Widespread destruction of houses in Buthidaung, illustrating the aftermath of recent events
Photo credit: Khin Sett Mon

living in IDP camps expressed a mix of grievances and hopes. A Muslim participant in Maungdaw acknowledged the efforts of ULA/AA in providing temporary safety and fostering collaboration, while a Hindu participant highlighted the dire living conditions in camps and the need for greater humanitarian assistance. These experiences underscore the varying levels of engagement and support received by displaced groups.

The participants' narratives reflect significant unresolved trauma among communities, particularly those directly affected by violence.⁴⁰ Addressing this trauma will be crucial for rebuilding trust and fostering reconciliation between local civilians from different communities, particularly among those who have suffered from the violence.

3. The Role of the Border in Conflict, Economy, and Cross-Border Relations

The border between Northern Arakan and Bangladesh is perceived as a central factor contributing to regional instability and conflict. Participants described the border as a historical and ongoing source of tension, shaping intercommunal relationships and security dynamics in the region. They emphasized that addressing border-related challenges requires a focus on peace, freedom, human rights, and equal opportunities for all communities in Northern Arakan.

A political officer highlighted the significance of migration into Arakan on interethnic relations, beginning in the British colonial period.⁴¹ They noted that migrants from Bangladesh were historically identified as "Bengali" and they linked the emergence of the term "Rohingya" in 1981, which coincided with the establishment of the RSO, to perceived attempts to claim Northern Arakan as a separate territory for the Muslim community. This fueled fears of territorial loss and a sense of urgency among some groups, especially among the Rakhine ethnic community, to secure the border and prevent the entry of what they view as destabilizing forces, including Muslim armed groups.

The border has also been associated with challenges of transnational crimes such as illegal immigration, drug and human trafficking, and arms smuggling, which have been enabled and, at times, perpetrated by Myanmar military border forces and affiliated armed groups. A participant from the ULA's Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office emphasized that local communities have not benefited from the border's economic potential. Instead, the region has been ruled by central government policies and criminal activities, leaving local populations without opportunities to engage in regional trade or reap economic benefits.

For the Muslim community in Northern Arakan, the border holds dual significance as both a refuge and a source of danger. A participant from the Muslim focus group in Maungdaw explained that generations of Muslims living in Northern Arakan have experienced discrimination and oppression, which has often forced them to flee to Bangladesh for safety. However, the journey to Bangladesh and life in refugee camps were also fraught with challenges, including the presence of terrorist groups and ongoing insecurity.



Figure 6: Buying and selling of local products between different communities in a local bazaar
Photo credit: Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office

4. Community Perceptions and Future Aspirations for Northern Arakan

The research illuminates a range of community perceptions regarding the administration of the APRG. While many recognize the administration's efforts, particularly its inclusivity and secular approach, there is also a shared understanding that challenges remain. Addressing issues of identity, resource limitations, and service delivery will be critical to building long-term trust and stability in the region.

Participants consistently noted the differences between the ULA administration and previous governments, particularly its improved coordination and inclusivity. A Khimi respondent in Buthidaung emphasized that ULA has made strides in incorporating local administrators from diverse communities, fostering mutual trust. Similarly, a Muslim participant from Maungdaw expressed hope that the inclusion of Muslim police officers and judges in the APRG structure would continue, creating greater opportunities for community involvement. While participants acknowledged the ULA's efforts in public services such as education and healthcare, they also highlighted significant gaps.⁴² The inclusion of health committees, rural clinics, and education initiatives for different communities is seen as a positive step, but many emphasized that these efforts must be expanded to adequately meet the needs of the population.

Identity emerged as a critical factor influencing social cohesion. A political officer observed that the lack of a mutually accepted term for identifying the Muslim community—whether "Rohingya" or "Bengali"—remains a sensitive and divisive issue. Resolving this will be vital for fostering harmony and mutual understanding not only between the ULA government and Muslim community but also among different ethnic groups in the region. At the same time, a participant from the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office stressed that the ULA/AA's actions and policies are not based on race or religion, reflecting a commitment to building a secular state.



Figure 7: A view of a local bazaar in Buthidaung where diverse communities come together to buy and sell commodities
Photo credit: Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office

Beyond governance and service provision, participants expressed a collective vision for a stable, equitable, and prosperous future in Northern Arakan. Economic opportunities, particularly in cross-border trade with Bangladesh, were a recurring theme.⁴³ However, concerns about historical exploitation and ineffective resource management by previous governments underscored the need for policies that prioritize local communities. Similarly, a political officer stressed the importance of managing natural resources effectively, ensuring that investments benefit the region rather than external interests.

Security and communal harmony remain pressing concerns. Participants from various backgrounds, including the Hindu and Chakkma communities, emphasized the need for stability amid ongoing security threats. The proliferation of weapons and activities of violent Muslim armed groups, compounded by the Myanmar military's bombing campaigns in liberated areas, were identified as significant threats to peace. Fear and mistrust persist, particularly regarding coexistence with the Muslim community.⁴⁴

Inclusive governance was highlighted as a critical factor for fostering long-term peace. A participant from the focus group discussion with Muslim community members in Buthidaung expressed hope that the APRG would avoid oppressive policies of the past and ensure equal rights and access to public services for all citizens.⁴⁵ Many participants voiced aspirations for a transparent, people-oriented government free from corruption.⁴⁶

5. Building Solidarity and Unity in Northern Arakan: Strategies and Actions

The research highlights the complex yet hopeful journey toward fostering solidarity and unity among diverse communities in Northern Arakan. Participants emphasized actionable strategies for achieving mutual understanding, equitable governance, and long-term peace. Participants acknowledged the importance of inclusive governance to build trust and solidarity.⁴⁷ They also stressed that international actors should approach the situation with a nuanced understanding, avoiding one-sided narratives that might exacerbate tensions.

Equitable public services and economic opportunities were seen as key drivers of community unity.⁴⁸ Trust-building programs, such as livelihood initiatives and community-based programs for common space, such as parks, sport centers, community centers, or town hall meeting places, led by the ULA, were proposed as practical ways to strengthen intercommunity relationships, particularly in areas devastated by conflict, like Buthidaung. Education and intercommunity communication were frequently cited as transformative tools for fostering unity.⁴⁹ Participants also suggested that teaching both Rakhine and Muslim community languages could improve communication, enhance literacy rates, and cultivate mutual understanding across communities.

Addressing historical grievances and trauma is an essential aspect of peacebuilding. While some participants, such as a female Chakkma respondent, expressed deep-seated fears and reluctance to coexist with the Muslim community, others called for programs that provide shared spaces, such as parks, community centers, cultural centers, and sports facilities, to encourage positive interactions.⁵⁰ Participants also stressed the need for international organizations to engage with the ULA government in the rebuilding process, focusing on humanitarian assistance, economic development, and resettlement.⁵¹

Conclusion

The findings from this study paint a complex but hopeful picture of Northern Arakan. The region's current socioeconomic challenges, historical grievances, and communal divisions present significant barriers to development and stability. Nevertheless, there is a shared sense of resilience and optimism among its diverse communities, driven by emerging efforts towards inclusive governance. Economic hardship, humanitarian needs, inadequate public services, and security concerns define much of the region's present situation. The remaining effects of intercommunal conflict and the activities of violent armed groups further exacerbate tensions.

Research informants highlighted the importance of addressing the historical and structural causes of division while leveraging Northern Arakan's strategic geopolitical position for development. There is widespread consensus that sustainable peace and unity are achievable through inclusive policies, economic collaboration, and fostering mutual trust among communities. While significant challenges remain—including unresolved border issues such as armed group activity and trafficking, but also challenges related to trade, political recognition, and the repatriation of Rohingya refugees—there is confidence in the potential for Northern Arakan to emerge as a region defined by solidarity, stability, and prosperity.

The path to peace and prosperity in Northern Arakan will require collaboration at all levels—from local communities to international partners. By addressing socioeconomic disparities, fostering intercommunity trust, and implementing inclusive governance, Northern Arakan can overcome its historical challenges and transform into a region of unity and opportunity. The insights and aspirations of its people, as captured in this study, offer a guiding framework for building a future defined by resilience and harmony.

Key Takeaways for Policy Action

This study provides valuable insights for international and local organizations committed to preventing further communal conflicts and promoting peaceful coexistence in Northern Rakhine State. Its focus on borderland governance, local civilian experiences with the current resistance government, inter-communal relations, and local peacebuilding efforts, address a critical information and analytical gap that has resulted from the protracted conflict context. In capturing the perspectives of the diverse communities living in Rakhine State, this study is able to put forward suggestions to guide future peace and development related policies by local and international actors as well as governments with a vested interest in the region.

For local communities

- Work collaboratively with ULA representatives to identify local needs and priorities for socioeconomic projects, voice community-specific concerns and contribute to local decision-making processes. Vocational training programs can equip youth and women with skills for self-employment and entrepreneurship. Ethnic affairs committees can support transparency by monitoring the delivery of public services.
- Participate in peacebuilding initiatives and intercommunal dialogues to foster trust and solidarity. These could take the form of cultural exchange activities, such as festivals, sports events, sharing community spaces to strengthen social ties. Encourage local leaders to take an active role in mediating conflicts and promoting coexistence.

For the APRG

- Expand representation from all ethnic and religious communities in government, law enforcement, and judiciary positions. The extension of education and health programs to underserved areas can contribute to equitable and representative governance by ensuring equal access for all communities. Consider rural healthcare centers and mobile clinics to improve access in remote regions.
- Develop and promote transparent governance mechanisms. These could help attract international investment in infrastructure, emphasizing local benefits and environmental sustainability. Transparent budgeting and resource allocation systems can ensure fair distribution of resources across communities. Ensure strong mechanisms to monitor and address corruption, ensuring accountability in governance.
- Develop and implement community dialogue programs to address historical grievances and build mutual understanding. This can be supported by policies that prohibit and penalize discrimination in all public and private sectors, and the establishment of multilingual education programs to teach Rakhine, Muslim community languages, and other local languages in schools.
- Encourage youth participation in governance and development programs to foster long-term stability. Establish community centers, parks, and sports facilities to create shared spaces for interaction among diverse groups. Design trust-building programs such as collective farming, skill development workshops, and interfaith dialogues in governance policies.
- Enhance border security by creating specialized forces trained to combat trafficking and illegal armed movements. Engage with the Bangladeshi government to establish regulated cross-border trade routes, and develop infrastructure in border areas to support economic activities and local livelihoods.
- Looking ahead, support agricultural revitalization initiatives by providing modern equipment, fertilizers, and training for sustainable farming. Develop comprehensive rehabilitation plans for displaced communities, including housing, healthcare, and livelihood support.

For international actors

- Provide technical and financial support for resettlement, reconstruction, and critical reforms, including infrastructure and robust governance systems. Grants for community-driven development projects can support poverty alleviation and capacity building in communities. Knowledge-sharing programs to introduce modern agricultural techniques and economic development strategies will also contribute to development in the region.
- Support conflict resolution and peacebuilding for community leaders and ULA officials. Partner with local actors to deliver trust-building activities fund initiatives that promote cultural diversity and social inclusion. Fund programs aimed at fostering intercommunity solidarity, including education campaigns and cultural exchange initiatives.
- Mediate discussions on cross-border cooperation, regional security, and economic development between the ULA and government of Bangladesh.

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- [2] Arakan Army, n.d. About Us, arakanarmy.net
- [3] David Scott Mathieson, 'The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State,' United States Institute of Peace, 2020.
- [4] Kyaw San Hlaing, 'Understanding the Arakan Army,' Stimson Centre, 21 April 2023.
- [5] Naw Show Ei Ei Tun and Kim Jolliffe, 'Self-determination under an interim constitutional framework: Local administration in ethnic areas of Myanmar,' June 2022.
- [6] Since gaining independence from British rule in 1948, Myanmar has grappled with effective governance in its multiethnic society. After a coup in 1962, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, has often held control, engaging in conflicts with ethnic minority groups fighting for self-determination (CFR, 2025).
- [7] Prior to the military coup of February 2021, ethnic armed groups operating in Myanmar were commonly referred to as Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), a term used in official government discourse and peace negotiation frameworks under the quasi-civilian governments of 2011–2021. Following the coup, many of these groups positioned themselves as key actors in the broader resistance against military rule, leading to a shift in terminology. The term Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) has since gained prominence, reflecting their expanded role in the pro-democracy resistance movement beyond their historical struggles for ethnic self-determination.
- [8] The National Unity Government of Myanmar was formed on April 16, 2021, by elected lawmakers, ethnic leaders, and pro-democracy activists in response to the military coup on February 1, 2021. Comprised mainly of members from the ousted National League for Democracy, ethnic representatives, and civil society figures, the National Unity Government presents itself as Myanmar's legitimate government-in-exile. It aims to restore democracy, support the nationwide resistance movement, and establish a federal democratic system. It has gained recognition from some international actors, though it continues to operate in exile without formal control over Myanmar's territory.
- [9] Note on terminology: This report uses 'Arakan' and 'Rakhine' interchangeably. 'Rakhine' is the official term used by the Myanmar government, while 'Arakan' is commonly used by many local communities and the Arakan nationalist movement. The choice of terminology reflects the diverse perspectives within the region.
- [10] Armed conflict involves a situation of extended and often violent clashes between nations, governments, or internal groups. These conflicts can arise due to various reasons, such as disputes over territory, political power struggles, ethnic differences, and ideological conflicts.
- [11] Martin Smith, Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier. Transnational Institute, 18 December 2019.
- [12] Ibid.
- [13] International Crisis Group, 'An Avoidable War in Rakhine: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State,' Report 307/Asia, 9 June 2020.
- [14] Faisal Edroos, 'ARSA: Who are the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army?' Aljazeera, 13 September 2017.
- [15] Kyaw Htet Aung, 'Arakan Army's Victory 2.0 in Myanmar: A New Order for Rakhine?' Fulcrum, 13 January 2025.
- [16] Ibid.
- [17] 'ARSA Blamed for Killing Muslim Villager in Rakhine,' The Irrawaddy, 13 September 2023.
- [18] The Western News (2025), 'Calling for Action Against ARSA for Human Rights Violations, Killings, and Kidnappings Targeting Rakhine, Hindu, and Other Communities in Rakhine State'.
- [19] The Irrawaddy, 'Myanmar Junta Accused of Starving and Arresting Civillians in Rakhine State 'to Instill Fear,' 21 December 2023.
- [20] Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (2024), Arakan Diary, United League of Arakan.
- [21] Ibid.
- [22] In this context, 'complete control' refers to the Arakan Army's ability to exercise de facto governance over the region. This includes authority over key transport routes, such as roads and waterways, control of local administration and judicial mechanisms, enforcement of security and law enforcement, and varying degrees of public support. Additionally, it may involve access to local taxation or financial resources, as well as the capacity to regulate trade and movement within these areas. Paletwa is officially listed as a township within Chin State under the administrative reorganization implemented by the Myanmar military regime in 1974 (Myanmar Government Gazette, 1974). However, historically, it was part of the Arakan Hill Tracts during British colonial rule. The territorial reclassification remains a point of historical and political contention, given its geographical and cultural ties to Arakan. Jacques P. Leider, 'What Is Arakan? Territory, Historical Geography and the Ethno-National Dissent in Myanmar's Rakhine State,' Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Policy Brief Series No. 164 (2025).

- [23] Helen Regan, Angus Watson, Anna Coren, Su Chay and Pallabi Munsri, 'Burnings and beheadings: Myanmar junta escalates terror tactics against its people,' CNN, 27 March 2024. The State Administration Council was established by the Myanmar military following the coup on February 1, 2021, which overthrew the National League for Democracy government. The State Administration Council, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, serves as the military junta's governing body, consolidating power through martial law, crackdowns on dissent, and the suppression of democratic movements. The council has faced widespread domestic resistance, including mass protests, civil disobedience, and armed resistance from both established EAOs and newly formed resistance groups.
- [24] MD Himel Rahman 'Myanmar: The Junta's forced conscription of Rohingyas,' Lowy Institute, 2 April 2024.
- [25] 'Junta troops and Rohingya militia jointly raid Rakhine Village,' RFA Burmese, 7 May 2024.
- [26] Devjyot Ghoshal, 'Exclusive: On Myanmar's frontline, Rohingya fighters and junta face a common enemy,' Reuters, 6 September 2024.
- [27] 'International Criminal Court: Investigate Arakan Army Massacre of Rohingya Civilians, Hold Perpetrators Accountable,' Fortify Rights, 27 August 2024.
- [28] Rajeev Bhattacharyya, 'Investigation: What Happened at Buthidaung Town in Myanmar's Rakhine State,' The Diplomat, 8 October 2024.
- [29] A common practice among ethnic resistance organizations in Myanmar is the establishment of both a political and an armed wing. The political wing is responsible for governance, diplomacy, and administration, while the armed wing engages in military operations. This structure allows resistance groups to simultaneously conduct armed struggles and political negotiations. The ULA serves as the political wing of the movement, overseeing governance and policymaking, while the AA functions as its military arm, engaging in armed resistance against the Myanmar military. The strength of an ERO is generally determined by several key factors, including the size of its armed forces, the extent of its territorial control, its governance capacity, access to resources, and popular support. In the case of the ULA, its growing influence is attributed to its well-trained and expanding military wing, its ability to administer governance in controlled areas, increasing financial and logistical resources, and widespread local support, which enhances legitimacy and operational effectiveness.
- [30] 'A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar,' COAR, 27 September 2023.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Kyaw Thu and Carlos Sardiña Galache (2023), 'The return of ARSA: Rakhine on the brink,' Frontier Myanmar.
- [33] An informant from Hla Phoe Khaung camp in Maungdaw township noted their dependency on aid from NGOs and the ULA/AA, highlighting the absence of work opportunities. Others from Chakkma, Mro and Khimi ethnicities expressed that remittances from family members abroad or in urban centers like Yangon were their primary means of survival.
- [34] A community leader from the Hindu quarter in Buthidaung pointed out that they were not invited to join the association despite hearing about its formation. This exclusion deprives minority communities of collective capital and opportunities to rebuild their livelihoods. Similarly, participants from Muslim quarters expressed that they were unaware of any such initiatives, highlighting gaps in inclusivity and communication.
- [35] A Khimi community leader expressed concern over potential hidden weapons within the Muslim community, while others, like a Hindu participant, described the trauma of witnessing their homes and properties being destroyed by those armed groups. These experiences have left a profound impact on intercommunity trust.
- [36] U Ne Win was a Burmese military leader who ruled Myanmar from 1962 to 1988 after leading a coup that established a military-controlled socialist government. His policies significantly shaped the ethnic and communal landscape of the country, including in northern Rakhine. Under his rule, the 1982 Citizenship Law was introduced, effectively denying the Rohingya community recognition as an official ethnic group of Myanmar, which led to their gradual disenfranchisement. Additionally, his administration implemented strict movement restrictions, mass expulsions, and military operations that deepened divisions between Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. These policies institutionalized ethnic discrimination and laid the foundation for the communal tensions that persist in the region today (Martin, 2017).
- [37] A Rakhine participant from Buthidaung linked the deterioration of inter-ethnic relationships to state-driven divisive practices by the previous governments, which fostered protracted dynamics of mutual suspicion and conflict.
- [38] The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) has established an Ethnic Affairs Committee to foster an inclusive administration within Rakhine State. This committee aims to incorporate various ethnic minorities, including the Khumi, Mro, Diangnet, and Hindu communities, into the governance framework. Additionally, a separate Muslim Affairs Committee has been formed to engage the Rohingya population. These initiatives are part of the ULA/AA's broader strategy to promote peace and stability by ensuring representation and participation of all communities in the region's administration (Bhattacharyya, 2024).
- [39] A Muslim participant expressed appreciation for the improved treatment and programs implemented under the ULA administration.

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- [40] A Chakkma participant recounted the destruction of her home and the near-death experience of her husband, emphasizing the emotional and material toll of such events.
- [41] British colonial rule in Burma lasted from 1824 to 1948, following the three Anglo-Burmese wars. During this period, particularly after the annexation of Arakan (now Rakhine State) in 1826, the British administration encouraged the migration of laborers from Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) into Arakan to work in agriculture and infrastructure projects. This migration significantly altered the demographic composition of the region, leading to increased tensions between the indigenous Rakhine population and the Muslim migrants (Settles, 2020).
- [42] A Khimi pastor expressed the need for higher education and livelihood programs for youth, while a Rakhine participant in Buthidaung pointed to inadequate healthcare access, particularly for those with chronic illnesses, due to the lack of laboratories and medical infrastructure.
- [43] A Rakhine participant emphasized that trade agreements between the ULA and the Bangladeshi government could foster regional development.
- [44] A Chakkma participant expressed concerns about returning to shared living arrangements, citing past violence and the need for security guarantees.
- [45] A Hindu participant advocated for greater opportunities to participate in state-building while guaranteeing equality for all communities.
- [46] A Muslim participant in Maungdaw emphasized their vision for a corruption-free administration under the ULA that prioritizes the well-being of all communities in northern Arakan.
- [47] A political officer representative noted the ULA government's efforts to establish inclusive administrative systems, which are seen as vital for fostering unity.
- [48] A participant from the Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office highlighted that local populations prioritize peace and development, which can be achieved through equal access to services and economic activities.
- [49] A pastor from the Khimi community expressed hope that access to better education would empower younger generations to build a peaceful and prosperous region.
- [50] A Muslim participant emphasized that such initiatives, along with ensuring freedom of movement and expression, would support community-building efforts.
- [51] A Khimi participant highlighted the importance of unbiased research and historical analysis to inform these efforts and address the complexities of intercommunal relations.

