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Arakan Army Commander-in-Chief Twan Mrat Naing on the Future of Rakhine State

“We are always in favor of repatriation [of Rohingya Muslims] in principle, and there should be voluntary, dignified, and safe repatriation under conducive conditions.”



By [Rajeev Bhattacharyya](#)

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Arakan Army Commander-in-Chief, Major Gen Twan Mrat Naing.

Credit: Special Arrangement

The Arakan Army (AA) has emerged as one of the most successful ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar in the war against the military junta's State Administration Council (SAC). With meticulous planning and alliances with other similar groups across the country, the AA has registered massive success in its operations against the military, which began intensifying on November 13 of last year. Currently, it has established [control](#) over 11 out of 18 townships spread across southern Chin State and Rakhine State in Myanmar. A fierce battle is currently on in Maungdaw and other regions, where [allegations](#) have surfaced of the AA committing atrocities against the Rohingya, a largely Muslim ethnic group.

In an online interview with The Diplomat's Rajeev Bhattacharyya, Commander-in-chief of the Arakan Army Major General Twan Mrat Naing, who is also the chairman of the organization's political front, the United League of Arakan (ULA), spoke his mind on a range of issues, including the ongoing war in Rakhine State, the allegations of atrocities against the Rohingya, and their future repatriation from Bangladesh.

How long will the Arakan Army take to liberate Rakhine State completely?

It is always better to speak in terms of circumstances rather than time. We need to see the genius task of liberating Arakan as both a process and a mission. A free and sovereign Arakan has always been in the hearts of our people. As a nation, restoring the lost sovereignty and status of Arakan is our historical, pragmatic, and dignified endeavor. Currently, the Arakan Army has liberated 11 out of 18 townships on the Arakan military front and will continue to occupy more strategic locations in the coming weeks and months.

The Arakan Army's rise to prominence in a span of around one-and-a-half decades after its formation has been almost meteoric. What are the factors that helped you to expand so rapidly when previous organizations had failed?

Since the fall of Mrauk-U and the loss of Arakan sovereignty in 1784 CE, previous generations of Arakanese revolutionaries have devoted their lives to one and only one objective: the liberation of Arakan. The reasons for their failure have reminded and taught us national lessons so that we can learn from mistakes. Time and circumstances have changed, but our objectives are not very different from theirs.

Indeed, throughout our struggles, we have had to overcome various challenges based on changing geopolitics, regional politics, and national politics. However, we need to be aware that real success comes from our ability to build leadership, organizational capacity, national solidarity, and helpful alliances, friends, and partners. We have always prioritized finding solutions within ourselves rather than outside.

Does the Arakan Army and the United League of Arakan consider themselves part of the Spring Revolution? The Arakan Army is also engaged in the war in other regions of Myanmar.

We have our own vision, missions, and objectives. Of course, we are happy to see how the people of Myanmar are brave enough to fight for their rights and dignity after the military coup in early 2021. We believe that our struggles for liberation from

military rule should be mutually beneficial. While we, the people of Arakan, are fighting for the liberation and construction of Arakan, we hope the people of Myanmar achieve their objectives as quickly as possible.

What do you think will be the outcome of the Spring Revolution in Myanmar?

We see that the determination and devotion of all the ethnic peoples of Myanmar are yielding results. We observe a growing degree of loss and weakness on the side of the SAC's military, while the anti-military coup forces are gaining strength day by day. However, this is not to claim that the SAC's military is doomed to fail in the coming days. The outcome ultimately depends on our solidarity, competence, and cooperation.

What are your views on the [allegations that the Arakan Army is committing atrocities](#) on the Rohingya populace?

Since we established our administration in Arakan a few years ago, our ULA government has always focused on promoting social cohesion, inclusive governance, and equal and transparent treatment among various communities in the region. The ULA represents all ethnic and religious groups in Arakan, and observers can see staff and officers from all backgrounds in our administration at

various levels. More importantly, it is our mission to promote greater participation from minority groups in our governmental institutions. There will be judges, police officers, and party cadres from all communities.

Regarding the Muslim residents in Arakan, we recognize that there are challenges such as unfounded and distorted accusations and attempts to create more mistrust between us. The AA is a well-organized and disciplined organization fighting in many parts of Myanmar, including northern Shan state and Kachin state. However, we have never been accused of or found guilty of committing any serious atrocities.

Since the beginning of our armed struggle in Arakan, we have never targeted any particular ethnic or religious group in the region. We have operated in many areas with large Muslim populations, and observers can see that our relations with the concerned Muslim community have been smooth.

Therefore, we can assure that there is no reason for our members to perpetrate any serious crimes against members of the Muslim or other communities in Arakan, despite accusations from some Muslim diaspora or interest groups. Indeed, like other professional militaries in the world, if

there are minor deviations among our soldiers, we handle these cases seriously. If there is credible evidence proving violations by our members, we always welcome addressing them in line with our rules and regulations.

Bangladesh has been pressuring the Arakan Army to repatriate the Rohingya refugees from the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. How do you plan to tackle the issue?

In principle, we always favor repatriation, and there should be voluntary, dignified, and safe repatriation under conducive conditions. We are happy to cooperate with Bangladesh or other regional countries to create a suitable environment for refugees to return.

On the other hand, we have also experienced issues of transborder crimes, terrorism, and drug and human trafficking among some members of the refugee community across the border. Therefore, border security, stability, and the rule of law should be key priorities.

Observers can see how different Muslim militant groups, such as ARSA (Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army), RSO (Rohingya Solidarity Organization), and ARA (Arakan Rohingya Army), commit crimes and terrorist activities within their community

and pose a threat to the security and safety of residents in border townships like Maungdaw and Buthidaung.

More importantly, this has become a question of Arakan national security, especially after these groups' intensive collaboration with the SAC junta military, which committed serious atrocities against their community in 2017. This is the same junta military that has been perpetrating crimes against all ethnic and religious people across Myanmar, particularly after the military coup in early 2021.

Thus, it is an imperative task for all regional and international stakeholders to support and cooperate with the ULA/AA in restoring stability and security at the border, a crucial precondition for sustainable repatriation.

The National Unity Government (NUG)'s views on the Rohingya, who are called “Bengali Muslims” in Arakan, are somewhat different from that of the Arakan Army and United League of Arakan. What are your views on this issue?

We see the NUG as an important factor in steering the politics of Myanmar in a better direction. However, we have some disagreements, particularly regarding the domestic politics of Arakan. There could be

different motivations and interests behind their divergent policy.

As we, the ULA/AA, have full support from the people of Arakan and maintain territorial control, it is our policy that will bring more opportunities in the process of solving this issue. More importantly, our people will also be affected by any significant changes that occur regarding this issue. Therefore, there are different policy adoptions due to divergent perceptions and interests.

The ULA has an unenviable task ahead of setting up an alternate administration as fast as possible. Does the organization have a timeframe for achieving this?

As we have liberated 11 out of 18 townships on the Arakan military front; we are still in the process of liberating the remaining townships. We are also beginning to deliberate and set up a better system of governance in our controlled areas. Indeed, as you have mentioned, it is an unenviable task for us to establish a suitable model of administration to provide crucial public services such as security, healthcare, transportation, and justice.

We consider building a proper administration as equally important as military affairs. Just as we have achieved

success in the military sphere, we need an “administrative victory” in the near future.

What administrative model will you adopt? Will it be decentralized or centralized?

There will be a unitary state system headed by the ULA as the vanguard party. The army will be under the control of the party.

Initially, a more centralized unitary government will be established, and later, based on capacity and performance, power may be delegated to different layers of government. As we want all the people of Arakan to benefit from the fruits of future economic growth, our economic policy will generally be welfare-oriented.

There is a severe resource crunch in Arakan in terms of almost all commodities except food grains and vegetables. How do you plan to tackle this situation?

Our people are immensely brave and resilient. The ULA/AA could not have achieved this without their support and courage. We have experienced war for over six years now, which has been a very difficult time for all people in Arakan, mainly due to trade, transportation, and travel blockages imposed by the junta.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that we have now overcome the most difficult period in our recent history, and with Arakan in our hands, it is our responsibility to shape its future. We have rice, vegetables, and fish, which are sufficient to provide food for our people temporarily. As fighting is ongoing, there may still be unusual challenges for all communities in the region.

We believe that benevolent international actors and neighboring countries will stand together with us in this critical time on humanitarian grounds. Indeed, our government will do its best to expand trade opportunities along the borders with neighboring countries.

Paletwa's liberation and subsequent occupation by the Arakan Army has been opposed by some Chin resistance groups, including the Chin National Front. This issue could hamper unity among the groups opposed to the military regime. How do you plan to resolve this issue?

Paletwa is a lost territory for the people of Arakan. This region had been under the rule of the Arakanese polity for thousands of years. Since the fall of the Arakan Kingdom in 1784 CE, we have been colonized and oppressed by outside powers, and our destiny has been determined by those

colonizers. Consequently, we lost some core parts of our land, not just peripheries.

Under both Burmese dynastic and British colonial rules, this region was a part of Arakan. However, after Myanmar gained independence, the U Nu government unilaterally severed this territory for their own political motives and gains, without the consent of the Arakanese. Despite being nominally separated from Arakan, the administration of the area historically derives from Arakan, and the junta's "Western Regional Command" controlled the region.

The people and region of Paletwa are historically, geographically, culturally, and socioeconomically connected to Arakan. Since we established our military presence, our primary concern has been to protect the local population, even during armed clashes. Now that we have liberated the area, the key goal of our administration is to provide essential public services to the local population. Additionally, we aim for the local residents to participate more in the current administration and develop their own areas independently.

Currently, we need to stabilize and secure the Paletwa region so that important infrastructure projects like the Kaladan Project can be implemented and regulated in

a timely and safe manner. The development from this economic investment will benefit not only the local population but also India, Arakan, and other stakeholders in the region.

At the same time, we do not want the Paletwa issue to escalate into confrontation and conflicts between the Arakanese and certain actors from neighboring Chin state. As we are now building better relations and fostering a spirit of brotherhood with our Chin brothers through the “Chin Brotherhood,” we are confident that we can resolve the issue peacefully and amicably.

What kind of a future do you envisage for Arakan? Will it continue to be a part of Myanmar?

The key objective of the ULA/AA is to achieve national self-determination for the people and region of Arakan. We envision building a confederated state that maintains beneficial relations with other governments in Myanmar. We hope other key stakeholders in Myanmar will be able to accommodate our objectives. Our first priority is to create Arakan as a sovereign, strong, peaceful, prosperous, and dignified region where residents from all communities enjoy equal rights and adhere to the same responsibilities.

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