



The Arakan Army's Journey:
From Rebels to Rulers and A New
Arakan Paradigm


Center for Arakan Studies

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The Center also intends to address the policy gaps in Arakan and Myanmar in general through analysis and recommendations in favor of democratic policy change and common solutions. The Center publishes a series of monthly reports, along with the policy briefing issues related to Arakan affairs, on its website and through various publications.

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Executive Summary

- The people and region of Arakan have a long history of political independence and anti-colonial struggles since 1785, when its last dynasty was overthrown. The Arakan Army (AA), founded by Twan Mrat Naing and a small group of Arakanese youths in April 2009, aims to establish an “Arakan Nation” through the “Way of Rakhita.”
- The AA originated in Kachin state along the border with China, where political challenges in Arakan provided fertile ground for the group to expand in strength and size. Significant events contributing to this growth include the 2009 and 2015 Kokang wars, the breakdown of a 17-year ceasefire in Kachin state in 2011, and the 2012 communal violence in Rakhine state.
- Before 2015, the AA was not a major player in the peace process under President U Thein Sein’s administration nor a dominant force in Arakan politics. However, its presence at the 2014 Arakan National Conference (ANC) and subsequent armed clashes in 2015 bolstered its popularity among the local population. The group was excluded as a signatory member from the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement.
- The failure of the NLD leadership to accommodate the Arakan National Party (ANP), which had won the majority in Rakhine state elections, fueled support for armed struggle in Arakan. Escalating armed clashes since 2018, and the joint response by the NLD and Myanmar military, thrust the AA into the forefront of Arakan politics and as a critical actor in the nationwide peace process.
- Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the ULA leadership capitalized on the ensuing political turmoil to navigate among various divisive actors nationwide. The ULA supported several newly emerged anti-military coup resistance forces, particularly in the Sagaing, Magway regions, and Chin state bordering Arakan. By mid-2024, the ULA/AA emerged not only as the dominant military and political force in Arakan but also as a key player in Myanmar’s national politics.

Part I: Introduction

A. Background of Arakan

Arakan, known as Rakhine State, situated on the eastern bank of the Bay of Bengal and connected to other parts of Myanmar by the Arakan Roma Mountain range, is a region marked by profound political complexities and socio-economic issues. These complexities have been exacerbated by escalating communal violence since 2012, leading to armed confrontations, significant displacement, food insecurity, and disrupted livelihoods. Particularly notorious was its status since 2017 as a hotspot for the Rohingya crisis and the emergence of armed movements such as the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA). Due to its strategic significance as a connecting hub for regional powers, the region has attracted substantial foreign investments from China and India¹.

The Rakhine people, also known as Arakanese, constitute one of Myanmar's prominent ethnic groups, with an estimated population of 3 to 4 million (3.22 million according to the Ministry of Immigration and Population of Myanmar in 2015²). The region is ethnically diverse, encompassing groups such as the Arakanese, Rohingya, and other double minority communities³, all facing unique challenges within Myanmar's complex socio-political landscape⁴. Geographically, Rakhine State shares borders with Bangladesh and internally borders Chin State, as well as the regions of Magway, Bago, and Ayeyarwady. It covers an estimated area of 36,778 square kilometers and comprises 17 townships, with Sittwe serving as its capital city⁵.

Despite its geographical advantages and cultural richness, the Arakan Region has a history of enduring prolonged and recurrent conflicts. Notably, the 2012 communal violence between Muslim and Buddhist communities in northern and central Rakhine State marked a significant turning point, followed by armed conflicts involving the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Myanmar military in 2016-17. The ongoing armed conflicts since 2018 between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military, now known as the State Administration Council (SAC) regime, have further exacerbated regional development and peace⁶. Amidst these conflicts, the resurgence of Rakhine nationalism, rooted in the historical grievances dating back to the fall of the independent Kingdom of Arakan to Bamar

¹Center for Arakan Studies. (2023, June 15). *The Investments of China and India in Rakhine State: The Perspectives of Rakhine Stakeholders on Ground in Post-Coup Myanmar*. CAS, Issue Brief. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/23/02/ibr_02-june_23.html

² Department of Population Ministry of Immigration and Population. (2015, May). *Rakhine State*. UNFPA Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Rakhine%20State%20Census%20Report%20-%20ENGLISH-3.pdf>

³Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, February). *Forgotten Voices: Addressing Challenges Faced by the Double Minority Groups in Arakan*. CAS, Issue Brief. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/01/ibr_01-feb_24.html

⁴Htoo Htet Naing and Kyaw Zin Lin, Edited by Radka Antalíková, PhD, "Hidden Truths of the Invisible: The Experiences of Double Minorities in Northern Rakhine State during Violent Conflict", PLRI, September, 2019. (Accessed: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/myanmar/15642.pdf>.)

⁵Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, February). *Forgotten Voices: Addressing Challenges Faced by the Double Minority Groups in Arakan*. CAS, Issue Brief. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/01/ibr_01-feb_24.html

⁶Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, February). *Forgotten Voices: Addressing Challenges Faced by the Double Minority Groups in Arakan*. CAS, Issue Brief. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/24/01/ibr_01-feb_24.html and See, Myint, M. (n.d). *Rakhine State: A Snapshot of Child Wellbeing*. Scribd. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.scribd.com/document/375483107/Rakhine-State>

King Bodawpaya of the Konbaung Dynasty on December 31, 1784, underscores a profound longing for the region's former independence⁷.

B. Background of Arakan Army (AA)

The Arakan Army (AA) was founded by Twan Mrat Naing and 25 comrades in April 2009 along the Myanmar-China border in Kachin State, with support from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The political objective is to establish an “Arakan Nation” through the “Way of Rakhita,” an ideology that embodies the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of sovereignty to the people of Arakan. The Arakan Army (AA) began its conflict with the military in northern Rakhine State in 2015. An escalation of hostilities by the AA started in late 2018 and continued until the first week of November 2020, just three months before the military coup⁸. Major-General Twan Mrat Naing, the leader of the AA, has expressed a desire for “confederation status” for Arakan, similar to the status enjoyed by the United Wa State Army⁹. Indeed, the power dynamics in Rakhine State have been significantly reshaped by the AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), over the past decade. After serious military confrontations with the Myanmar military from 2015 to 2020, it led to an informal ceasefire in November 2020, allowing the AA to consolidate power by establishing and expanding its parallel administration. Although tensions resurfaced in late 2021 and conflict resumed in 2022, another fragile ceasefire was established in November 2022.

Despite being labeled a terrorist organization by the Tatmadaw and the NLD-led government, the AA's status shifted after the military coup in February 2021, with both the junta and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) retracting the terrorist label. However, the AA has maintained its support for anti-junta forces¹⁰. The growth of the AA can be attributed to four main factors¹¹. Firstly, the AA's young, educated leadership, including Maj. Gen. Twan Mrat Naing and Brig. Gen. Nyo Twan Aung, has effectively expanded the organization. The second factor is its strategic political mobilization through initiatives like the "Arakan Dream 2020," which has consistently galvanized support and aimed for greater autonomy. Thirdly, the greater support of Rakhine people for the AA has been driven by constrained political space and government actions. Lastly, AA's strategic alliance-building with other ethnic armed groups, particularly along the Myanmar-China border, has provided a crucial resource base enabling the AA to maintain and expand its activities and formulate its goals.

⁷Myint, S. A. (2019, February 7). *Rakhine nationalism and the rise of the Arakan Army*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-nationalism-and-the-rise-of-the-arakan-army/>

⁸Hlaing, K. H. (2023, April 21). *Understanding the Arakan Army* • Stimson Center. Stimson Center. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.stimson.org/2023/understanding-the-arakan-army/>

⁹Myint, S. A. (2019, February 7). *Rakhine nationalism and the rise of the Arakan Army*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-nationalism-and-the-rise-of-the-arakan-army/>

¹⁰Leider, J. P. (2024, February 27). *The Arakan Army: Challenges for Rakhine State's Rising Ethnonational Force*. Cambridge University Press, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/southeast-asian-affairs-2023/DE361A03659BE3747E5025A6B502178B>

¹¹Hlaing, K. H. (2023, April 21). *Understanding the Arakan Army* • Stimson Center. Stimson Center. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.stimson.org/2023/understanding-the-arakan-army/>

Interestingly, beyond domestic conflict, the ULA/AA is involved in broader issues, including border disputes with Bangladesh, Rohingya repatriation, and the geopolitical interests of China and India, as mentioned above. Despite these complexities, due to its strong leadership and decisive ways, the group's success and recruitment efforts have strengthened its position. However, it continues to face ongoing challenges in its role as defender of the Rakhine people amidst these complex issues¹².

The current paper intends to address and cover the narratives of the AA's emergence and growth in Arakan during the two previous governmental periods in Myanmar and the subsequent military coup in early 2021. By exploring the AA's historical evolution, military activities, political engagement, and administrative structures, the report traces its development under the USDP administration (2011-2015), including its involvement in the Kachin War and the 2015 Kokang Offensive, and its transformations during the NLD administration (2015-2020), focusing on its political stance, military actions, and response to the Rohingya Crisis.

This paper also aims to examine the AA's judicial and administrative developments after the 2021 military coup, highlighting its interactions with the National Unity Government (NUG) and State Administration Council (SAC) regime, and its prominence and achievements through Operation 1027 in 2024. By analyzing mainly secondary data from official AA websites, local news agencies, reports, and analyses on domestic and international platforms, including primary observations from the CAS team, the report provides a comprehensive understanding of the AA's ascent and its impacts in the region. Through these insights, the primary aim of this report is to uncover the power dynamics and political implications that the AA has brought to Myanmar, particularly in Arakan politics during the previous decades of quasi-democratization and the subsequent turmoil nationwide.

¹²Leider, J. P. (2024, February 27). *The Arakan Army: Challenges for Rakhine State's Rising Ethnonational Force*. Cambridge University Press, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/southeast-asian-affairs-2023/DE361A03659BE3747E5025A6B502178B>

Part II: Emerging Years of the Arakan Army: USDP Administration (2011-15)

After its founding in 2009, the leaders of the Arakan Army (AA) encountered a new political environment in Myanmar, shaped by the pre-planned 2008 constitution drafted by the Myanmar military. The first general election in over 50 years of single-party and military dictatorship was held on November 7, 2010. The prominent opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by imprisoned Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was not allowed to participate. On the Arakan electoral front, the Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), a key NLD ally, also chose to boycott the election. However, a new entity called the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) was formed to participate and secure a majority of seats in the state parliament, as well as becoming one of the largest parties at the national level. Meanwhile, in the nationwide competition, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), a military-proxy party, won the majority of seats in the national parliament and formed the first quasi-civilian government. Former Prime Minister and Ex. General U Thein Sein assumed the presidency, while other top generals, appointed by former dictator U Than Shwe, took key positions such as chairpersons of the upper and lower houses at the national level. Similarly, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing was appointed as Commander-in-Chief of the military (Tatmadaw) in March 2011, solidifying its role as the most powerful military and political institution in the country.

Against this backdrop, armed conflict erupted in Kachin State on June 9, 2011, following the breakdown of a 17-year ceasefire in 1994. Hostilities commenced when Myanmar military forces attacked Kachin Independence Army (KIA) positions along the Taping River, east of Bhamo near the Tapin hydroelectric plant¹³. Newly trained AA soldiers seized the opportunity to support their Kachin ethnic counterparts and gain combat experience. An analytical piece from December 2018 highlighted the AA's early involvement in battles in Kachin and northern Shan States:

“Trained and supported by the Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), the AA gained battlefield experience fighting alongside these groups in Kachin and northern Shan States. They also participated in joint operations with the PSLF/TNLA and MNDAA, groups likewise trained and supported by the KIO/KIA. Together, these four groups often operated under the banner of the Northern Alliance.”

While accumulating battlefield experience and securing military supplies from allied territories, AA leaders faced a crucial logistical challenge: transporting soldiers, ammunition, and other military equipment into Arakan. Historically, this logistical hurdle has posed a significant challenge to Arakan's revolutionary movements. Unlike other ethnic armed groups active along the borders with China and Thailand, Arakan's neighbors are India (via the Paletwa region) and Bangladesh—countries generally opposed to ethnic revolutionary

¹³ BNI. (2012, December 18). *More war than peace in Myanmar*. BNI Online. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/more-war-than-peace-in-myanmar>

movements due to their own internal insurgency issues, such as northeastern insurgencies in India and Chittagong insurgencies in Bangladesh. Consequently, past Arakanese revolutionary movements, like the Arakan Independence Organization (AIO) and the Arakan Liberation Party/Army (ALP/ALA) in the 1960s and 70s¹⁴ and subsequent movements in the 1990s, including the Arakan Army, struggled to overcome this logistical challenge after Myanmar's independence.

Being aware of this difficulty, the current AA leaders changed their strategy and tactics. Instead of moving all soldiers and weapons in one or two times, the AA leaders sent their troops group by group using all available channels from Kachin or Northern Shan state. Weapons and ammunition are also reported to move by land and water challenges via Thailand, India, or Bangladesh. Their first target area is the region of Paletwa, the former Arakan hill tract areas, and now the southernmost township of Chin state bordering both Mizoram state of India and Chittagong Hill Tract areas of Bangladesh. Subsequently, an armed clash with Bangladesh Border Guard (BBG) took place in August 2015.

An AA statement at that time mentioned that a two-hour-long clash began around 10 am with both sides opening fire near the Boro Modak area of Thanci in Bandaran district near the border¹⁵. The armed clash happened because BBG soldiers confiscated several horses used to carry supplies belonging to the AA's political wing. Later, following that incident, in order to avoid further confrontation with Dhaka authority, the AA's vice-chief Dr. Nyo Twan Awng said that the group was going to send a letter of regret to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. It seemed the AA leaders wanted to avoid another side of animosity while they were preparing for more intensive armed clashes with Burmese authorities in Naypyidaw.

During the quasi-democratic transition in the country, AA's participation in political activities, especially related to the Arakan issues, is also well-reported. One of the most prominent events was the five-day 'Arakan National Conference' (ANC), held in Kyaukphyu in early May 2014; the event called for the creation of an Arakan National Defence Army (ANDA) in Rakhine state¹⁶. The vice-chief of the AA, Nyo Twan Awng, along with his team, presented at the event. Regarding the call for the formation of the national army group, one key organizer claimed:

"This decision came out from our analysis of the current situation in our region. This decision represents all people in Arakan and the government has to seriously consider it."

Before the event, on the 5th anniversary of the AA on April 10, 2014, the AA's Chief Twan Mrat Naing spoke out that there is a need to formulate 'the Way of Rakhita' that can be followed by all Arakanese in order to solve the current difficulties and problems, including

¹⁴ Hanieh, A., & Lynn, K. (2019, December 18). *Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier>

¹⁵ Myint, M. (2015, August 28). *Arakan Army Calls for Calm After Bangladesh Border Clash*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arakan-army-calls-for-calm-after-bangladesh-border-clash.html>

¹⁶ Weng, L. (2014, May 2). *Arakan Conference Calls for Creation of 'Arakan Army'*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arakan-conference-calls-creation-arakan-army.html#google_vignette

future challenges¹⁷. In order to fill this gap, he added that the group has fully supported the upcoming ANC held in Kyaukphyu. On another front, the AA started to become more well-known when its troops participated in the 2015 Kokang war in its allied areas. Among the several ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, the Chinese ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), along with the AA, were regarded as smaller groups with very little armed activity and limited controlled areas during the peace environment under the U Thein Sein administration. The government rejected these groups from being accepted as full participants similar to the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) because they were formed or reformed after the ratification of the 2008 constitution and had no controlled area. Consequently, when the MNDAA, an informal ally of the AA at that time, waged an offensive war against the Myanmar military from February to June 2015, the participation of AA troops was well-reported. Even though the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) rejected their involvement following accusations by the Myanmar military, the AA leaders did not deny their participation in the fighting¹⁸. This 2015 Kokang Offensive led the MNDAA to retake some territories under their control at the end of the war.

However, the role of the AA in the peace process under U Thein Sein's administration was quite minimal. As of mid-2014, the group was reported to have only around 1,500 troops, which increased to more than 2,500 by September 2015. When a prominent alliance of ethnic armed groups known as the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) was founded on February 16, 2011¹⁹, the AA did not join or get accepted as a member of the council, although the clear reason for this remains unknown. Instead, another Rakhine armed group known as the Arakan National Council/Arakan Army (ANC/AA) was accepted as a member of the council. When the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed in November 2015 under U Thein Sein's administration, the AA was rejected as a signatory member, and instead, another Rakhine armed group, Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan Liberation Army (ALP/ALA), was allowed. The key reasons behind this rejection were that the Myanmar military refused to accept it because the group's tenure was short and would only allow the group to participate in the peace process after disarmament.

On the military front, the AA reported experiencing the first armed clashes against the Myanmar military in Kyauktaw township. Regarding the armed clashes, the AA's chief said in June 2015²⁰: "It is not very good. They [the Burma Army] still pursue the approach of annihilation to solve the problem [of armed ethnic resistance in Arakan State]. But it is not difficult for us because we have already taken it into consideration. The situation is not very difficult. But I think the fighting could become more intense." When asked about the upcoming general election in November 2015, he remarked that he supported the Arakan National Party (ANP) but believed the latter needed a better organizational structure."

¹⁷Rakhine Tatmataw. (2014, April 25). *5th Anniversary of Arakan Army*. Rakhine Tatmataw. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWhIW9245Ks&t=1451s>

¹⁸ Khine, T. A., & Aung, M. (2015, February 27). *Wa, Mongla Armies Deny Helping Kokang Rebels Fight Myanmar Military*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved June 30, 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/denial-02272015172721.html>

¹⁹ (Burma, United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) members that have signed ceasefire agreements with Naypyitaw "will be reviewing their agreements, 2012)

²⁰ (Pwint N. L., "I Want to Stress that We Are Not the Enemy", 2015)

Part-III: Growing up and Consolidation: NLD Administration (2016-2020)

Myanmar transitioned through a process of quasi-democratization following the 2015 general election, which saw victory handed to the oppositional civilian political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi. During the NLD administration, the presence of the AA became more prominent due to its growing military activities and intensive armed clashes against the Myanmar military from 2018 to 2020, before the military coup in 2021. During that period, it is fair to claim that the AA gained popular support from the Arakan people, through its official declarations of the “Arakan Dream” and “Way of Rakhita”, and more importantly, due to the dissent towards the NLD government's negative response to the AA.

The decisive political objectives and precise strategies declared by the AA were factors that attracted the hearts and minds of the Arakan people and mobilized the mass youth population to join its nationalist movement. In 2016, the political wing of the AA, the United League of Arakan (ULA), was founded with Twan Mrat Naing as the president and Nyo Twan Aung as the head of the Secretariat²¹. In May 2019, the “Way of Rakhita” and “Arakan Dream” were officially introduced by ULA/AA leader Twan Mrat Naing in a speech published on its official website.

According to his speech²², the “Way of Rakhita” represents the fight for the self-determination of the Arakanese people and for building an independent and dignified Arakanese society that can be represented on the global stage. “Arakan Dream” aims to implement the desires and dreams of the Arakanese people, focusing on the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan sovereignty. Furthermore, “Arakan Dream 2020” urges people to believe in themselves as citizens of an independent Arakan and to contribute to the ULA/AA-led nationalist movement. The speech also highlighted the historical loss of sovereignty after the fall of the Arakan Kingdom and called for solidarity under unified national leadership with righteous ways.

In January 2019, the AA chief responded to media outlets stating a preference for [a confederation of states] similar to the status of the AA's ally, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), adding that a confederation was “better” than federalism and more appropriate to the history of Arakan and the hopes of the Arakanese people²³. This stance suggests a desire for minor sovereign polity that may have treaty relations with the Burmese government while enjoying substantial autonomy in regional affairs and development. Alongside these aspirations, the manpower of the ULA/AA has grown significantly, estimated at 1,500 troops

²¹ David Scott Mathieson, “The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State” (United States Institute of Peace, November 2020), 6.

²² “AA Army's General Speech,” The official website of the Arakan Army, May 3, 2019, <https://www.arakanarmy.net/post/aa-army-s-general-speech>.

²³ Nan Lwin Hnint Pwint, “Confederation the Only Option for Arakanese People, AA Chief Says,” The Irrawaddy, January 11, 2019, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/confederation-option-arakanese-people-aa-chief-says.html>.

in 2014²⁴, 3,000 in 2016²⁵, and between 6,000²⁶ and 10,000²⁷ by May 2020. Moreover, support for the group has been widespread among the local Arakanese population, including politicians and the diaspora community.

In addition to these mobilizing factors, the grievances voiced by the ULA/AA also resonate with the Arakanese people in terms of discriminatory political factors. Resentment grew more pronounced under the NLD government, which the people expected to treat them fairly. Politically, during the 2015 general elections, the NLD appointed an NLD party member as chief minister of Rakhine State, despite the Arakan National Party (ANP), the most dominant Rakhine ethnic political party, winning the majority of seats²⁸. This decision generated a sense of betrayal among the Rakhine and deepened distrust in electoral politics as a vehicle for change. Subsequently, the NLD largely ignored the ANP, complicating its ability to demonstrate any positive results from its representation in the national parliament, despite holding the seat of deputy speaker of the Upper House²⁹.

In 2018, the NLD government refused to permit the commemoration of the '233rd Anniversary of the Fall of the Arakan Kingdom', leading to a public demonstration in Mrauk U. However, the protest was cracked down upon, resulting in the deaths of seven protestors³⁰. The commemoration was later held in Rathedaung township, where prominent Rakhine nationalist politician Dr. Aye Maung and author Wai Hun Aung were arrested for delivering speeches advocating for Rakhine sovereignty and supporting the ULA/AA. Dr. Aye Maung, former chairman of the ANP, cited that "he was told by an Arakanese grandma that Bamar people consider Rakhine people as slaves and do not want to give equal rights," defending armed struggle, which led to his sentencing to 22 years for high treason and criminal incitement³¹. Furthermore, when the 2020 general election was announced, more than 1.5 million people in Rakhine State were politically disenfranchised due to the unsafe environment caused by armed clashes³². Although armed groups agreed four days after the elections to call for elections in areas of Rakhine State where voting had been canceled, due to the mediation of Japan's government special envoy for national reconciliation in Myanmar, Yohei Sasakawa, with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the Election Commission, the voting rights of affected people were not restored³³.

On the military front, with widespread support from the local population, especially in the northern and central townships of Arakan, the AA intensified guerrilla warfare against

²⁴Arakan Conflict: The Arakan Army Assertiveness or an Act of Self-Defense?", 9 January 2019

²⁵ "Deciphering Myanmar's Peace Process: A Reference Guide 2016", Burma News International, January 2017 (available on its web site).

²⁶ The 6,000 estimate is found in several sources. For instance, see "Shadowy Rebels Extend Myanmar's Wars", 11 June 2017

²⁷ Iftekharul Bashar, "Arakan Army: Myanmar's New Front of Conflict", Rajaratnam School of International Studies ('RSIS') Commentary, No. 140 (2019), 12 July 2019 ('Bashar, 2019') (available on the RSIS' web site). Other reported numbers lie in between, such as the 7-8,000 mentioned in Subir Bhaumik, "India's Rakhine Dilemma", Mizzima, 17 April 2020.

²⁸ Moe Myint, "ANP Stages Walkout Over NLD Chief Minister for Arakan State," The Irrawaddy, March 28, 2016, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/anp-stages-walkout-nld-chief-minister-arakan-state.html>.

²⁹ David Scott Mathieson, "The Arakan Army in Myanmar: Deadly Conflict Rises in Rakhine State" (United States Institute of Peace, November 2020), 6.

³⁰ "Myanmar Police Shoot Dead Seven Protesters in Troubled Rakhine," Reuters, January 18, 2018.

³¹ Leider, "The Arakan Army, Rakhine State and the Promise of Arakan's Independence."

³² Fishbein Emily and Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, "Vote Cancellations Trigger Outrage among Myanmar Minority Voters," Aljazeera, October 28, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/28/vote-cancellations-trigger-outrage-among-myanmar-minority-voters>.

³³ ICG, "From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State."

the Myanmar military starting in mid-2015. Initial clashes were relatively small-scale skirmishes limited to Paletwa and Buthidaung townships. However, these skirmishes grew in size and intensity by late 2018. Between September and December 2018, there were twenty-five clashes between the AA and Myanmar military forces. On January 1, 2019, the AA allegedly carried out an improvised explosive device (IED) attack on the convoy of the Rakhine State chief minister near Mrauk U. Then, on January 4, 2020, Myanmar's Independence Day, over one hundred AA soldiers participated in coordinated assaults on Border Guard Police (BGP) stations in Buthidaung Township, with around fifty involved in a fourth assault. These numbers were significant for insurgent attacks in Myanmar, indicating that the AA's strength in the western borderlands had already reached several thousand fighters. These military activities extended into the main towns and peri-urban areas of northern Rakhine State, including Mrauk U, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Myebon, Rathedaung, and Ponnagyun, which are considered the heartland of the ethnic Rakhine population.

The AA's attacks on the four police stations on January 4, 2019, marked a turning point, transforming it from a manageable nuisance into a serious security threat. Since then, the AA has conducted hundreds of operations across more than nine townships in northern Rakhine and has been steadily expanding into southern Rakhine townships. In early 2020, the AA released data claiming it had engaged in 681 engagements lasting longer than thirty minutes in 2019, inflicting a total of 3,562 casualties on government security forces³⁴. In response to the growing operations of the AA, the NLD government aligned closely with the Myanmar military. A day after the January 4, 2019, attacks on the four BGP bases, terrorism charges were filed against the four leaders of the AA: Twan Mrat Naing, Nyo Twan Aung, Kyaw Han, and Khaing Thukha, carrying potential sentences ranging from ten years to life imprisonment. On July 4, 2019, a government court charged these four senior AA leaders in absentia under the 2014 counterterrorism law, which could result in three- to seven-year prison terms³⁵. In March 2020, President U Win Myint declared that the actions and objectives of the AA, its political wing the United League of Arakan (ULA), and affiliated groups and individuals "have constituted a danger to law and order, peace and stability of the country and public peace" and are unlawful under Section 15 (2) of the Unlawful Associations Act. The order was signed by Minister of Home Affairs Lieutenant General Soe Htut, who also serves as chairman of the Central Committee for Counterterrorism.

Furthermore, alliance formation is one of the AA's key strategies for gaining power. Born in border areas with China, the AA is a member of three key ethnic armed group coalitions. Firstly, the AA became a member of the Northern Alliance-Burma (NA-B) along with four other groups (KIA, MNDAA, and TNLA) when it was formed in December 2016. Secondly, the AA joined a more significant political coalition known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) led by the powerful armed group, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), established in April 2017. The AA, along with other members such as KIA, MNDAA, TNLA, SSPP, and NDAA, participated as a founding member. Thirdly,

³⁴ See 2019 Combat Statistics on www.arakanarmy.net, January 4, 2020. There have also been numerous reports of wounded Tatmadaw personnel traveling on commercial airlines from Sittwe to Yangon in 2019 and 2020

³⁵ Wai Mar Tun and Min Thein Aung, "Myanmar Charges Arakan Army Leadership under Counter-Terrorism Law," Radio Free Asia, July 8, 2019.

when the ‘Three Brotherhood Alliance’ (3BTAs), consisting of MNDAA, TNLA, and AA, was established in June 2019, it became a core member of a more organized military coalition.

Alliance formation			
Name of Coalition	Northern Alliance-Burma (NA-B)	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC)	Three Brotherhood Alliance’ (3BTAs)
Alliance Members	KIA, MNDAA, TNLA, AA	UWSA, KIA, MNDAA, TNLA, SSPP, NDAA, AA	MNDAA, TNLA, AA

In terms of inclusion in the formal peace process led by the NLD government, the AA, similar to the TNLA and MNDAA, was still excluded from participating in the 21st Century Union Peace Conference. This exclusion prompted these three groups to join forces with four other non-signatory Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to form the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC), aiming to push for a new peace negotiation framework. When the government's Peace Commission held informal talks with the AA, PSLF/TNLA, and MNDAA in Kunming, China, about the possibility of their participation in the peace conference, the groups showed a willingness to seek a political solution to the ongoing conflicts; however, armed struggle persisted.

The political stance of the ULA/AA during the 2016 and August 2017 Rohingya crisis, however, was observed to be largely marginal. When the armed and violent activities of the ARSA increased in 2016, especially in the townships of Buthidaung and Maungdaw bordering Bangladesh, the AA’s presence and prominence in these areas were less reported. When the Myanmar military responded disproportionately and ruthlessly against the Rohingya population in response to coordinated attacks by ARSA in August 2017, the AA’s armed activities in central townships of Arakan were minimal initially, except in the region of Paletwa. In December 2019, the AA, in coordination with the MNDAA and TNLA, released a statement supporting the ICJ case against Myanmar³⁶.

³⁶ Lynn, K. Y. (2019, 11 29). *Rebel coalition supports int'l lawsuits against Myanmar Members of Northern Alliance bloc of armed groups say they have evidence for prosecuting military for war crimes, genocide*. WORLD, ASIA - PACIFIC, ROHINGYA GENOCIDE CASE AT ICJ. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/rebel-coalition-supports-intl-lawsuits-against-myanmar/1658990>

Part-IV: From Rebels to Rulers: After the Military Coup

A. Installation of Judiciary and Administrative Activities

Following the military coup on February 1, 2021, the Arakan region notably avoided the widespread violence and clashes seen in other parts of Myanmar. While the junta focused on anti-coup efforts elsewhere, the AA and its political arm, the United League of Arakan (ULA), made efforts to establish parallel governance that now exercises de facto control over the region, primarily in its northern areas³⁷. During the initial ceasefire period with the junta starting from August 1, 2021, the AA took advantage to systematically handle judiciary and administrative matters, urging people to report criminal incidents in Rakhine State directly to them³⁸. By accepting complaints via email, VKontakte (VK), and Telegram while safeguarding personal information, the AA's judiciary aims to address various cases including violence, theft, and land disputes. This initiative has garnered local support and positioned the AA as a potential stabilizing force, promoting transparency and accountability within the ULA/AA. Judicial offices under AA control are now operational in the Arakan region, offering an alternative to the military courts of the junta, which are less trusted by locals³⁹.

Before these judicial efforts, the ULA/AA demonstrated significant influence during the Covid-19 pandemic by effectively enforcing a stay-at-home order until August 4, 2021, to curb the virus spread. Reports described enforcement measures such as patrols with bamboo sticks in Minbya and Kyauktaw, and punishments like sit-ups in Rathedaung for non-compliance with guidelines, which were generally well-followed by residents⁴⁰. On August 6, 2021, U Khine Murn Chun, president of the Mrauk-U Youth Association, praised the AA's use of physical measures to enforce the stay-at-home order, achieving full compliance in rural areas of Rakhine. He also noted the AA's effective control over both urban and rural areas, enforcing strict restrictions on street gambling and alcohol consumption in Mrauk-U⁴¹.

Furthermore, reports from Frontier Myanmar indicated that the AA's initial initiatives have been warmly welcomed by residents, civil society organizations, and prominent political figures. Kyauktaw resident U Zaw Win expressed support for the AA, citing a desire for governance that represents the interests of ethnic Rakhine people, which he felt had been neglected in recent years. Aligning with local desires for self-representation and effective leadership has strengthened the ULA/AA's authority and popularity⁴². This shift in governance dynamics in Rakhine State, with increasing reliance on ULA-operated courts over

³⁷ Nyane, K. M., & Whong, E. (2022, January 19). Arakan Army, not military junta, run the show in Myanmar's Rakhine state. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/arakan-army-01192022193040.html>

³⁸ DMG. (2021, August 3). ULA introduces a parallel justice system for Arakan State. DMG Newsroom, Sittwe. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.dmediag.com/news/3235-ula-introduces>

³⁹ Myanmar Now. (2021, August 3). ULA/AA to establish its own judicial system in Rakhine State. Myanmar Now. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state/>

⁴⁰ Myanmar Now. (2021, August 3). ULA/AA to establish its own judicial system in Rakhine State. Myanmar Now. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state/>

⁴¹ HLAING, K. H. (2021, August 6). Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/arakan-army-extends-administrative-grip-on-rakhine-state/>

⁴² HLAING, K. H. (2021, August 6). Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/arakan-army-extends-administrative-grip-on-rakhine-state/>

those of the military junta, was noted by former Myanmar lower house members and residents in a report from RFA in January 2022. The report highlighted decreasing crime rates in rural areas under AA control, while the junta's administrative and judicial authority weakened. Former MP Aung Thaung Shwe from Buthidaung mentioned these developments, while former MP U Pe Than from Myebon noted that the AA now controls over two-thirds of the state, leading to reduced operational effectiveness of military units.

Despite warnings from the junta about supporting the AA, Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, the junta's spokesperson, acknowledged a strong military-AA relationship. Meanwhile, Gen. Twan Mrat Naing of the AA expressed plans to incrementally reclaim the state's sovereignty⁴³. However, despite the junta removing the AA from the terrorist list, residents face continued legal risks from the military⁴⁴. Despite notable strides in administration and judiciary aimed at Rakhine's self-representation since the ceasefire in November 2020, over 200,000 displaced people in Rakhine and Chin states still cannot return home. Ongoing risks from unexploded landmines remain unresolved⁴⁵.

B. Administrative Structures, Functions, and Activities

As mentioned in the previous section, during a ceasefire agreement with the junta in November 2020 and capitalizing on the military's diversion towards anti-coup movements following its unlawful coup in 2021, the ULA/AA's administrative center extended its focus and influence from central Arakan to areas spanning from the Bangladesh border to southern Chin State and southern Rakhine State⁴⁶. Operating independently from the military junta in Naypyidaw, the AA strives for inclusive governance plans encompassing all residents in these regions, including Rohingya Muslims⁴⁷.

In pursuit of this goal, the AA enacted a judiciary law establishing a separate Justice Department distinct from Myanmar's military-controlled judicial system. Courts have been established at village-tract and district levels, with individuals found in violation of ULA/AA laws facing prosecution under this new framework. This initiative to create a parallel legal system under ULA's administration coincides with the ongoing informal ceasefire between the military and AA⁴⁸. However, since February 2022, community criticism of abuses by Arakan People Authority (APA), a body of ULA administration, administrators has prompted the ULA to take action against some lower-level administrators. While local media amplifies Rakhine community concerns, Rohingya complaints of bias and discrimination persist, albeit less prominently. Many Rohingya appreciate the inclusive rhetoric from ULA/AA leaders,

⁴³ Nyane, K. M., & Whong, E. (2022, January 19). *Arakan Army, not military junta, run the show in Myanmar's Rakhine state*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/arakan-army-01192022193040.html>

⁴⁴ Myanmar Now. (2021, August 3). *ULA/AA to establish its own judicial system in Rakhine State*. Myanmar Now. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state/>

⁴⁵ Myanmar Now. (2021, August 3). *ULA/AA to establish its own judicial system in Rakhine State*. Myanmar Now. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state/>

⁴⁶ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

⁴⁷ Hlaing, K. H. (2021, August 31). *Arakan Army Seeks to Build 'Inclusive' Administration in Rakhine State*. The Diplomat. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-seek-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/>

⁴⁸ Hlaing, K. H. (2021, August 31). *Arakan Army Seeks to Build 'Inclusive' Administration in Rakhine State*. The Diplomat. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-seek-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/>

but concerns arise due to the refusal to use the term 'Rohingya' and unclear repatriation plans. This highlights a gap between ULA/AA central leadership and local implementation, with ongoing reports of discrimination towards Rohingyas raising concerns about their future under ULA/AA governance in the region⁴⁹.

Nevertheless, ULA/AA's administrative and functional strategies deserve recognition. While other parts of Myanmar witness anti-coup forces boycotting and dismantling central government structures, the ULA/AA is adopting a different approach by assuming control from the grassroots level upwards. This signifies the emergence of new decentralized forms of governance. Moreover, adopting a hybrid approach by integrating Naypyidaw's structures with their own, AA's judiciary and administrative systems operate independently while utilizing some state resources strategically. This collaboration with the State Administration Council (SAC) has facilitated a bureaucratic presence with numerous local Rakhine staff, garnering strong local support. As a result, all junta-funded rural development projects are directed towards ULA/AA community initiatives. Furthermore, healthcare and education personnel appointed by SAC serve communities under ULA/AA facilitation and control. Additionally, SAC-appointed judges conduct trials in ULA/AA-administered courts across the region⁵⁰.

Besides these sectors, the ULA allows Naypyidaw's health and education systems to continue, but with greater influence over them. For instance, health services funded by Naypyidaw still operate in remote areas controlled by the ULA/AA, and SAC-funded schools' function in ULA/AA areas, where students raise the Rakhine flag and sing the Rakhine national anthem instead of Myanmar's. Health and education staff, while receiving SAC salaries, serve communities under ULA/AA direction and pay taxes to the ULA/AA⁵¹. Moreover, the undeniable fact is that in classrooms, the influence of Rakhine nationalism, specifically that of the Arakan Army, is evident. Over the last two years, the Rakhine national anthem authored by the Arakan Army has supplanted the Myanmar national anthem in government schools across numerous regions⁵².

In some areas, the same individuals serve as administrators for both the SAC and the ULA/AA, while in other places, different people hold these positions. They have access to both organizations and have to follow the rules. Therefore, there are overlapping phases and investigations involving ULA/AA and SAC presence in some urban areas, but it is common for ULA/AA and SAC police to collaborate on investigations and work together to resolve cases initially⁵³. However, it seems like the ULA/AA strategically takes advantage of administrative structures using some SAC-appointed individuals who are local residents.

⁴⁹ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

⁵⁰ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

⁵¹ Eugene Whong and Khin Maung Nyein 2022, 'Arakan Army, not military junta, run the show in Myanmar's Rakhine state,' *Radio Free Asia*, 19 January, Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/arakan-army-01192022193040.html>.

⁵² DMG. (2022, January 20). *Some schools opt for Arakha national anthem over its Myanmar counterpart*. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.dmediag.com/news/3933-ss0>

⁵³ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

Overall, ULA/AA governance in western Myanmar is characterized by a complex network that spans nearly every corner of the state, though not always visibly so.

Regarding the formation of bureaucratic bodies for administration, at the village level, the ULA has set up APA Village Administration Committees, usually composed of around 10 members. The specific members vary. A focal person or chair from each committee reports to higher administrative levels within the AA's military commands, which are divided into three tiers: Alpha, Victor, and Nova, each with three or four sub-levels. However, the problem lies in the lack of a public-facing administrative policy from ULA/AA. In forming committees for ethnic Rakhine villages, they include SAC-appointed village leaders, heads of hundred households, and educated young people in typical ways. However, in Rohingya villages in the region, the approach is more adaptable and flexible, reflecting ULA/AA's cautious stance towards Rohingya communities. This means they might include SAC-appointed village leaders, heads of hundred households, religious leaders, or other community elders⁵⁴. During 2021, out of 3,838 cases reported to the ULA, 1,900 were successfully resolved. In the first three months of 2022, through AA's judiciary actions, 1,845 cases were received, with 1,026 of them resolved by April⁵⁵. A resident of Ponnagyun township who filed a case with a ULA court told RFA that AA-administered courts handle cases more promptly compared to government courts, which often face delays⁵⁶.

Analyzing the far-reaching impact of these activities, due to rapid administrative expansion and unclear territorial boundaries, it's challenging to determine exactly how much land the Arakan Army controls. However, it appears they have de facto authority over 50 to 75 percent of Rakhine State. During these years, areas still under junta control have primarily included most cities in southern Rakhine, particularly in Gwa, Thandwe, Taungup, and Munaung townships. Conversely, most northern areas are under AA control, particularly rural areas of Mrauk U, Kyauktaw, Rathedaung, Buthidaung, and Ponnagyun townships. Border areas in Maungdaw Township and parts of central and southern Rakhine, such as Kyaukpyu, Taungup, and Ann townships, are more contested with competing power structures⁵⁷.

C. Navigating Public Criticism: Judicial and Administrative Interactions

As ULA administration grew, the people in Arakan replied on more than the SAC regime's administration. Regarding Rakhine State and law enforcement in the region, U Khaing Kaung San from the Wan Lark Foundation emphasized in a report by Frontier Myanmar the necessity of providing a venue for residents to seek justice, citing the inadequacies of the regime's judiciary and law enforcement in certain townships of Rakhine State. Additionally, in the same report, U Pe Than of the Arakan National Party observed that the ULA's administrative mechanisms were proving more effective than those of the regime

⁵⁴ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

⁵⁵ BNI. (2022, April 19). *Arakan Army Grows Up Quickly*. Burma News International. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/arakan-army-grows-quickly>

⁵⁶ Nyane, K. M., & Lipes, J. (2021, August 23). *Arakan Army Eclipsing Government in Administering Myanmar's Rakhine State Amid Cease-fire*. Radio Free Asia. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.rfa.org/english/new>

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group. (2022, June 1). *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Asia Report N°325. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/325-myanmar-rakhine-state.pdf>

council in the region, marking a return to the rule of law following conflicts with the military. Furthermore, under the increased administrative control and public services of the AA, Ma Su Mrat Htwe of the Rambree Youth Network emphasized residents' belief in and increased reliance on AA's assistance even before the recent election. Interestingly, she raised concerns over potential abuses of power at the local level by AA members, highlighting the need for accountability amid the growing legitimacy of ULA's governance in the region⁵⁸.

In February 2022, there were criticisms directed towards AA's judiciary. Western News, a Rakhine-based media outlet sympathetic to the ULA/AA, was among the first to voice concerns. It criticized the growing community dissatisfaction with ULA's judicial sector and its requirements⁵⁹. Subsequently, numerous reports surfaced of ULA/AA abuses against civilians, including nepotism, corruption, miscarriages of justice, land-grabbing, and unlawful executions. Reports indicated that while cases from all ethnic and religious communities were reported, media coverage primarily focused on grievances of the Rakhine community, which wields influence in western Myanmar's media⁶⁰. Moreover, the International Crisis Group's 2022 report added that despite the rise of AA bringing some benefits to the Rohingya community, such as improved access to services and freedom of movement, the community remains vulnerable, and its members generally fear criticizing the Arakan Army due to potential reprisals⁶¹.

In response to criticisms, ULA/AA spokesperson U Khaing Thu Kha stated at a press conference that instead of criticizing on social media, educated young people should actively participate. He strongly addressed issues within ULA/AA, such as poor human resources, corruption, and weaknesses in administering justice. He continued by acknowledging that abuses of power and decision-making weaknesses in administrative and judicial sectors may occur due to the aforementioned factors. Simultaneously, he encouraged educated youths to contribute positively to the administration of Rakhine State, urging them to improve the current situation by joining governance sectors established by AA⁶².

D. ULA's Interactions with the NUG, SAC, and Other Actors

The Arakan Army, which began as a small group of Arakanese revolutionaries, has grown into a significant force in regional governance and Myanmar's peace process. Its importance is highlighted by the congratulatory messages it received from the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) and several ethnic armed organizations on its 13th anniversary. This recognition underscores the AA's rising power and its prominent role in

⁵⁸ HLAING, K. H. (2021, August 6). *Arakan Army extends administrative grip on Rakhine State*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/arakan-army-extends-administrative-grip-on-rakhine-state/>

⁵⁹ Western News 2022, ရက်ချိုင်းပြည်သူ့အာဏာပိုင်အဖွဲ့ လက်အောက်ရှိ တရားရေးဌာနအချို့၏ အမှုဖြေရှင်းပေးမှုနှင့် တရားစီရင်မှုပိုင်းတို့၌ အမှုတချို့တွင် မကျေနပ်မှု ရှိနေ (There is dissatisfaction with the ULA/AA's Judicial Sector), 22 February, Retrieved June 15, 2024, from [https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/470409658098877?_cft__\[0\]=AZXnhGntCJE8xHM0Mh8gmHWX8AoGglvNd3tgo2YSeeS8HOps5m56_vcqctBJXh8out3O6egb1g4vHy3_YNQON_TQhnZffKj5IBPyLcTysittf4uq-HV-0FfONRj3AKY2gKps&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/470409658098877?_cft__[0]=AZXnhGntCJE8xHM0Mh8gmHWX8AoGglvNd3tgo2YSeeS8HOps5m56_vcqctBJXh8out3O6egb1g4vHy3_YNQON_TQhnZffKj5IBPyLcTysittf4uq-HV-0FfONRj3AKY2gKps&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R)

⁶⁰ COAR. (2023, September 27). *A Governance Tapestry: Layered Administrations and Revolutionary Service Delivery in Western Myanmar* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 19, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/27/a-governance-tapestry-layered-administrations-and-revolutionary-service-delivery-in-western-myanmar/>

⁶¹ International Crisis Group. (2022, June 1). *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Asia Report N°325. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/325-myanmar-rakhine-state.pdf>

⁶² Western News. (2022, March). အုပ်ချုပ်ရေး၊ တရားစီရင်ရေးမဏ္ဍိုင်များတွင် ခေတ်ပညာတက်လူငယ်များပါဝင်ရန် ULA/AA ဖိတ်ခေါ်။ WN. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.facebook.com/share/e72fH5qmsV5xkBoM/?mibextid=WC7FNe>

Myanmar's current situation and future prospects⁶³. The relationship between AA and the NUG can be characterized by a distance from the alliance between the NUG-led opposition and other ethnic armed groups, as AA primarily focuses on its own efforts to control Rakhine State⁶⁴. Despite sharing the goal of overthrowing the Tatmadaw, AA pursues its own objectives and approaches differ from those of the National Unity Government (NUG). This was evident in AA Commander Twan Mrat Naing's advice to his followers not to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which was the NUG's strategy against the junta in early 2021 during the initial phase of anti-coup protests. He emphasized that AA's revolution aimed to secure Rakhine self-determination. When the NLD-dominated Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw formed the NUG on April 16, 2021, Twan Mrat Naing declined their offer to join. By January 2022, he reiterated that AA/ULA would "remain at a distance from the ongoing struggle for democracy now in Burma," noting that Rakhine State had not benefited from past involvement in the Burmese democracy movement⁶⁵.

There was a cordial meeting between the NUG, and the Arakan People's Government led by ULA Chairman Twan Mrat Naing in May 2022; however, the NUG did not promise to meet AA's demand for confederate status for the region in a future democratic federation of Myanmar⁶⁶. Nevertheless, author Aung, K. H. (2022, June)⁶⁷ referred to the saying "my enemy's enemy is my friend" regarding AA's stance towards the NUG. This implies that AA should leverage the junta's opposition to the NUG as a common enemy, despite their differences. However, beyond this shared opposition, AA's strong objective remains achieving greater independence from the Burmese mainland. Despite strategic overtures towards the NUG, aligning with the Spring Revolution to counter Tatmadaw pressure, AA strategically maintains its independence and does not align closely with Burmese leadership⁶⁸.

While AA has become a major player in current local politics, both the NUG and other ethnic armed organizations seek closer ties with it. During AA's 14th anniversary, the NUG sent a congratulatory letter expressing a desire for closer collaboration to form a federal union of Myanmar. The letter also acknowledged the AA martyrs' sacrifices and their support for the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) through the anti-regime movement. The AA chief appreciated this gesture. While other ethnic armed organizations have formal alliances with the NUG, AA provides training and weapons to the PDFs⁶⁹. Despite invitations for cooperation from the NUG, it is undeniable that AA prefers to maintain its independence and prioritize Rakhine and Arakan nationalism over aligning closely with the Burmese leadership.

⁶³ BNI. (2022, April 19). *Arakan Army Grows Up Quickly*. Burma News International. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/arakan-army-grows-quickly>

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group. (2022, June 1). *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Asia Report N°325. Retrieved June 20, 2024, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/325-myanmar-rakhine-state.pdf>

⁶⁵ Parvez, A., Alam, S., & Ronnie, A. (2022, January 2). 'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas'. Prothom Alo English. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://en.prothomalo.com/opinion/interview/we-recognise-the-human-rights-and-citizen-rights-of-the-rohingyas>

⁶⁶ Leider, J. P. (2023). *Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March*. TOAEP. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/144-leider/>

⁶⁷ Aung, K. H. (2022, June). *Grievances, Identity Crisis, and Rising Nationalism: Understanding the ULA/AA's Political Aspirations after the Coup*. CSIS. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.csis.or.id/publication/grievances-identity-crisis-and-rising-nationalism-understanding-the-ulaaas-political-aspirations-after-the-coup/>

⁶⁸ The Irrawaddy. (2022, May 16). *Myanmar's Civilian Government Holds Talks with Arakan Army*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-civilian-government-holds-talks-with-arakan-army.html>

⁶⁹ The Irrawaddy. (2023, April 10). *Myanmar's Civilian Govt Seeks Closer Ties With Arakan Army on 14th Anniversary*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-civilian-govt-seeks-closer-ties-with-arakan-army-on-14th-anniversary.html#google_vignette

"Our relations with the NUG are good, and we are more interested in having friends than enemies. It would be good to have a lot of friends because the goal of our revolution is to build our country. At any time, we continue to be friends with all the organizations that are fighting for national liberation in Myanmar, in addition to NUG PDFs," AA spokesperson U Khaing Thu Kha mentioned⁷⁰.

Through the NUG's intentions to close with AA, there have been some tough relations after resuming the conflicts with the junta starting from November 2023. There were reports about Rohingya homes being burned, causing 45,000 Rohingya to flee. These incidents are now under investigation by UN Human Rights and UNHCR after the AA's capture of Buthidaung on May 17. In relation to this, NUG expressed concerns on May 21 about human rights violations by both junta troops and AA combatants against the Rohingya in Buthidaung Township⁷¹. The AA has requested NUG to limit its interference in Rakhine State matters, despite recognizing NUG's role in Myanmar's revolutionary struggle, according to AA commander-in-chief Major General Twan Mrat Naing. General Twan Mrat Naing mentioned in an interview with VOA that there are some disagreements with NUG's actions from AA while the country has high hopes for NUG. He then emphasized that AA has maintained good and positive relationships with NUG and allied with other resistance forces like Chin resistance forces, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), Ta'ang and Kokang ethnic armed organizations in northern Shan State, and others alongside in central Myanmar⁷².

Regarding the Arakan Army (AA) relations with other ethnic armed groups, it is part of a coalition known as the 'Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee' (FPNCC), which was established by the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in April 2017⁷³. It has praised the determination of anti-junta forces and, similar to other ethnic armed organizations, provided training and support to PDFs in Sagaing Division and Chin State⁷⁴. Furthermore, having alliances with ethnic armed organizations through AA liaison officers and troops has increased its significance and power, leading it to take on a quasi-national role that it did not initially seek⁷⁵.

On the other hand, AA, with its clear path of "Road to Rakhita," has different and strategic relations with SAC too. The relationship between the Arakan Army (AA) and the junta (SAC) has been tense and marked by strategic maneuvers. As opposed to inhumane actions, following the 2021 coup, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, including the AA, warned the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Army) to cease crackdowns on protesters or face support for the Myanmar Spring Revolution. This alliance conducted a joint attack on a police station in

⁷⁰ The Irrawaddy. (2022, June 14). *AA says its relations with NUG and military regime trending in opposite directions*. Development Media Group. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.dmediag.com/news/4596-nug-rs-aa>

⁷¹ BNI. (2024, June 5). *AA Urges NUG to Limit Intervention in Rakhine Affairs*. Burma News International. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/aa-urges-nug-limit-intervention-rakhine-affairs>

⁷² BNI. (2024, June 5). *AA Urges NUG to Limit Intervention in Rakhine Affairs*. Burma News International. Retrieved June 21, 2024, from <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/aa-urges-nug-limit-intervention-rakhine-affairs>

⁷³ Nyan Hlaing Lynn and Oliver Slow, "Mixed Results at Latest Panglong Peace Conference", *Frontier Myanmar*, 30 May 2017. An insightful analysis of the exclusion of the AA and other armed organizations from the peace process is given in Jason Gelbort and Martin Smith, *The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Myanmar Promoting Ethnic Peace or Streng*.

⁷⁴ The Irrawaddy. (2022, June 14). *AA says its relations with the NUG and military regime trending in opposite directions*. Development Media Group. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.dmediag.com/news/4596-nug-rs-aa>

⁷⁵ Leider, J. P. (2023). *Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March*. TOAEP. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/144-leider/>

Lashio Township, Shan State, on April 10, in response to deadly junta actions against protesters in Bago the previous day. Despite initial silence from the AA after the coup, reports from Rakhine sources in Kachin State indicate AA troops were already engaged in attacks against the Tatmadaw alongside northern allies like the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)⁷⁶. This showed that although AA follows its own political path, it will never support the barbarity of the junta against civilians.

On the AA's 12th anniversary on April 11, Twan Mrat Naing emphasized their commitment to political objectives and governance in Rakhine State, stressing a preference for their method of change over civil disobedience movements and street protests. He outlined the AA's shift from early revolutionary mobilization towards establishing governance institutions for public administration, judiciary, and security⁷⁷.

E. The August 2022 Clashes and Pathway for Humanitarian Ceasefire

From November 2020 until the August 2022 Offensive, the Arakan Army (AA) largely avoided armed confrontations with the junta (SAC), except when SAC forces entered AA-controlled areas. In November 2020, the AA and the Myanmar military agreed to an informal truce, maintaining a fragile peace for about a year. Starting from early 2022, however, the Myanmar military increased pressure by arresting civilians suspected of having ties to the AA, including those involved in AA's governance structures. This led to clashes again, breaking the already tense situations between them⁷⁸. One of the reasons for resuming armed conflicts after a ceasefire between SAC and AA might be that SAC is deeply troubled by the ULA/AA's assertive expansion of governance and afraid of recent efforts to increase its presence in Sittwe, the state capital, and along the commercially significant Myanmar-Bangladesh border, further straining relations and pushing both sides towards the likelihood of renewed, prolonged conflict⁷⁹.

By September, the Arakan Army (AA) had captured 36 military outposts and Border Patrol Police posts along the Bangladesh border and expelled junta troops from a tactical command base in Paletwa following a three-month siege⁸⁰. The AA caused substantial losses to the military by ambushing convoys carrying reinforcements and supplies in Maungdaw and Paletwa townships, resulting in numerous soldiers defecting to the AA⁸¹. The military's blockade of transport routes led to food shortages in northern Rakhine State, and the United

⁷⁶ Hlaing, K. H. (2021, April 14). *After Myanmar's Military Coup, Arakan Army Accelerates Implementation of the 'Way of Rakhita'*. The Diplomat. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/after-myanmars-military-coup-arakan-army-accelerates-implementation-of-the-way-of-rakhita/>

⁷⁷ Hlaing, K. H. (2021, April 14). *After Myanmar's Military Coup, Arakan Army Accelerates Implementation of the 'Way of Rakhita'*. The Diplomat. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/after-myanmars-military-coup-arakan-army-accelerates-implementation-of-the-way-of-rakhita/>

⁷⁸ COAR. (2023, September 28). *Situation Update: Arakan Army Attacks SAC in Northern Rakhine and Paletwa* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/28/situation-update-arakan-army-attacks-sac-in-northern-rakhine-and-paletwa/>

⁷⁹ COAR. (2023, September 28). *Situation Update: Arakan Army Attacks SAC in Northern Rakhine and Paletwa* - COAR. COAR Global. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/28/situation-update-arakan-army-attacks-sac-in-northern-rakhine-and-paletwa/>

⁸⁰ The Irrawaddy. (2024, September 26). *Myanmar Junta Shelling Kills Two Children in Northern Rakhine*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved July 1, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-shelling-kills-two-children-in-northern-rakhine.html>

⁸¹ The Irrawaddy. (2022, September 29). *Rakhine Residents Trapped and Going Hungry as Myanmar Military Blockades Villages*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/rakhine-residents-trapped-and-going-hungry-as-myanmar-military-blockades-villages.html>

Nations (UN) and international NGOs were asked to cease operations in six Rakhine townships. Unfortunately, the informal ceasefire in late November did not immediately lead to the reopening of these routes⁸².

In August 2022, the resumption of armed clashes led to civilian casualties and displacement, with one person killed and two injured in Rathedaung Township, causing over 700 residents to flee⁸³. The economic impacts worsened due to the Myanmar military blocking trade routes and cross-border trade with Bangladesh, leading to rising commodity prices and limited access to healthcare⁸⁴. Communities tried to stockpile supplies in anticipation of further conflict, and residents in Sittwe reported increased insecurity and crime, partly due to economic hardship and weak law enforcement⁸⁵. These humanitarian deteriorations alarmed AA, prompting a return to peaceful situations in Arakan to help residents re-establish their resilience. Therefore, the situation forced the ULA leadership to establish an informal and humanitarian ceasefire in late November 2022 with the SAC regime⁸⁶. However, effective cooperation remains challenging⁸⁷. This difficulty was compounded by a new humanitarian emergency caused by Cyclone Mocha, which struck the Arakan coast in mid-May 2022, inflicting humanitarian challenges that added to the ongoing crises⁸⁸.

Despite having that informal ceasefire agreement for humanitarian matters, Cyclone Mocha and the junta's blockages to humanitarian organizations worsened the vulnerability of affected societies in Arakan. Therefore, to help and increase humanitarian access to residents, AA has also inserted activities on that matter. However, while the ULA has made significant strides in enhancing its administrative and technical capacities in recent years, there remains ample room for further improvement in these areas. The ULA acknowledges the need for external assistance to enhance these capabilities and is open to suitable collaborations⁸⁹. Additionally, there is a pressing requirement for increased funding to adequately address humanitarian and public service needs in Rakhine. To streamline coordination efforts, the ULA has established a Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCCO), aimed at facilitating collaboration with both local and international non-governmental organizations. Organizations interested in supporting Rakhine's populace and fostering regional stability are encouraged to engage with this office. In brief, AA holds its own way of political strategy, strengthening its truce in Arakan with

⁸² Leider, J. P. (2023). *Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March*. TOAEP. Retrieved July 2, 2024, from <https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/144-leider/>

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<https://www.facebook.com/westernnewsagency/posts/pfbid02MCGzvKEHnHXzydsvgEouqb5XX2qjVywZEjRv81iwWoU5Fwn7TmMskrkNyM8Sbhl>

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<https://www.facebook.com/narinjara.info/posts/pfbid02zAwj155KG3suct7nYHFMFvXPquv2oqzh7eBi3j2X3oN3XfgX96x9nZsxtmNMoiy8l>

⁸⁵ COAR. (2023, September 28). *Situation Update: Arakan Army Attacks SAC in Northern Rakhine and Paletwa - COAR*. COAR Global. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://coar-global.org/2023/09/28/situation-update-arakan-army-attacks-sac-in-northern-rakhine-and-paletwa/>

⁸⁶ Hanieh, A., & Lin, N. (2023, June 29). *Assessing What is Happening in Arakan*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.tni.org/en/article/assessing-what-is-happening-in-arakan>

⁸⁷ Center for Arakan Studies. (2023, August). *A Comparative Analysis of the Post-Cyclone Scenarios of Mocha and Nargis in Myanmar*. Center for Arakan Studies. Retrieved July 3, 2024, from https://www.arakanstudies.org/ibr/23/03/ibr_03-aug_23.html

⁸⁸ Hanieh, A., & Lin, N. (2023, June 29). *Assessing What is Happening in Arakan*. Transnational Institute. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.tni.org/en/article/assessing-what-is-happening-in-arakan>

⁸⁹ Thida, M. (2024, March 29). *It's Time to Engage The Resistance Govt in Myanmar's Rakhine*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/its-time-to-engage-the-resistance-govt-in-myanmars-rakhine.html#google_vignette

influential border expansion, engaging in administrative and judiciary activities, and managing the humanitarian needs in the region.

Part V: A New Arakan Paradigm

A. "1027 Operation" and the AA's Military Campaign

The intermittent clashes between the AA and the junta military, combined with their lack of trust and the AA's stance on humanitarian matters, led to the further escalation of conflicts in November 2023. Before this, the situation in the region was relatively calm. However, the commencement of Operation 1027 in late October 2023, conducted by the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BTAs) in northern Shan State, garnered significant attention and debate due to its swift capture of Myanmar military bases and outposts⁹⁰.

Notably, the AA achieved substantial advantages from Operation 1027 through its efforts to control more territories, as explained by Dr. Aung Myo, a Myanmar soldier-turned political observer. As aimed, the Milestone-4 junta outpost in Maungdaw Township near the Bangladesh-Myanmar border, manned by Squadron 2 of the Border Guard Police (BGP), was recently seized by the AA⁹¹. Following this, they launched assaults on the Squadron-5 outpost, defended by junta forces using artillery fire from Maungdaw's urban areas. Before the conflicts spread to the region, there were ten BGP squadrons stationed along the Bangladesh-Arakan border, with two in Buthidaung Township and eight in Maungdaw Township. The Squadron-7 base in Kyein Chaung, Maungdaw Township, was AA's first achievement and captured BGP outpost in April.

The AA's spokesperson, Khaing Thukha, clarified during a press conference on March 4, 2024, that the AA's objective was not secession from Myanmar but rather the establishment of a state with a status akin to a confederation⁹². In another interview with Irrawaddy News in April 2024, he outlined the organization's achievements and ongoing objectives in the aftermath of the operation. He emphasized control over several key townships in Rakhine State, including Kyauktaw, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Myebon, Ramree, Pauktaw, Ponnagyun, and Rathedaung, as well as maintaining a presence in Paletwa Township in Chin State. The AA also expressed its focus on ensuring public safety by clearing landmines and providing essential supplies to local communities in the region⁹³.

Subsequently, local civilians continue to face challenges due to regime blockades and airstrikes, which the AA condemns as genocidal acts. Nonetheless, the AA and its people's goal remains to establish a confederal status for Arakan State under their policy of "Way of Rakhita," emphasizing local sovereignty and self-determination. While strategic cooperation with other forces supports their objectives, details about such cooperation remain

⁹⁰ Hlaing, K. H. (2024, February 19). *New Battlefield Emerging in Western Myanmar* | FULCRUM. Fulcrum.sg. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://fulcrum.sg/new-battlefront-emerging-in-western-myanmar/>

⁹¹ Myanmar Now. (2021, August 3). *ULA/AA to establish its own judicial system in Rakhine State*. Myanmar Now. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/ulaaa-to-establish-its-own-judicial-system-in-rakhine-state/>

⁹² Htun, N. S. S. (2024, March 7). *AA's goal can be shaped after Operation-1027*. CNI myanmar. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://cnimyanmar.com/index.php/english-edition/20839-aas-goal-can-be-shaped-after-operation-1027>

⁹³ Hein, Y. M. (2024, April 22). *War Between Arakan Army And Myanmar Military Enters 'Critical Phase'*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/war-between-arakan-army-and-myanmar-military-enters-critical-phase.html>

confidential. Over 15 years, the AA has garnered strong support from local populations united in their desire for liberation, which is the most essential foundation for its rise. Remarkably, Khaing Thukha emphasized that true freedom and safety in Myanmar can only be achieved by removing the current military regime, which he criticized as the last fascist army in the world, perpetuating oppression and denying basic rights to the people⁹⁴.

B. Impacts on Socioeconomic and Humanitarian Situations

Currently, intense fighting between the AA and the junta military in Rakhine State has led to local residents fleeing for safety. The situation causes devastating economic, social, and humanitarian factors in the region. UNICEF-Myanmar's report, "Humanitarian Situation in December 2023," expressed that in Rakhine State, all townships are grappling with extensive blockades, restricted movement, frequent arbitrary arrests, and artillery attacks, resulting in 37 civilian deaths and 121 injuries. Over 190 individuals have been detained, including humanitarian workers, amidst escalating tensions and deteriorating humanitarian conditions⁹⁵.

According to a report from Frontier Myanmar (April 4, 2024), Khaing Thu Kha, a spokesperson for the AA, informed that according to data from the group's HDCO, the conflict resulted in the displacement of over 300,000 individuals from November 13 to March 13⁹⁶. He also warned of a worsening displacement crisis in Rakhine State, citing critical shortages of food, medicine, and shelter, including health challenges among IDPs such as skin diseases and diarrhea exacerbated by blocked medical supplies. Movement restrictions imposed by the military council have hindered international aid efforts, prompting many organizations to leave. He urged international assistance through alternative means like cross-border aid to alleviate the IDPs' suffering effectively⁹⁷. The DMG, a Rakhine-based media outlet, also reported that out of the 200,000 refugees in AA-controlled areas, 80 percent are Muslims and 20 percent belong to the Arakanese and other minority groups. Despite the complex situation in Rakhine characterized by violence, the AA has asserted that the group is fulfilling its duty in public service responsibly. They claim to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to more than 500,000 refugees impartially, regardless of religious affiliation⁹⁸.

⁹⁴ Hein, Y. M. (2024, April 22). *War Between Arakan Army And Myanmar Military Enters 'Critical Phase'*. The Irrawaddy. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/war-between-arakan-army-and-myanmar-military-enters-critical-phase.html>

⁹⁵ Unicef Myanmar. (2024, January 10). *UNICEF Myanmar Humanitarian Situation Report No. 10: December 2023 - Myanmar*. ReliefWeb. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/unicef-myanmar-humanitarian-situation-report-no-10-december-2023>

⁹⁶ DMG. (2024, May 2). စစ်ရှိန်မြင်တက်နေသည့် ရခိုင်ဒေသတွင် အလုပ်လက်မဲ့ များပြားလာ။ Retrieved June 29, 2024, from https://web.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=831538589019739&id=100064908151155&mibextid=oFDknk&rdid=ZTsvt9Vx0dmCgUYF

⁹⁷ Aung, A. P. (2024, April 4). *Rakhine IDPs caught in the conflict and cut off from aid*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-idps-caught-in-the-conflict-and-cut-off-from-aid/>

⁹⁸ Aung, A. P. (2024, April 4). *Rakhine IDPs caught in the conflict and cut off from aid*. Frontier Myanmar. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-idps-caught-in-the-conflict-and-cut-off-from-aid/>

⁹⁸ Development Media Group. (2024, May 24). မောင်တောခရိုင်က စစ်ဘေးရှောင်နှစ်သိန်းခန့် အကူအညီလိုအပ်နေကြောင်း AA ထုတ်ပြန်။ Retrieved June 29, 2024, from https://www.dmgburmese.com/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%90%E1%80%84%E1%80%BA%E1%80%B8/advgeric.html?fbclid=IwZ_Xh0bgNhZW0CMTAAAR3ROECfSfzn-OK05sym91CiL8Fcnwd0OXd7Ivka68jRf0BJAS_IQWYWAvo_aem_ZmFrZWR1bW15MTZieXRlcw

The economic and social situations have worsened significantly. The conflict in Rakhine State has deepened unemployment issues, with fishing bans leaving fishermen unable to work. Despite some price reductions, many families still struggle with hunger due to widespread job losses⁹⁹. Government servants no longer receive salaries, and rice transport restrictions have pushed prices higher. Food intended for civilians ends up with military units, worsening food scarcity. Landmines threaten ethnic minorities' livelihoods, while bank closures hinder financial access, with high withdrawal fees adding to residents' economic burdens¹⁰⁰. Since the resumption of armed conflicts between junta forces and the Arakan Army (AA), Rakhine State faces severe shortages of food, medicine, fuel, and water, exacerbated by targeted attacks on hospitals and the economic downturn. Diseases like malaria and diarrhea are increasing, with tens of thousands at risk due to water scarcity, and 1.6 million people have lost access to hospital care. The internet shutdown hampers information flow and obscures war crimes, while over 38,000 students were enrolled in reopened schools in seven townships by late May¹⁰¹. All of these situations call for humanitarian assistance and international support for the residents' survival under the hardest circumstances.

Part-VI: Conclusion

The emergence and ascendance of the AA, led by its political wing, the ULA, has had a profound impact on the politics of Arakan in recent decades. The group was born out of the complex and critical political landscape of Myanmar in the 2010s. The establishment of the group with just a few dozen Arakanese youths was not unique in Myanmar politics, where several armed groups from various minority communities already existed. However, the birth of the AA coincided with changing political dynamics in northern Shan State, where the group was founded. Just around four months after the group was initiated by its leader Twan Mrat Naing, the Myanmar military launched an offensive against the Kokang group, MNDAA, in August 2009 and rooted out its presence. Four years later, the MNDAA itself would become a core ally of the AA. On another front, the Myanmar military also started armed clashes against the KIA in July 2011, one of the strongest ethnic armed groups, which supported a base for the growth of the AA. These two critical shifts in the environment of armed politics provided a different set of opportunities that the AA leadership was able to grasp.

The rise of Rakhine ethnonationalism stemming from the 2012 communal violence created a powerful mobilization force and awakened consciousness among Arakanese youths to protect their homeland. However, the AA leadership was strategically smart in avoiding the 'political trap' created by the Bamar-led central government and military. Under the U Thein Sein-led USDP administration, the role of the AA in Myanmar politics and the peace process was minimal. The group was still in competition with other Rakhine armed groups such as ALP/ALA and ANC/AA for public support and representation. The AA's presence

⁹⁹ DMG. (2021, August 3). *ULA introduces parallel justice system for Arakan State*. DMG Newsroom, Sittwe. Retrieved June 15, 2024, from <https://www.dmediag.com/news/3235-ula-introduces>

¹⁰⁰ Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, May). *Mass Displacement: Over 185,000 Flee the Liberated Areas in Arakan*. Monthly Report | May 2024. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.arakanstudies.org/mr/24/05/month-may-24-re.html>

¹⁰¹ Center for Arakan Studies. (2024, May). *Mass Displacement: Over 185,000 Flee the Liberated Areas in Arakan*. Monthly Report | May 2024. Retrieved June 29, 2024, from <https://www.arakanstudies.org/mr/24/05/month-may-24-re.html>

at the Kyaukphyu conference increased its visibility among the Rakhine population. The group's involvement in the 2015 Kokang offensive also brought more attention to the Rakhine population and political observers in Myanmar.

The AA's more intensive war against the Myanmar military only started in 2015 under the NLD administration. The NLD's failure to appoint a prime minister from the majority-winning Rakhine political party, ANP, was a critical factor that pushed for more support for armed rebellion than the electoral path. The ULA was formed in 2016, and until 2018, the AA's armed activities were mainly limited to the region of Paletwa, a tri-border area with India and Bangladesh, and some mountainous areas in northern and central townships. A more intensified phase of armed clashes occurred from 2019 until the introduction of a de facto ceasefire in November 2020. This ceasefire allowed the ULA/AA to establish both military and administrative strongholds in Arakan.

Changes in nationwide Myanmar politics after the military coup in 2021 brought fresh opportunities for the AA leadership to grow its dominance in the region of Arakan. The group mobilized general administration and judiciary activities while supporting anti-military coup resistance forces across the country, including the majority Bamar ethnic people in central Myanmar. The group did not formally cooperate with the NUG, a key anti-SAC opposition formed out of the NLD and other forces in the country. The AA's strategy towards the new political landscape in Myanmar is mainly based on balancing acts between the SAC and pro-federal democracy forces. The group initiated another short phase of armed clashes from August to November 2022 but introduced a 'humanitarian ceasefire' due to the massive trade, travel, and transportation blockages imposed by the junta authorities in Arakan.

Despite the fragile ceasefire, the AA initiated a more critical phase of military offensives in November 2023, following the well-recorded "1027 Operation" in northern Shan State. A new paradigm of the military-political landscape emerged when the AA captured around 10 townships in northern and central Arakan in mid-May 2024. The AA has now become the key dominant actor in the region of Arakan, with military offensives continuing in southern townships, particularly in Taungup and Thandwe townships. With the capture of the northernmost townships such as Maungdaw and Buthidaung, the ULA leadership faced massive criticism from the Rohingya diaspora groups and human rights organizations. The region and population of Arakan, within just a decade, are now experiencing a critical new paradigm where the ULA/AA is the only actor governing all governmental sectors.