Emerging New Governance Mechanisms and
Civic Space

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Abbreviations

KIEC	Karenni Interim Executive Council
KNPLF	Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front
KSCC	Karenni State Consultative Council
KSIJ	Karenni State Interim Judiciary
KSIP	Karenni State Interim Parliament
NUG	National Unity Government
PAB	People's Administration Body
PDB	People's Defense Body
PDF	People's Defense Force
PSB	People's Security Body
SAC	State Administration Council
YDF/YRA	Yaw Defense Force/ Yaw Revolutionary Army

Research Background

Civic Space in a New Condition After 2021:

Facing Civic Space

It is vital to maintain a constant flow of information during these conflict-sensitive moments, especially with significant political and governance changes. It is undeniable that the public's freedom of expression and access to information have been disrupted in recent times. As evidence, the Independent Press Council of Myanmar released a statement regarding the public's access to information and freedom of expression. In this statement, dated 10/2024, the Council highlighted that access to collect news, report it to the public, and disseminate information has been disrupted due to the constant oppression by the State Administration Council (SAC). They demand that the SAC stop oppressive tactics aimed at press freedom, such as revoking press licenses, arresting journalists, releasing detained journalists, and guaranteeing journalists' access to news and information.[1] The statement further emphasizes that the people have the right to know about injustices, corruption, and unfair practices, and to reinforce this right, the press and media should be allowed to operate without restrictions or interference.

During 2024, the importance of access to information for the public became even more evident, especially in the face of massive destruction of lives and property caused by natural disasters, flooding, and airstrikes. While difficulties in accessing information are common in conflict-prone areas, civilians residing in these regions face even more limited access due to security concerns. Regardless of who controls the areas or the specific circumstances, the extent of access to information, press, and media, and the ability to communicate with journalists, still exists despite the

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[1] Independent Press Council Myanmar (၂၀၂၄၊ စက်တင်ဘာ ၁၄)။
သတင်းလွတ်လပ်ခွင့်ကောင်စီ၏ သတင်းထုတ်ပြန်ချက် (၁၀/၂၀၂၄)။ Facebook။
Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1AryTz8t8c/?mibextid=wwXIfr

level of impact. [2]Even in areas deemed to be liberated, public access to information and freedom of expression continue to face limitations.

Since the coup, the SAC has primarily limited the rights of individuals. To oppress the news media, the SAC revoked licenses, seized the offices and supplies of news agencies, raided the homes and offices of journalists, filed irrelevant charges against them, and detained them for extended periods. As a result, news media agencies have lost their space within the country. Although many have fled abroad and continue their operations outside Myanmar, access to information and news production has become quite limited compared to the period from 2012-2020. While politics and security-related news dominate media coverage, other important news is often ignored. At the same time, some media outlets, in their struggle for freedom, have resorted to self-censorship and intentionally avoid covering certain topics. Additionally, due to difficulties in accessing information on the ground, media outlets face challenges in investigating and reporting on events, incidents, and new sources. This has led to an increased reliance on citizen journalists for media coverage. Ordinary civilians are also hesitant to contact and speak with the media. Far from sharing their identities, they fear expressing their opinions, even on social media.

On the other hand, it is also challenging to assess the extent to which democratic values are practiced in the territories controlled by resistance groups, particularly during the establishment of new political institutions by new actors. To what extent is the public's access to information and freedom of expression—the foundations of democracy—guaranteed in these sensitive times, and to what extent has transparency been implemented? Therefore, this report seeks to gather the voices of local people to understand state-society relations (the relationship between the government and the governed) during the operation of the new administration, as well as the practice of freedom of expression and access to information.

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[2] EngageMedia, "Myanmar Digital Coup Quarterly: August 2024 – October 2024,
" *EngageMedia*, 2024, https://engagemedia.org/2024/myanmar-digital-coup-quarterly-august-2024-october-2024/.

Background on the Selection of Study Locations

As of January 2025, data indicates that resistance groups control and administer governance in more than 90 townships across Myanmar. [3]Among them, Karenni State has six townships under resistance governance, including Moebye and Mese. Sagaing has five townships, including a sub-township, while Magway, which shares a border with Rakhine, also has significant resistance control in rural areas. The territories controlled by resistance groups continue to expand.

As the areas under resistance control grow, alternative governance and public service structures have also been emerging. In Karenni State, the Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC) is the primary governance body. For local administration, KIEC has established six Joint Township Governance Committees and ten Township Interim Executive Councils, covering a total of 16 townships or sub-townships.[4] These joint committees consist of both political and military representatives. They function in Mese, Ywar Thit, Dew Baung Khu, Nan Ma Khon, and Pekhon townships. Therefore, Karenni State demonstrates two distinct forms of local administration:[5]

1. Township Interim Executive Councils – Operate in areas with significant KIEC influence and control (represented in this research by Demoso District).
2. Joint Administration Councils – Function in areas where multiple resistance forces are active (represented in this research by Mese District).

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[3] Myanmar Peace Monitor။ (၂၀၂၅၊ ဇန်နဝါရီ ၉)။ *တော်လှန်ရေးအင်အားစုများမှ သိမ်းပိုက်ထိန်းချုပ်ထားသည့်*

မြို့ပေါင်း ၉၅ မြို့။

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https://mmpeacemonitor.org/mmr-
infographic/%e1%80%90%e1%80%b1%e1%80%ac%e1%80%ba%e1%80%9c%e1%80%be%e1%80%94%e1%80
%ba%e1%80%9b%e1%80%b1%e1%80%b8%e1%80%a1%e1%80%84%e1%80%ba%e1%80%a1%e1%80%ac%e
1%80%b8%e1%80%85%e1%80%af%e1%80%99%e1%80%bb-29/

[4] EC။ (၂၀၂၄၊ အောက်တိုဘာ ၃၁)။ ၂၀၂၄ ခုနှစ် တတိယ ၃လပတ်အစီရင်ခံစာ။

Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/share/1KQQ655qhb/?mibextid=wwXIfr

[5] Ibid

In Sagaing and Magway, the National Unity Government (NUG) plays a key role in local administration. The NUG has established governance structures at multiple levels, including Village, Township, and District People's Administration Bodies (PABs). By the end of 2023, the NUG had formed Township PABs in 173 townships, including 35 in Sagaing and 18 in Magway.[6] Sagaing has eight district-level PABs, while Magway has two district-level PABs. In most villages within these regions, PABs are actively functioning, and in some areas, members of these bodies are even elected.[7]

With the expansion of these new governance mechanisms, new dynamics and tensions have emerged. For example, in Magway's Gangaw Township, the Kyaw Interim Local Administration Central Committee issued an order listing 23 prohibited activities, with violations potentially resulting in the death penalty. [8]This order was even endorsed by Gangaw District's PDF Battalion 19. Additionally, in PAB-controlled areas of Sagaing and Magway, there have been reports that Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) must obtain permission from PABs before conducting any activities.[9] Moreover, there have been documented protests against the PAB system in several locations, such as Htee Gyain, Wuntho, Watlat, and Mawlaik in Sagaing. Given these developments, Gangaw District in and Yinmarbin District in Sagaing have been selected as study locations.

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[6] National Unity Government. (2024, March 29). *Announcement: Interim implementation of local administration and social services.* Retrieved from https://nugmyanmar.org/announcement/announcement-interim-implementation-of-local-administration-and-social-services/

[7] Ibid

[8] ယောအလင်းတန်း။ (၂၀၂၄၊ ဒီဇင်ဘာ ၁၃)။ *ကျော်မြို့ ကြားကာလဒေသန္တရအုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဗဟိုကော်မတီ၏အုပ်ချုပ်ရေး အမိန့်။* Facebook။ Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/share/15rSQMYFoV/?mibextid=wwXIfr

[9] Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, "ဆားလင်းကြီး မြို့နယ်ပြည်သူ့အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဒေသန္တရအမိန့် ၆/၂၀၂၃," *Facebook*, April 20, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/share/166vtGGCsn/?mibextid=wwXIfr.

Objectives of the Research

The objective of this research report is to understand the relationship between emerging government actors and civilians in areas where resistance groups have a significant presence and control. It also aims to investigate the state of civic space, which can only survive with fundamental human rights—namely, access to information and freedom of expression—under such new administrations.

Research Questions

- How are state-society relations (government and governed) evolving under the newly functioning governance systems?
- Under these emerging systems, what is the status of public freedom of expression and access to information?
- How do the policies and programs developed by these emerging systems impact civic space?

Locations of the Research Study

1. **Karenni State** – Demoso and Mese District (Demoso, Hpruso, and Mese)
2. **Magway Region** – Gangaw District (Gangaw and Hteelin Townships)
3. **Sagaing Region** – Yinmarbin District (Salingyi, Yinmarbin, and Pale)

Research Methodology

During the preparation for fieldwork, the research team collected relevant data and information from the three respective study areas. Due to the coup, reports covering these areas have been largely inaccessible to the public since 2021. However, the research team gathered all possible sources of data and information.

As this research aims to document the human rights landscape during the emergence of a new form of governance, it was conducted amid political and security sensitivities. The expertise and deep familiarity of local researchers with their respective territories, along with their observational and investigative skills in human rights research, played a crucial role in accomplishing this study. More than 50 in-depth interviews were conducted during field data collection.

For sampling, the research team purposively selected respondents from diverse backgrounds to ensure a variety of independent and unbiased perspectives.

During the interviews, a semi-structured questionnaire consisting of 30 questions was used. The interview guide was divided into three main sections:

1. **State-society relations** – The relationship between the state and governed civilians under the new governance in the respective territories.
2. **Freedom of Expression** – The state of freedom of expression under the governance structures that have established new institutions, policies, and procedures.
3. **Public Rights and Access to Information** – The extent of public rights and access to information.

Ethics

In this research, three lead researchers oversaw the study. Each lead researcher was assigned to mentor and engage with two local researchers and was responsible for analyzing the collected data.

Due to security reasons, this report will not disclose any personal or identifiable information about the research team, including local researchers. However, with the consent of both local and lead researchers, their identities may be revealed in the future if deemed necessary.

Since all respondents currently reside in politically sensitive areas, their names and identities will not be disclosed to ensure their safety. Additionally, for recorded interviews, consent was obtained between the local researcher and the respondents. All collected data was securely stored in consultation with technological experts to protect the safety and confidentiality of the respondents.

Research Scope and Limitations

This research examines the forms and dynamics of emerging governance in Karenni State, Magway, and Sagaing. Our targeted territories can be considered areas of resistance, where resistance groups exert significant control and influence. However, these areas face constant airstrikes and ongoing security instability. Although this research aims to investigate the reciprocal relationship between government and the governed, it primarily focuses on the perspectives of the governed.

Given the ongoing conflict in these areas, rapid and immediate changes are common. Therefore, this research covers only a specific period and does not serve as a longitudinal study for long-term monitoring. Additionally, the findings of this research do not provide representative data for the entire area, state, or region. While the study focuses on three areas with strong resistance group influence, its primary goal is to understand the nature of governance by these groups rather than to conduct a comparative analysis across the three areas or sectors.

Since the selected territories differ in their historical backgrounds, trajectories within the current resistance landscape, social structures, and governance dynamics, this research aims to provide a general overview of the impacts of emerging governance—particularly its policies, regulations, and their effects on civic space, freedoms, and basic human rights.

More importantly, as this research examines irregular governance administrations, it is not possible to assess them using the same indicators and indices that international organizations typically use to evaluate governance, freedom, and access to information in stable governmental contexts[10]. Therefore, the research team developed indicators and a framework relevant to the current resistance and emerging governance structures, ensuring they uphold the values and perspectives of promoting human rights and human dignity.

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[10] Florea, A., & Malejacq, R. (2024). The Supply and Demand of Rebel Governance. *International Studies Review, 26*(1), viae004.

Findings – Governance Mechanisms

Based on the data collected by local researchers and lead researchers across the three focus areas, distinct governance dynamics are operating in each region.

National Unity Government Mechanism – Sagaing and Magway

In Yinmabin, Kani, and Salingyi townships of Sagaing, where this research team collected data, the National Unity Government (NUG) primarily operates governance and administration. All respondents in these areas stated that the governance mechanism is structured around the 3Ps framework: People's Defense Body (PDB), People's Security Body (PSB), and People's Administration Body (PAB). Similarly, most Magway respondents also identified the 3Ps mechanism as the principal governance structure.

At the village, township, and district levels, administrative structures have been formed. At the regional level, plans and progress are underway for establishing a regional-level PAB, though it is not yet fully operational. According to the guidelines of the National Unity Government's Central Committee for the Implementation of Interim Local Administration, PABs at the township, district, and regional levels are meant to consist of 20 members each, with the PAB officer serving as the leader and the PDB officer as the deputy leader.

People's Administration Body Officer	**Leader**
People's Defense Body Officer	**Deputy Leader**
People's Security Body Officer	**Member**
Health Officer	**Member**
Finance Officer	**Member**
Education Officer	**Member**
Humanitarain Assistance and Disaster Management Officer	**Member**
Human Rights Officer	**Member**
Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation Officer	**Member**
Women, Youth and Children Affairs Officer	**Member**
Labour Affairs Officer	**Member**
Legal Affairs Officer	**Member**
Communication, Information and Technology Affairs Officer	**Member**
Electricity, Energy and Construction Affairs Officer	**Member**
Economy and Trade Affairs Officer	**Member**
Agriculutre and Livestock Affairs Officer	**Member**
Municipalitity Officer	**Member**
Taxes Assessor	**Member**
Audit Officer	**Member**
Office Secretary	**Member**

Despite this structured guideline, fully functional PABs remain limited on the ground[11]. However, in Sagaing and Magway, officers—including PAB, PDB, and PSB representatives—have already been appointed, and administrative functions are progressing.[12]

"Under NUG policy guidance, the Pa Aa Pha (People's Administration Body) operates with 17 departments. However, their administration does not fully cover all of Hteelin Township yet."

— Hteelin Resident, October 2024

At the village and village tract levels, the formation of PABs is supervised by township-level PABs. According to instructions, village PABs should be elected by local residents. Ideally, each village PAB consists of:PAB officer, PDB officer, PSB officer and Two village representatives.

However, in practice, PAB and PDB officers are still being appointed by the NUG's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Home Affairs, and full implementation of structured village PABs remains limited. [13]Elections for PABs can only take place in villages where PAB leaders have close and cooperative relationships.

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[11] Observation of Local Researchers.

[12] ပြည်သူ့အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအဖွဲ့လုပ်ငန်းလမ်းညွှန်အမျိုးသားညီညွတ်ရေးအစိုးရကြားကာလဒေသန္တရအုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဖော်ဆောင်မှု ဗဟိုကော်မတီ။ (၂၀၂၄ မေ ၁၈)။

[13] Observation of Local Researchers.

> "NUG allows villages to manage their own administration. Initially, there were five members in our local organization. However, two have resigned due to personal matters, leaving only three people to continue administration according to NUG policy."
>
> — Sagaing Resident, October 2024

> "In some villages, where public voices are valued, residents have the opportunity to select their administrators and vote for PAB and PDB representatives. However, this is not the case for all villages."
>
> — Sagaing Resident, October 2024

The National Unity Government also aims to implement a similar administration model in Magway, mirroring that of Sagaing. However, this research indicates that in Magway, other governance mechanisms exist alongside NUG's system.

> "In villages controlled by the YDF, an administration mechanism exists where each village selects one representative. These representatives then form the township administration group—but only in the western part of Hteelin."
>
> — Hteelin Resident, October 2024

In Magway's Hteelin and Gangaw townships, where this research was conducted, the administration does not always follow the 3Ps structure (PAB, PDB, and PSB). Gangaw has a strong NUG presence, where the PAB, PDB, and PSB are actively functioning. Hteelin Township, however, is divided; Eastern Hteelin is under the control of NUG's 3Ps system and Western Hteelin is governed by the Yaw Revolution Army (YRA) / Yaw Defense Force (YDF), which does not operate under NUG's direct control.[14]

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[14] Direct interview and participant observation of local researchers (October, 2024).

> "We did not want two separate administrations in Hteelin. Therefore, at least six rounds of negotiations took place to unify the east and west governance structures. A compromise was reached: both parts would proceed under a joint administration. Each side would have its own chairman, and four leaders—two from each side—would jointly manage governance, distributing responsibilities proportionally across departments."
>
> — Hteelin Resident, October 2024

According to data from local researchers, the western Hteelin administration (by YDF/YRA) is composed of elected village representatives, while the eastern part (NUG's 3Ps system) consists of appointed officials.

There were attempts to merge both administrative structures to form a unified township governance system, but ultimately, the effort failed, resulting in continued division.

However, this joint administration structure lasted only one month.

> "Thirty villages rejected the arrangement, leading to a complete separation again. As a result, to this day, Hteelin remains divided into two separate administrations."
>
> — Hteelin Resident, October 2024

Karenni Administration Mechanisms – Demoso and Mese

In Karenni State**,** governance is primarily overseen by the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State (IEC)**.** The IEC is responsible for the administration of governance, while law-making falls under the authority of the Karenni State Interim Parliament (KSIP)**,** and judicial matters are handled by the Karenni State Interim Judiciary (KSIJ)**.** In addition, political and policy leadership is provided by the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC)**.** Together, these bodies form the administrative structure of Karenni governance.According to data collected by local researchers, the KIEC administration covers not only Demoso and Hpruso but also Mese Township. KIEC's governance framework operates at village, township, and district levels**.**
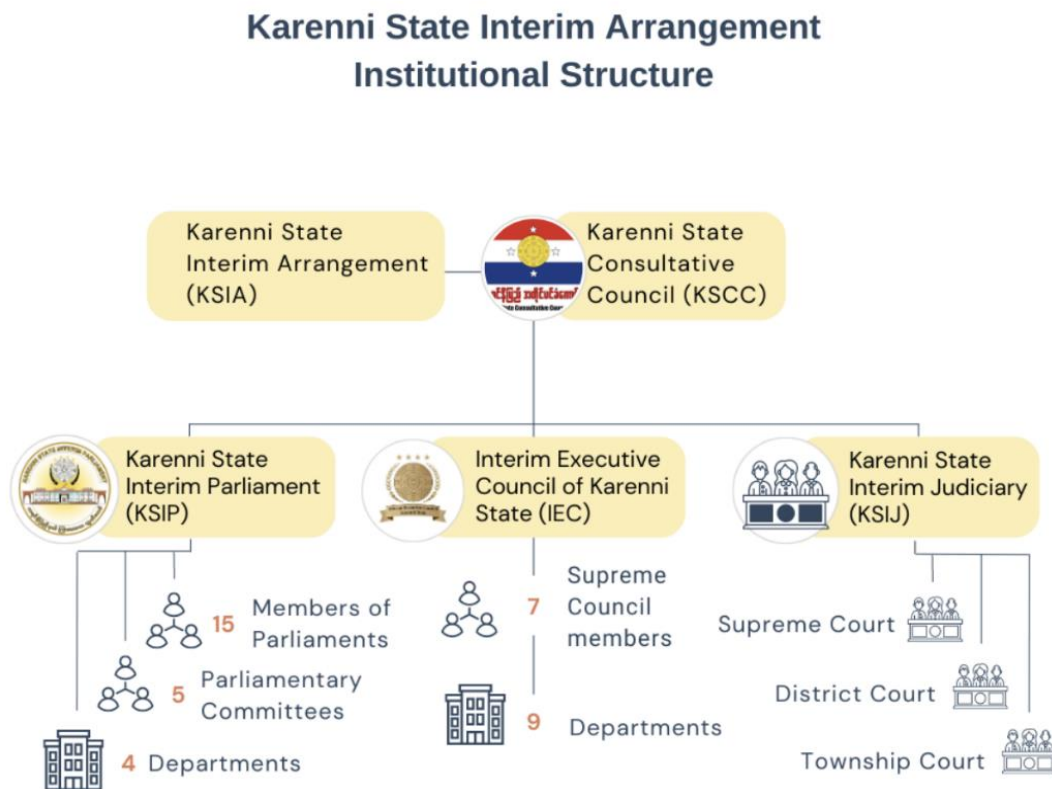

Figure 1: Karenni Interim Governance Mechnaims (Reference: Progressive Voice et al, 2024)[15]

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[15] Progressive Voice Myanmar. (2024, October 9). *Federalism from the ground up: The Karenni model of nation-state building.* Retrieved from https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2024/10/09/federalism-from-the-ground-up-the-karenni-model-of-nation-state-building/

However, Mese Township operates under a joint governance model. The township's administration is headquartered by the Karenni National People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), which collaborates with the Karenni Progressive Party and the IEC to oversee governance. According to an IEC report, Mese is jointly administered by the KPP, KNPLF, and the Mese Township Joint Governance Committee.

Public Opinions and Voices on Governance Actors

Based on data collected by local researchers, this section presents the voices and opinions regarding governance actors and armed groups.

According to respondents from Sagaing, governance and armed groups generally maintain a smooth working relationship. However, tensions have been reported between armed groups under the National Unity Government (NUG) and those that operate independently. Additionally, conflicts have been observed between PAB(s) and PDB(s).

> "In our village, the relationship between Pa Aa Pha (PAB) and Pa Ka Pha (PDB) is generally okay. However, there are tensions between NUG-affiliated groups and other resistance forces. For example, when each group sets up its own security checkpoints, it can lead to conflict. But overall, their relationship is manageable."
>
> — Pale Resident, October 2024

However, in Gangaw District, where this research focuses, respondents reported more significant tensions between governance and armed actors. In Hteelin Township, groups affiliated with the NUG, such as PABs and PDBs, have a working relationship, but conflicts arise with other resistance and armed groups. As mentioned earlier, multiple governance bodies operate in Hteelin, leading to unstable relationships between armed groups at the local level. In the study areas, armed groups often hold more influence than governance actors on the ground.

Respondents highlighted weaknesses in governance implementation, with reported pressures and external influences affecting administration.

> "In Hteelin, the administration differs between the eastern and western parts. I won't comment on the eastern side, but in the west, governance structures exist only as a formality. The governance groups follow the armed groups' leadership without question. For example, when the armed groups ordered a ban on cattle trading or sports events, governance bodies enforced these restrictions without independent decision-making. The governance group is essentially a puppet of the armed actors, with no real authority."
>
> — Hteelin Resident, October 2024

At township and village levels, governance bodies frequently issue statements and regulations, but respondents reported a lack of clear explanations for these rules. In Pale Township, residents noted that while regulations exist, enforcement is weak. The governance system primarily relies on deterrence rather than effective implementation.In Yinmarbin, respondents mentioned that governance actors interpret laws and regulations inconsistently. There are also concerns about arbitrary actions, extrajudicial killings, and lack of accountability.For example, **in** August 2022, in Chaung-U Township (Sagaing), village PAB members arrested three men and four women on accusations of being informants, later raping and killing them.

> "There are threats of forced shop closures in the markets, so people follow the rules out of fear rather than genuine enforcement."
>
> — Kani Resident, October 2024

[16]Similarly, in April 2023, in western Depayin Township (Thityaw Aeik Village), individuals accused of being informants were reportedly executed extrajudicially.[17]Despite the existence of some functional governance and public service mechanisms in Sagaing, they struggle to implement administration effectively due to security concerns, external pressures, and inconsistencies in the rule of law.

> "Regarding the PDFs, People's Administration Bodies (PABs), and People's Security Bodies (PSBs) under the NUG, it's like worshipping a sacred pagoda or a shrine. They roam freely in and out of the villages, doing whatever they want. Even when villagers return home, they are subject to checks and questioning by PDF forces, being treated like enemies."
>
> —A resident of Gantgaw region, October 2024

Residents of Sagaing and Magway regions have expressed concerns about their interactions with certain resistance groups. Public trust in the PAB and PDB has noticeably declined in some areas due to abuses of power and poor management. Many residents are afraid to criticize the armed groups and hesitate to communicate openly with them. Fear and anxiety characterize interactions with these groups, as their use of weapons and perceived pressure create an environment of intimidation. Armed groups are reported to disregard public concerns and rely on coercion through weaponry. Additionally, individuals and groups face discrimination based on perceived affiliations with administrative bodies.

> "When we see them, we really wanted to rely on them. But instead of relying on them, we are afraid of them."
>
> — A resident of Magway, October 2024

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[16] NUG ဖြေရှင်းရမယ့် 'ပသုံးလုံး' အာဏာစက်။ (၂၀၂၄၊ စက်တင်ဘာ ၂၆)။ BBC Burmese။
https://www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/cnvd3n4gne7o
[17] Ibid

"In our region, the armed groups try their best to be considerate and accommodating to the people. However, some are bad apples who abuse their power and act without regard for the people."

— A resident of Yaw region, October 2024

The public is also burdened by taxation practices, as checkpoints and tax collection by various administrative bodies and armed groups add financial strain. While efforts are being made to establish a more structured tax system, cooperation remains weak, and no concrete action has been taken.

"In other districts, cargo trucks pass through villages with a single tax slip at the checkpoints. In our area, there are many checkpoints, and when crossing from one village to another, both the villages and the checkpoints collect taxes. Having to pay at one checkpoint and then again at another has led to increased commodity prices, placing an additional burden on the public. Although there were plans to collect only one tax slip for the entire region, we have yet to see it implemented."

— A resident of Gantgaw region, October 2024

Residents report that while administrative bodies follow standard procedures dictated by central authorities, their decision-making autonomy is limited, and their administrative capacity is weak.

"In our region, the assigned village leaders pass even minor issues up the higher decision-making level, like theft, fights, and marital problems. It is inefficient and unnecessary, and it needs to be revised."

— A resident of Sagaing region, October 2024

Decisions are typically made in meetings, but the lack of systematic implementation leads to inefficiencies. Some regulations exist only on paper and are not enforced, while others are difficult for the public to follow. Fear prevents people from speaking out.

> "Some rules and regulations exist only as written records on paper and in discussions, without concrete implementation. The implementation methods are also flawed."
>
> — A resident of Gantgaw region, October 2024

Despite governance challenges, administrative bodies are involved in public service delivery, particularly in health, education, and security. Collaboration with Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) participants enables healthcare and education services, and some healthcare providers travel to villages to offer medical treatment. In security, administration bodies raise awareness about military attacks and air strikes, assist in constructing bomb shelters, and share crucial information about natural disasters. They also engage in resolving social issues. The involvement of CDM personnel is crucial to these public services in Sagaing and Magway.

Reports indicate discrimination by administrative bodies, including favoritism towards relatives and the wealthy. Evidence suggests bribery plays a role in resolving social disputes. Armed groups have also engaged in abuse and threats, granting preferential treatment to their relatives. Disagreements between administration bodies and armed groups have led to further discrimination, with those in strained relationships with authorities facing bias. Discrimination also occurs within administration bodies based on group size. Respondents reported that some relatives of administration officials have accumulated wealth during the revolution, further reinforcing inequality.

In Magway, education providers who were previously independent of the NUG have sought official recognition from the NUG. CDM doctors and clinics in resistance

units continue to provide healthcare services. However, administrative bodies struggle to enforce the rule of law, particularly in cases of murder, and are perceived as biased in their dealings with the public. In Gantgaw, local resistance groups prioritize their own members, and NUG-affiliated entities favor relatives. Ordinary citizens outside NUG control face monitoring and labeling as rebels, while wartime displacement has exacerbated these inequalities. Those with connections receive preferential treatment, while others face discrimination. Reports suggest that administrative bodies and resistance groups prioritize relatives, supporters, and individuals close to the PDF, and 3Ps often acting on personal motives rather than political principles.

Violations of established rules for personal gain are evident in administration bodies. In Htilin, preferential treatment is given to the homes of PDF personnel, while others face oppression. Reports indicate political bias in administrative decisions, favoring individuals involved in the revolution or those from wealthy families while discriminating against others. Impunity is granted to the relatives of township and village administrators, shielding them from consequences for their actions.

Interviews with locals in Sagaing and Magway reveal that armed groups often fail to operate within legal frameworks, and tensions exist among different factions. Corruption within administrative bodies, delays in enforcing the rule of law, and the use of threats and punitive measures further weaken governance structures. Administrative services are hampered by competition and conflicts among resistance groups, making life more difficult for the public.

In Karenni, KIEC faces significant challenges in effectively carrying out administrative functions. While efforts are being made to raise awareness about rules and regulations, compliance remains low. A resident of Demoso reported a lack of awareness regarding KIEC activities due to insufficient news coverage and limited access to information. Administrative training is being provided in villages to ensure the continuation of governance, and committees and secretaries have been appointed in IDP camps to carry out administrative tasks. The KIEC is also implementing traffic regulations and travel restrictions.

The relationship between administration bodies, armed groups, and the public in Karenni remains weak.

> "The public has a poor understanding of the administrative sector, and greater efforts are needed to increase awareness."
> — A resident of Demoso, October 2024

Some armed groups have been accused of oppressive tax collection, with ongoing taxation in Debaw Khu, in western Demoso Township, identified as a key concern. [18] Local researchers involved in this study emphasized the need for better regulation and control of tax collection by armed groups.

The KIEC provides air strike warnings, emergency alerts, and services in education, health, and transportation. Support is also being provided to displaced individuals through food aid and humanitarian assistance. However, reports highlight a lack of transparency in administration, with favoritism towards those connected to armed groups.

Governance in Karenni State is marked by weak ethical standards in interactions between armed groups and the public. Local researchers and at least five respondents emphasized the need for more transparency in humanitarian assistance efforts. They highlighted the importance of monitoring and supervising administrative implementation to ensure compliance with rules and procedures.

> "Families of armed group members receive priority in the provision of wartime shelter."
>
> — A resident of Mese Township, October 2024

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[18] Kantarawaddy Times။ (၂၀၂၄၊ ဇွန် ၂၈)။ *ဒီးမော့ဆိုအနောက်ဖက်ခြမ်းက ဈေးတန်းတွေမှာ လက်နက်ကိုင်တပ်ဖွဲ့တချို့ ကို လစဉ် အခွန်ပေးဆောင်ရ။* Retrieved from https://www.kantarawaddytimes.org/%e1%80%92%e1%80%ae%e1%80%b8%e1%80%99%e1%80%b1%e1%80%ac%e1%80%b7%e1%80%86%e1%80%ad%e1%80%af%e1%80%a1%e1%80%94%e1%80%b1%e1%80%ac%e1%80%80%e1%80%ba%e1%80%96%e1%80%80%e1%80%BA%e1%80%81%e1%80%bc%e1%80%99-3/

Findings – Access to Information

Since the attempted coup in Myanmar, there have been 330 internet shutdowns nationwide, with Sagaing Region experiencing the highest number of shutdowns. According to records from the Myanmar Internet Project, among these shutdowns, there were 21 instances in Karenni State, 23 in Magway, and 91 in Sagaing.[19] In these areas, traditional methods of information access have been blocked and restricted by the military council, forcing civilians to seek alternative means of accessing information. According to a November 2024 report by the Athan organization, which monitors freedom of expression, a total of 135 townships across the country have experienced phone and internet line shutdowns, including 28 townships in Sagaing Region, 4 in Magway Region, and 7 in Karenni State. [20]This study discusses the situations faced by local residents in accessing and obtaining information, based on data collected from local researchers.

Access to Information - Sagaing

Sagaing Region is one of the areas with the most internet shutdowns. Due to internet shutdowns, phone line cuts, and power outages, access to information is difficult. Sagaing Region has a population of nearly five million, [21]and the military has been conducting raids on villages, arresting and killing locals, and burning down entire

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[19] Myanmar Internet Project॥ (၂၀၂၅၊ ဇန်နဝါရီလ အထိ)॥ *Internet shutdown*॥ Retrieved from
https://www.myanmarinternet.info/internet-shutdown

[20] အသံ॥ (၂၀၂၄၊ ဒီဇင်ဘာ ၂၀)॥ *မြို့နယ်စုစုပေါင်း (၁၃၅) မြို့နယ်ရှိ*॥ Facebook॥ Retrieved from
https://www.facebook.com/athan.foe.myanmar/posts/pfbid02qqK44mZJE1orMRtQVh46aTUFeUbr822LrbiMJR
mvmPDSb1Ze2oWvCBqyQuxcFirNl

[21] Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population. (2014). *The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census: Highlights of the main results (Census Report Volume 2 – A)* [PDF]. *The Union Report – Census Report Volume 2 [EN/MY]*, p. 6. Retrieved September 1, 2022, from
https://myanmar.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Sagaing%20Region%20Census%20Report%20-
%20ENGLISH-3.pdf

villages. [22]To conceal these events and impose an information blackout on military operations, internet access has been widely restricted. In Sagaing Region, where armed resistance is strong, resistance groups and local people are working together to gain internet access and share information. This situation is known from the voices of research participants and confirmations from two local researchers included in this study.

Residents of Sagaing Region reported that administration bodies share information with the public through village meetings, but in some places, this implementation remains weak. While information is shared through radio-communication devices, some administration bodies have yet to acquire these devices. In emergencies, certain groups raise awareness by going around the village, putting up notices, using gongs for alarms, and providing radio-communication devices in schools. Some residents also provide preparedness training for war-related risk management. At the beginning of the revolution, administration bodies provided information about military attacks, but later, they became preoccupied with administrative matters and stopped providing such information.

> "Now, it's like the revolution has been longer, or maybe I just don't see it as much anymore. When it first started, there was a bit more awareness campaign and so on, but now it's not really like that anymore. And also, in this area, there are more armed individuals, so how should I say it, there aren't many enemies around here, you could say. It's mostly our own armed groups among ourselves, so there aren't many reasons for that kind of thing to happen. Even if something happens between our own people, there are many leaders, so they keep things in check. It doesn't become anything big, you could say. So because of that, maybe that's why there isn't much awareness campaign anymore, I think."
>
> — A resident of Yinmabin region, October 2024

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[22] ISP Myanmar. (2024, November 22). Most arson destructions in Sagaing and Magway regions. Retrieved from https://ispmyanmar.com/most-arson-destructions-in-sagaing-and-magway-regions/

Local residents who participated in this study reported that while they have complete freedom of expression through news media, they use pseudonyms and alter their voices due to concerns about security leaks. Some locals also expressed a slight fear of the term "journalist" and noted that building trust between journalists and locals remains a challenge. In areas without military activity, they say there is no news media. However, there is secrecy regarding cases related to 3Ps.

> "As far as I've heard around here, I haven't seen anyone openly working as a journalist. When people in this area hear the word 'journalist,' many of them are a bit, how should I say it, a bit afraid, you could say. So, locals can write only if they trust. I think there might be difficulties in publishing news. People around here are a bit allergic to that, to the term 'journalist,' you could say. That's how it is around here."
>
> — A resident of Salingyi region, October 2024

Residents access information via television and radio, and where phone signals are available, they use phones to communicate warnings. They travel to areas with Starlink access to obtain information. Other methods include using PSI satellite dishes and phone SMS messages to gather and share information.

Access to Information - Magway

In Magway Region, locals report that administration bodies do not use the internet to issue announcements and disseminate information, which is a significant weakness. In most villages, Starlink internet is available, authorized by PDF under the NUG, who collect fees for its use.

Residents primarily rely on phone lines for information and use alternative methods such as word-of-mouth, notices on lampposts, loudspeakers, radio, television, monthly meetings, and PSI satellite dishes. In areas with poor phone signals, People's Administration offices personally deliver information. However, non-NUG organizations sometimes have a stronger media presence. An incident was reported where the NUG arrested a journalist, though they were later released.[23]

"It's not about making comparisons. In terms of media engagement and connection, those not affiliated with the NUG are doing a better job."

— A resident of Magway region, October 2024)

Regarding the media, there's nothing they've done for us. In our area, there's hardly any media. You could say there's none at all. Speaking from experience, during Thingyan in 2024, when journalists came to gather news, I heard that they were arrested. It was NUG people who did the arresting."

— A resident of Magway region, October 2024)

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[23] Collected and Confirmed by Local Researchers in Magway (November, 2024)

Magway Region has weak media development and limited free communication between journalists and the public. Residents report fear of armed groups, and journalists must disguise themselves to gather news.

> "Regarding the safety of journalists, the People's Defense Force (PDF) and People's Administration Bodies (PABs) seem unaware or disregard. They themselves display an attitude of not welcoming journalists. One thing we understand is that journalists are known as the fourth pillar of the state. Nowadays, in our area, when they come, they have to conceal their true identities to gather news."
>
> — A resident of Gantgaw region, October 2024)

Access to Information - Karenni

Karenni residents access announcements issued by the Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC) via the internet, but KIEC has not yet been able to implement timely warnings for natural disasters and airstrikes. Alternative methods include radio-communication devices (walkie-talkies), information brought by frontline PDF militants, siren signals, bell-ringing, radio, television, Starlink internet, and news sharing by civil society organizations and ethnic armed resistance groups.

"The KIEC's local media releases announcements, but because the public has difficulty with internet access, not everyone can know. We suggest that if they make announcements, it would be more convenient if they could distribute newsletters through the relevant sub-committees and village administration bodies. However, in emergency situations, there may be delays if the roads as well as transportations are bad and the phone lines are poor."

— A resident of Demoso region, October 2024

Media access in Karenni is restricted for security reasons, leading to misinformation concerns. There are calls for more effective information handling by administration bodies.

"In our area, there isn't much media. There is a radio, but it's far away. For example, regarding information for Mese, there isn't an immediate release of information. Even if there were, we wouldn't know directly; we'd hear about it a day or two later. We often find out about things after they've already happened, and there are more rumors. Also, sometimes we're scared when we shouldn't be worried."

— A resident of Mese region, October 2024)

Findings – Freedom of Expression

Freedom of Expression in the Remain - Restricted Anyar (Sagaing and Magway Regions)

According to the voices of local researchers and residents who participated in this study, it was found that freedom of expression in the Sagaing and Magway Regions is still being restricted, controlled, and threatened, facing various forms of limitations. In particular, they are facing restrictions and threats not only from the State Administration Council (SAC) but also from resistance groups that were formed to protect the public. In carrying out such threats and restrictions, in addition to using weapons, these groups also use their authority to intimidate. Regarding such actions by resistance groups that restrict the public's freedom of expression, participants in this study commented that these are shameful acts.

Regarding the actions of some revolutionary groups:

"It's shameful to see those resistance groups themselves behaving in an authoritarian way."

— A resident of Sagaing Region, October 2024

In some townships in the Sagaing and Magway Regions, it has also been observed that gatherings and meetings require permission from the PAB, and meetings are banned if they do not have their permission.

"In previous events, if there was a meeting or gathering of people, either the administration or the defense forces would call and inquire or even prohibit it. The implication was that it couldn't be done without their permission. You could say there's no personal freedom of expression."

— A resident of Htilin Region, October 2024)

A resident of the Magway Region commented that people are afraid of any armed group. According to the voices of the participants, people in the Magway Region feel that they have lost their freedom of expression and that their lives would be in danger if they criticized any group. Furthermore, they feel that they have no access to provide constructive feedback or suggestions to administration bodies. At the same time, it is observed that there are limitations in the capacity of groups that would effectively take responsibility and resolve incidents of threats to the public. Moreover, the public is in a state of fear to speak out and point out the challenges, difficulties, and human rights violations they are facing in their region to the respective organizations. In particular, they are worried about the dangers and threats from the authorities and armed groups. These factors show that there are many limitations to the public's freedom of expression.

"There is no freedom of expression either. If they [the authorities/armed groups] even suspect something, they threaten to kill or harm, so people are scared, and they don't dare to speak out. If we try to speak out, we're afraid of being arrested or killed. If we really wanted to give advice, citizens don't have the means to do so. There's no way for us to give advice."

— A resident of Gantgaw Region, October 2024

"We don't speak in front of them about which armed group is acting like an authoritarian. We only talk about it amongst ourselves, at home, in the fields while weeding, or while farming. This is also a form of expression. But there are things we don't dare say in their presence because we're afraid of being punished if they hear us. We're afraid of that kind of thing."

— A resident of Pearl Region, October 2024

Research findings show that citizens in the Sagaing and Magway Regions are clearly afraid and worried about threats from authorities and armed groups in their areas. One reason for this is the failure (or inability) of the respective groups to effectively take action on complaints and reports submitted by the public. Local authorities should take effective investigative, detection, and prosecution measures against rights violations to protect and promote the public's freedom of expression. It has also been observed that the failure to do so is leading to a decline in the trust and confidence of local people.

"In our area, there are many people who offer criticism and suggestions. However, if they offer too much criticism, they [the authorities] become unreceptive. If we say something like, 'This could be improved by doing this,' they usually respond with excuses like, 'We will discuss it,' or 'We will submit it,' or 'This depends on the decision of higher-ups."

— A resident of Gantgaw Region, October 2024

Freedom of Expression in Karenni

The people in Karenni State have trust and confidence in the KIEC's state-building efforts and view freedom of expression under the KIEC's administration positively. Most interviewees commented that their opinions and voices are reflected in the KIEC's political steps and other undertakings.

"Nowadays, the KIEC has emerged, and we see that the administrative mechanisms are functioning. At this time, they listen to the voices of the people, and we feel that we have the right to express ourselves."

— A resident of Demoso Region, October 2024

However, similar to the above findings, it has been observed that there are concerns among the public about making comments, suggestions, or criticisms regarding the actions of resistance groups and administration bodies. Due to the current intense armed conflicts and sensitive political situation, there are limitations to freedom of expression as in normal situations, and there are many limitations in effectively handling and resolving complaints. According to discussions with some locals from Demoso and Mese who participated in the interviews, they pointed out that due to political and military reasons, the Karenni Interim Executive Council (KIEC) allows only limited freedom of expression for the public.

"In some places, the public does not have freedom of expression. This is because, with the current rapid increase of armed groups, there are difficulties. There are people who are afraid of something happening if they say something wrong, so they remain silent. They want to tell the truth. But because they are afraid of life-threatening pressure, I don't think the public will be able to speak openly."

— A resident of Demoso Region, October 2024

A resident of Demoso said that although arrangements have been made for the public to report complaints about human rights violations they experience to the Karenni Interim Executive Council, the council does not yet have the capacity or ability to take action on those complaints. Furthermore, it has been observed that there are still limitations in having a safe environment or space for the public to freely express their opinions and the challenges they are facing. The reason is the influence of armed groups on the public's thinking, speaking, and actions. In other words, the public's influence cannot reach and affect the armed groups, but the influence of the armed groups is affecting the public.

Freedom of Operation by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

Locals who participated in this study stated that civil society organizations are emerging in the Sagaing and Magway Regions and are actively supporting public services. They are particularly able to provide significant assistance in education, health, and aid for those displaced by conflict.

"Regarding the matter of teaching, they are also operating freely. Recently, there was participation from civil society organizations in organizing an Education Symposium festival here."

— A resident of Htilin Region, October 2024

However, it has been observed that the number of these groups and their capacity to provide support remain far from sufficient compared to the existing needs. A resident of Htilin noted:

> "Regarding civil society administration, in our Htilin area, we don't have many civil society organizations. Right now, you can even count the number of civil society organizations on one hand."
>
> — A resident of Htilin Region, October 2024

In the Sagaing and Magway Regions, there are also areas where civil society organizations are weak due to security restrictions and ongoing conflict. Although there is no significant friction between administrative bodies and civil society groups, restrictions exist in some areas of the Sagaing Region. Furthermore, there are limitations where activities can only be carried out with the permission of administrative officials. In some cases, punitive action is taken if permission is not obtained.

> "Civil society organizations cannot operate freely as they wish. If they want to operate, they need permission from the PAB and PDB in their area. They can only operate freely if they get their permission. If they do something on their own without permission, the PDB and PABs will take action."
>
> — A resident of Yinmabin Region, October 2024

Additionally, respondents reported that in some areas, civil society organizations face many limitations in carrying out their activities, as they must submit applications for permission at each stage, a process that takes considerable time.

"In this area, it's not completely free everywhere. We have to go through the levels of the administration bodies. Even other organizations, if they're going to do something in this area, can't do it according to their own wishes. They can only work after getting permission from the central authority. It's like that. Nothing is done according to one's own wishes."

— A resident of Kani Region, October 2024

Local respondents also reported instances where civil society organizations are controlled and subjected to dominance by administrative bodies. While monitoring civil society organizations for security and military strategic reasons is understandable, excessive restrictions and control risk weakening and undermining the entire civil society sector.

An analysis of the relationship between civil society organizations and administrative bodies in Karenni State reveals that they have established transparent collaborative mechanisms and structured relationship arrangements. Responses from locals indicate a strong cooperative bond. Interviewees pointed out that this cooperation between civil society organizations and administrative bodies in Karenni State has enabled the effective implementation of educational services and healthcare activities.

"They [the authorities] want civil society organizations to operate under their administration and control. Even when civil society organizations want to help and support the public and displaced people, the authorities want them to go through their administration. We object to that. Our objection is not about disregarding the administration. We let them do what they have to do. But in areas where people are truly suffering, even in remote areas, civil society organizations are more effective than administrative bodies in providing help and assistance. I don't like it that the administration wants to control civil society organizations."

— A resident of Htilin Region, October 2024

Collected data also indicates that civil society organizations within Karenni State actively engage in providing necessary technical support, advice, and other assistance to administrative bodies. Notably, civil society organizations in Karenni State coordinate and collaborate across different organizations based on their respective fields of work. They demonstrate the capacity to work together and the ability to develop expertise and resources needed for the successful implementation of their activities.

As a result, the KIEC seeks advice from civil society organizations to systematically implement its planned programs. A participant from Demoso Township noted that after the formation of the KIEC, civil society organizations and NGOs became stronger and were able to resume work on their respective programs. The KIEC maintains ongoing communication and collaboration with civil society organizations. Participants from Karenni commented that administrative bodies tend to coordinate with civil society organizations when undertaking a project. Similarly, a participant from the Mese area agreed, stating:

> "The relationship between civil society organizations and administrators is quite strong and connected. It is because of their strong connection and relationship that the administrative bureaucracy here can function quite well."
>
> — A resident of Mese Region, October 2024

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the National Unity Government serves as the primary governing body in the Sagaing and Magway Regions. However, it has been observed that local administrative bodies outside of the National Unity Government also operate in some areas. Additionally, friction exists between armed groups and political entities, and in certain townships, overlapping administrations create further complications. These tensions burden the public and result in difficulties. Regarding taxation, the public has been observed to pay taxes to multiple groups, causing financial strain. Some administration bodies in the Sagaing and Magway Regions exhibit governance practices based on force and fear. Across all three regions (Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni), the rule of law remains weak, and there are deficiencies in the effective enforcement of regulations. Particularly in Sagaing and Magway, administrative bodies and armed groups display weak accountability and governance. A common observation in all three regions is that public services, especially support programs, lack integrity and are biased and discriminatory.

Regarding access to information, Karenni State faces severe restrictions due to limited internet access, and public awareness of information access methods is weak. Across all three regions, the capacity of administrative bodies to facilitate information dissemination remains inadequate. Locals, civil society organizations, and donors work independently to share information. While some access is available through telecommunication devices (walkie-talkies), PSI dishes, and Starlink devices, financial constraints and transportation challenges hinder accessibility. Media access is particularly weak in Magway Region, where instances of journalist monitoring, harassment, and arrests have been reported. Limited on-the-ground reporting contributes to discrepancies in information, necessitating efforts by administrative bodies to counter misinformation and rumors.

Freedom of expression is restricted in Sagaing and Magway Regions, where threats involving weapons are reported. The relationship between the public and administrators is distant, limiting open and free interaction. While protests against public administration bodies have occurred, fear of repercussions discourages public participation. In Karenni State, political and military tensions also limit freedom of expression. The influence of armed groups instills fear, making individuals hesitant

to speak out. However, it is crucial that freedom of expression is not classified based on "normal" versus "emergency" circumstances, as such limitations can restrict efforts to monitor governance, expose human rights abuses, and report injustices.

Regarding civil society organizations, Karenni State demonstrates strong cooperation between administrative bodies and civil society groups. CSOs play a critical role in public service delivery and operate with relative freedom. In contrast, the development of CSOs in Sagaing and Magway Regions varies across different areas. In most parts of these regions, CSOs must submit applications for permission at multiple levels, facing operational limitations and monitoring. While security concerns necessitate certain oversight measures, excessive restrictions can weaken public service delivery and diminish CSOs' ability to hold administrative bodies accountable.

Combining the research findings, discussions with local researchers, and observations from the lead researchers, we would like to offer the following recommendations:

- Regarding the administrative mechanisms in Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, measures should be taken to improve public access to information for reporting complaints and to ensure that complaint mechanisms are transparent and fair.
- In creating such complaint mechanisms, measures should be taken to protect the information of complainants and to ensure that complaints are acted upon promptly and that perpetrators are not immune from punishment.
- In Sagaing and Magway, which are the focus of this research, the influence and interference of armed groups on administrative arrangements among administrative, political, and armed actors should be limited and reduced. Furthermore, the overlapping and unclear responsibilities among administrators should be reviewed and clarified.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, the tax system, tax policies, and use of funds for public services should be made more transparent.

- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, armed groups should be supervised to ensure that their interactions with the public comply with established codes of conduct and that there is no suppression or intimidation through the use of weapons and force.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, administration bodies and public service providers should be educated and held accountable to ensure they are free from corruption.
- In addition, mechanisms should be created and implemented for reporting corruption by department and region.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, administration bodies should work with local organizations to find and implement more effective ways to disseminate information to the public.In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, to ensure that the public has free access to and use of information, the free construction of places where free information and internet access are available (e.g., community internet cafes, internet shops) should be guaranteed.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, media outlets should be protected so that they can freely gather news and report it, and efforts should be made to develop local media.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, measures should be taken to protect the public from local misinformation and disinformation, and to establish independent fact-checking agencies.
- In Sagaing, Magway, and Karenni States, which are the focus of this research, administration bodies should listen to the voices of civil society organizations and provide public services effectively, and protect the freedom of civil society organizations to operate.
- In Sagaing and Magway Regions, which are the focus of this research, efforts should be made to improve the administrative, management, and public service capacity of administration bodies.

Acknowledgement

Report Contributors

Athan, a research-based organization, was established by combining two organizations, (RTTL) Research Team for Telecommunications Laws and (WSJ) We Support Journalists, to promote Freedom of Expression with three core approaches – research, advocacy, and awareness-raising. Our organization continuously researches and investigates laws, customs, regulations, and case studies that oppress freedom of expression and works on legal reform according to democracy standards, campaigns, and lobbying to achieve a broader level of freedom of expression in respective country categories based on our research and investigation.

Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica is a non-governmental research organization that tends to political research, advocacy, and youth empowerment. To create a society that values human rights and does not discriminate based on the ground of different categories of people, NLTA focuses on peace, human rights, democratic values, and multiculturalism.

The Red Flag team was founded by activists and academics advocating for digital rights since before Myanmar's attempted military coup. As digital rights actions, the team focuses on research and social media monitoring, combating mis/disinformation, and promoting media and information literacy. We will continue strengthening people's capacity, supporting independent media, and advocating for digital rights in Myanmar.