ACLED Methodology and Coding Decisions around Political Violence in Myanmar

Coding political violence in Myanmar poses several methodological challenges given the complexity of the many conflicts in the country. In addition to armed conflict between the military and various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in the borderlands, the military in recent years has used nationlist sentiments to wage a campaign of violence and discrimination against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine state. Further, in the country's heartland, demonstrations have persisted not just over land and labor issues, but also to demand changes to the military-drafted 2008 constitution. A reference map of the country can be found at the end of this document.

Shortly after Myanmar gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1948, several ethnic groups took up arms against the state, demanding equality and the right to self-determination. Divisions between ethnic groups had long been fostered by the colonial practice of 'divide-and-rule'. This resulted in the center of the country being governed separately from the frontier areas where many ethnic minorities reside. Despite the signing of the Panglong Agreement prior to independence,[1] the failure of the central government to address ethnic concerns led to rebellions by Karen rebels in 1949 and by Kachin rebels in the early 1960s. Other ethnic minorities also took up arms during this period. In March 1962, the military seized power in a coup. It continued with a 'divide-and-rule' approach in its dealings with ethnic armed groups, and further adopted a policy of 'four cuts', which aimed to eliminate local support for armed groups (Smith, 1991).

In 2011, a quasi-civilian government led by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) replaced the military dictatorship. The military and the new government then started a national-level peace process with the goal of having all EAOs eventually accede to a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in addition to signing bilateral ceasefires, which had been the focus of the military in the 1990s. While the majority of ethnic armed forces in the country have not signed the NCA, ten groups — several with limited military capacity — have signed the agreement.[2] Based on military strength, the two most significant NCA signatories are the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) and the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State

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[1] Signed by Kachin, Shan and Chin leaders prior to the assassination of the Burmese independence leader Aung San in 1947, the Panglong Agreement has been held up by successive generations as representing a promise of equality and autonomy for ethnic minorities in the country.

[2] In 2015, eight groups signed the NCA, including: All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF); Arakan Liberation Party/Arakan Liberation Army (ALP/ALA); Chin National Front/Chin National Army (CNF/CAN); DKBA (Benevolent): Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (2010-); Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA); KNU/KNLA Peace Council (KPC); Pa-Oh National Liberation Organization/Pa-Oh National Liberation Army (PNLO/PNLA); Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S). In 2018, the New Mon State Party/Mon National Liberation Army (NMSP/MNLA) and the Lahu Democratic Union (LDU) also signed.

Army-South (RCSS/SSA-S). However, despite signing the NCA in 2015, clashes between the Myanmar military and both groups have since continued intermittently, with both groups recently suspending their involvement in formal peace talks with the military over concerns with the pace of progress ([Myanmar Times, 31 October 2019](#)).

Among the non-NCA signatories, two key groups, the United Wa State Party/United Wa State Army (UWSP/UWSA)[3] and the Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army (KIO/KIA), have since supported the formation of new alliances among non-signatory EAOs (see more details below). The groups in these alliances operate in Kachin state or northern Shan state, which has been the location of intense conflict in recent years. The United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), meanwhile, has clashed more recently with the military in northern Rakhine state (and Paletwa township in Chin state), where they aim to establish a base.

Despite the democratically-elected National League for Democracy (NLD) coming to power in 2016, there have been few changes in how the state has approached peace negotiations. Harkening back to the original Panglong Agreement, the current national-level peace process has been deemed the 21st Century Panglong Union Peace Conference ([The Diplomat, 6 August 2016](#)). The apparent goal of both the government and military is to have all ethnic armed groups eventually sign the NCA. Meanwhile (as discussed in an earlier ACLED [report](#)) many ethnic armed groups feel that issues of equality and self-determination should be discussed in greater depth prior to signing such an agreement.

In addition to battles between state forces and EAOs, there are a number of territorial disputes that have led to battles between EAOs themselves in Shan state. Most notably, the RCSS/SSA-S and the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA) have fought. The PSLF/TNLA accuses the RCSS/SSA-S of encroaching on its territory in the north. The PSLF/TNLA and the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army-North (SSPP/SSA-N) have allied with each other in several clashes against the RCSS/SSA-S in early 2019. Meanwhile, territorial disputes occasionally lead to clashes in other states, notably between the KNU/KNLA and the NMSP/MNLA in Kayin and Mon states.

Aside from the many internal armed conflicts between the military and EAOs, the rise of Buddhist nationalist sentiments has led to an outbreak of violence targeting Muslim communities in recent years — particularly the Rohingya Muslim community in Rakhine state. In 2012, there were several communal clashes between groups of Rakhine Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Shortly after, in

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[3] In 1989, after the collapse of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which had also been engaged in armed conflict with the Myanmar state since independence, four armed groups emerged in its wake, chief among them the UWSP/UWSA, the largest ethnic armed group in the country with an estimated 20,000 plus soldiers ([United States Institute of Peace, 29 April 2019](#)). While the ceasefire between the UWSP/UWSA and military has held over the past 30 years, the UWSP/UWSA has supplied other ethnic armed groups with weapons and have used their sizable force and backing by China to influence peace negotiations in the country.

2013, mob violence in the center of Myanmar targeting local Muslim communities resulted in many deaths, particularly in Meiktila. In October 2016 and again in August 2017, the military responded to attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) by launching a crackdown on Rohingya villagers which involved mass killings, mass rapes, and the razing of villages. Hundreds of thousands of Rohingya civilians fled to neighboring Bangladesh in the wake of these crackdowns.

The complexity of the disorder in Myanmar presents unique methodological challenges for the recording of political violence (for more info about ACLED-wide coding decisions, see ACLED's Codebook). The key challenges include: identifying and labeling the many actors involved; georeferencing village locations given different transliterations of names; and triangulating data from various sources reporting on events.

What does ACLED cover in Myanmar?

ACLED's coverage of political violence and demonstrations in Myanmar spans from January 2010 to the present.

How are key armed actors recorded?

State forces include standard military and police, as well as other paramilitaries which function as part of the state's security apparatus and are organized under the "Tatmadaw" (armed forces). In Myanmar, the regime years are 1988-2011, 2011-2016, and 2016-.[4] Three notable state forces sub-actors include:

- **Military Forces of Myanmar (2016-) Border Guard Force:** When the military implemented the Border Guard Force (BGF) scheme in 2009 and 2010, Myanmar military soldiers were integrated into some armed groups that had ceasefires with the military or armed groups that were factions of EAOs that acceded to the scheme. Most BGF groups are located in Kachin, Shan, Kayin, and Kayah states (The Asia Foundation, July 2016). They have fought alongside the military in battles against EAOs.

- **Military Forces of Myanmar (2016-) People's Militia Forces:** At the same time as the BGF scheme was implemented, local militias friendly with the military were transformed into People's Militia Forces (PMF). These groups do not have military soldiers integrated into their forces, but are expected to support military operations

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[4] Note that for all state actors, ACLED indicates the regime years in brackets, representing the activity of these actors under a particular political regime.

([The Asia Foundation, July 2016](#)). Many PMFs operate in Shan state and have fought alongside the military in battles against EAOs.

- **Police Forces of Myanmar (2016-) Border Guard Police:** A prominent state actor in Rakhine state is the Border Guard Police (not to be confused with the Border Guard Force), which focuses on security mainly along the border with Bangladesh. Before being disbanded in 2013, NaSaKa, coded as **Police Forces of Myanmar (2011-2016) Border Area Immigration Scrutinization and Supervision Bureau (NaSaKa),** provided security along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border ([International Crisis Group, 16 July 2013](#)).

Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have been coded using the names and abbreviations of both their political wings and armed wings. While presumably only the armed wings are involved in battles, some sources only refer to the political wing in their reporting. Thus, to avoid confusion for both researchers and users, both the political wing and armed wing names are included when coding an EAO actor. For example, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) is the political wing of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA); this group has been coded as "KIO/KIA: Kachin Independence Organization/Kachin Independence Army."

In some cases, where there has been splintering of EAOs, ACLED has clarified which actor by using years. For example, this is the case for the DKBA in Kayin state where ACLED has distinguished three different DKBA groups ([Karen Human Rights Group, September 2016](#)). When the military's Border Guard Force scheme came into effect in 2009 and 2010, the original DKBA founded in 1994 (coded as "DKBA (Buddhist): Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (1994-2010)") was split, with one faction becoming BGF and another continuing under the name Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (coded as "DKBA (Benevolent): Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (2010-)"). The "DKBA (Benevolent): Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (2010-)" group signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. This group then later split in two following several battles against the military on the Asia Highway in 2015. In early 2016, the new splinter faction named itself the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (coded as "DKBA (Buddhist): Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (2016-)") after the original group's name. Media sources do not always clarify which faction of the DKBA they are reporting on, but researchers use additional information (e.g. names of commanders, locations of battles, etc.) to decide on the appropriate group to code.

ACLED also records alliances among EAOs. There are currently three key alliances among the EAOs that have not signed the NCA. These include:

- **Northern Alliance (NA-B)**: Formed in late 2016. Comprised of four EAOs: KIO/KIA; ULA/AA; PSLF/TNLA; and the Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party/Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNTJP/MNDAA).

- **Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC)**: Formed in early 2017. Comprised of seven EAOs: UWSP/UWSA; KIO/KIA; ULA/AA; PSLF/TNLA; MNTJP/MNDAA; SSPP/SSA-N; and the Peace and Solidarity Committee/National Democratic Alliance Army-Eastern Shan State (PSC/NDAA-ESS).

- **Brotherhood Alliance**: Formed in 2019, and comprised of the PSLF/TNLA, MNTJP/MNDAA, and ULA/AA. These three groups have yet to sign bilateral ceasefires with the military and were previously prevented from signing the NCA as the military thought this would grant undue recognition to smaller, more recently formed ethnic armed groups (International Crisis Group, 24 September 2019). All three groups are part of the Northern Alliance under which negotiations with the military and government are held.

In cases where all four groups making up the Northern Alliance fight together, NA-B: Northern Alliance is coded as the main actor. In cases where only two or three of the groups are identified by the media as fighting together, those specific groups are coded as the main actor and associate actors. The same holds true for the Brotherhood Alliance. The FPNCC is not currently coded as an actor in armed clashes as the members of the alliance have not all fought together on the battlefield.

How are locations recorded in Myanmar?

There are five admin levels in Myanmar:

1. State/Region
2. District
3. Township
4. Village Tract/Town
5. Village/Ward

Villages are coded with geoprecision 1 when the source reports that an event occurred in the village. Wards within towns are not coded (the town is instead coded at geoprecision 1). When a source notes the event occured near a village, the village is coded with geoprecision 2. If an event is noted as occurring between two villages, one of the villages is coded and geoprecision 2 is recorded.

When information about which village or town an event took place in is not included in the source, village tracts, townships and districts are all recorded with geoprecision 2. When an event location cannot be coded below admin1, the location is coded at a natural location where possible, and, if not, at the capital of the state/region with geoprecision 3. No events are coded at fuzziness beyond the admin1 level (e.g. at the country level).

Coding villages in Kachin and Shan states can be especially challenging given the lack of standard English transliterations used in sources. The English transliteration for the Shan language name of a village can differ from the English transliteration for the Burmese language name of the village. Often, the Burmese language name for the village is a transliteration of the Shan name. For example, *Mong* is commonly part of village and township names in Shan state, but the Burmese transliteration is written မိုင်း which produces a sound more akin to *Mine* in English.

ACLED primarily uses location data developed by the [Myanmar Information Management Unit](#) to code village and township locations in Myanmar. Where different spellings are possible, the data are reviewed for both English and Burmese spelling variations.

There are cases where a village name is given, but the township information is not provided. This poses a challenge as there are villages with the same name in different townships. In such cases, the village that corresponds to areas of known conflict is recorded. In some sources, places that are not townships are reported as being townships; most often these locations are village tracts. If the geo-coordinates for the village cannot be found, but the township is known, the township is recorded as the location of the event. In cases where the township location is not given and the village location cannot be found due to transliteration issues, the location is set at a township where fighting is known to occur between the two armed groups. This is determined based on previously coded events and, in some cases, the battalion locations of the armed groups involved. Such events are set at geoprecision 3.

How are events sourced?

Each week, ACLED researchers review dozens of English and Burmese language sources to code political violence and demonstration events. One challenge for sourcing events in Myanmar is that journalists have been restricted from accessing and reporting from many conflict locations in the country. Journalists who have reported on such conflicts have been subject to judicial harassment and even imprisonment for their reporting ([Committee to Protect Journalists, 31 July 2019](#)).

Despite these challenges, several sources still manage to report on the daily battles between the military and various ethnic armed groups (as well as between ethnic armed groups themselves). With the growth of 'ethnic media' outlets, subnational sources have increasingly been able to produce more in-depth reporting from conflict areas ([Burma News International, 23 September 2019](#)). For example, sources such as Kachinland News or the Shan Herald Agency for News have detailed reporting on clashes each week in their respective states. As a result, subnational sources have been favored to code events over national and international sources where available, as they tend to have better access to conflict areas and stronger connections with the people and groups in those areas. This results in more detailed and timely reporting. Over one-third of all events coded in the Myanmar dataset come from such subnational sources.

On the other hand, some respected national sources — such as the Irrawaddy, which has reporters assigned to cover the many conflicts in the country — have been able to access these conflict zones with some regularity despite the risks. This, in addition to their coverage of riots and protests, means that national sources are also widely sourced, and are responsible for approximately one-third of all events coded in the country.

While the vast majority of information comes from subnational, national, regional, and international media sources (approximately 85% of events combined), a number of other source types are reviewed as a means of supplementing data gaps and triangulating details (for details on ACLED's overall sourcing methodology, see the Sourcing FAQ). As one example, ACLED has partnered with a local organization, Myanmar Peace Monitor (Burma News International), to improve coverage of battle events in several states. Data from the Myanmar Peace Monitor have been particularly useful in supplementing coverage of conflicts involving the Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA) in Shan state. Additionally, Burma News International's website aggregates various 'ethnic media' sources into a single space, thus making the sourcing of subnational sources easier. Approximately 8% of events coded in the Myanmar dataset (and 25% of battles in Shan state) come from this local partner.

Aside from traditional media reports and data from local partners, ACLED regularly sources reports by the UN, international monitoring groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, and local human rights organizations. These reports (categorized under 'other' in terms of source scale in the data) will most often improve ACLED's coverage of violence against civilians (VAC). For example, reports from the Burmese Women's Union and the Kachin Women's Association Thailand have contributed to the coding of events concerning violence targeting women in conflict zones. In total, these 'other' sources have supplied details for approximately one-third of all events capturing violence against civilians in Myanmar. Such reports likewise allow for events to be revised where more information has become available since the initial traditional media report was published. In this way, ACLED's data are continually improved upon as new information comes to light.

Lastly, while 'new media' can be a powerful supplemental source in some contexts, it varies widely in terms of quality. For Myanmar, ACLED's use of new media sources has been limited, especially in light of concerns around the prevalence of 'fake news' (Wired, 6 July 2018) and fake accounts (CNET, 22 August 2019) on social media platforms, like Facebook, coupled with the difficulty in verifying the information reported on such platforms. As such, ACLED has deferred to traditional media and reports from reputable organizations to code events. However, ACLED is currently exploring strategies to establish relationships with those operating relevant new media accounts to verify the quality of reporting and integrate such reporting into weekly sourcing.

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How has violence against the Rohingya in Rakhine state been coded?

Coding the violence against the Rohingya population has posed additional challenges separate from coding clashes between the military and EAOs. The ACLED dataset covers both the communal clashes that occurred between Rakhine and Rohingya communities in Rakhine state in 2012, as well as the violence perpetrated against the Rohingya population by the military in October 2016 and August 2017.

The mass violence against Rohingya civilians in 2017 has been especially difficult to capture. This is due to the government and military restricting access to northern Rakhine state for journalists and aid workers. Attempts to report on the violence have led to imprisonment, most notably for two recently released Reuters journalists who reported on the mass killing in Inn Din village ([Myanmar Times, 7 May 2019](#)).

While in the aftermath of the violence, many organizations were able to document the abuses that took place in the region by interviewing those who fled into Bangladesh,[5] there are challenges to coding the reports based on these interviews. Some organizations have skillfully used survey data to estimate the aggregated number of fatalities and rapes during the violence ([Medecins Sans Frontieres, 12 December 2017](#); [Physicians for Human Rights, 30 August 2018](#)). The lack of precise time and location information in some cases, however, does not allow for the disaggregation of all reported incidents into individual, discrete events per ACLED methodology. ACLED only codes those events for which there is sufficient detail within published reports with regard to the event date (when it happened); actors (who it involved); and location (where it happened). ACLED continues to research and revise events as additional information is made available.

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[5] Violence in the refugee camps for Rohingya who fled to Bangladesh is coded in the Bangladesh dataset.