Four years after

Surveying post-coup perceptions and lived experiences in Myanmar

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K4DM was launched in 2017 by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC. It nurtures a new generation of young actors to promote inclusion, gender equality, respect for diversity, and prosperity for all in Myanmar. Making use of online courses, fellowships and research on digital spaces, the initiative supports diverse students and researchers primarily in the Myanmar diaspora and research institutions outside the country.

Abstract

Four years have passed since the Myanmar military seized power in a coup on February 1, 2021, ending the country's transition toward democracy. In the years since, Myanmar's political, social, and economic landscape has undergone profound and devastating changes. This study examines public perceptions and lived experiences in Myanmar four years after the coup. Drawing on an online survey of 3,058 individuals across Myanmar, conducted between December 2024 and January 2025, the report offers insights into attitudes toward federal democracy, the state of public administration, access to education, the country's territorial organization, and the impacts of digital repression.

Executive summary

We fielded an online survey, hosted on Qualtrics, between December 17, 2024, and January 31, 2025. This produced a convenience sample of 3,058 respondents. Our key findings are as follows:

- While there is strong desire for federal democracy across all segments of Myanmar society, younger generations express slightly less enthusiasm compared to adults, and individuals who have attended college show stronger support compared to those with less education.
- Bamar respondents are as supportive of federal democracy as the system of government for the future Myanmar as their non-Bamar counterparts. Urban residents in the sample are also as supportive of federal democracy as their rural counterparts.
- While the SAC's administrative systems are still functioning in various parts of the country, there are some signs of tenuous functionality. The NUG has made some headway with its administrative bases in Sagaing and Magway regions, but its administrative presence remains minimal elsewhere.
- Government schools remain the primary school choice for families, especially in urban areas.
- Although NUG-run programs and schools have minimal presence overall, they are more prevalent in rural areas and regions than in urban areas and states.
- When it comes to school safety, rural residents perceive schools in their areas as safer than those in urban areas. Similarly, state residents view their schools as safer than those in regional areas.
- Regarding perceptions of the government's role in state and society, youth respondents prioritized higher living standards and economic opportunities over the protection of political rights more than adult respondents did. Similarly, urban residents, college-educated individuals, and those with higher incomes also placed greater emphasis on economic well-being over political rights.
- When it comes to preferences for ethnic-based or territorial-based federalism, the vast majority of respondents did not express a clear preference. Among those who did, both ethnic minorities and Bamar respondents favored territorial-based federalism over ethnic-based federalism.
- When asked about territorial organization, ethnic minorities were more open to the creation of a Bamar State than Bamar respondents were.
- Regarding the territorial integrity of Shan State, Shan and other ethnic minority respondents appear more open to partitioning the state into several smaller states than Bamar respondents.
- Internet usage has declined sharply, especially in rural areas, and urban residents face heightened risks of arrest or threats for online activities compared to rural populations.

Contents

1. Introduction

Four years have passed since the Myanmar military seized power in a coup on February 1, 2021, ending the country's transition toward democracy. In the years since, Myanmar's political, social, and economic landscape has undergone profound and devastating changes.

The military's brutal crackdowns, widespread public resistance, the emergence of the National Unity Government (NUG)—a parallel government made up of activists and politicians who oppose the coup—and the increasingly important role of the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) has reshaped governance, education, and daily life across the country. As the revolution to remake Myanmar's political landscape according to a federal democracy framework enters its fifth year, the people of Myanmar continue to navigate the complexities of war, displacement, economic hardship, and digital repression while also striving to imagine and build a more inclusive and representative future.

This study examines public perceptions and lived experiences in Myanmar four years after the coup. Drawing on an online survey of 3,058 individuals across Myanmar, conducted between December 2024 and January 2025, the report offers insights into attitudes toward federal democracy, the state of public administration, access to education, the country's territorial organization, and the impacts of digital repression. Since the study relies on a convenient online sample, its findings are better suited for comparing important segments of society rather than capturing broader national trends. As such, while the study cannot reliably estimate what percentage of the population holds certain views or has certain experiences, it can still provide valuable insights into how these views and experiences vary across different demographic groups.

The report begins with a discussion of how the survey data was collected and key characteristics of the sample. Then we present our findings in six sections:

- support for federal democracy,
- public administration,
- education access,
- perceptions of the role of government,
- territorial organization, and
- digital repression.

Finally, we conclude with a discussion of policy implications and suggestions for future research.

2. Survey data

We fielded an online survey, which was hosted on Qualtrics, between December 17, 2024 and January 31, 2025. Respondents were recruited through Facebook advertisements as well as through our personal networks. Respondents were offered a mobile top-up credit of 5,000 kyat for their time and data usage.

While 5,111 survey attempts were recorded on Qualtrics, only 3,336 respondents reached the informed consent document. Of these, 114 did not consent to participate in the study and were discontinued, while another 106 likely dropped out due to internet connectivity issues. Among the 3,116 respondents who successfully began the survey, 58 were identified as duplicates and removed. As a result, our final sample consists of 3,058 respondents.

2.1 The sample

Since the sample is drawn from a convenience sample of online users, it is not expected to be representative of Myanmar's overall population. While the gender distribution is relatively balanced, the sample overrepresents youth, urban residents and individuals who have attended college (see Figure 2.1.1). At the same time, the proportion of respondents identifying as Buddhist aligns with most recent census data.

FIGURE 2.1.1: SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS COMPARED TO NATIONAL POPULATION

	Percentage of sample	Percentage of population
Male (age 18+)	51	47.1
Urban residents (age 18+)	63.2	28.1
Youth	59.5	47.4
College educated (age 25+)	48.6	12.4
Buddhist	87.9	87.9
State residents	38.8	29.3
Ethnic minorities	36.1	31.5

Note: For the sample column, 'youth' refers to respondents aged 18-34, whereas in the population column, it refers to those aged 15-34. Population benchmarks for gender, urban residency, and ethnic minorities come from the General Administration Department 2019 Township Reports; the numbers for gender and urban residency are based on tabulations by the Myanmar Information Management Unit while the numbers for state residency and ethnic minorities are based on tabulations Jap and Courtin (2022). Population benchmarks for youth, religion and state residency come from the 2014 Census; note that number religion includes the non-enumerated population. Finally, the population benchmark for college educated comes from the World Bank's Global Dataset.

Beyond gender, age, urban-rural differences, and religion, ethnic identity significantly shapes individuals' daily experiences and perceptions. In our recruitment efforts, we intentionally oversampled ethnic minorities to ensure that we have a sizable ethnic minority sample. To do so, we targeted recruitment advertisements to the states (as opposed to regions) where ethnic minorities account for the majority of the local population. As Figure 2.1.1 shows, this effort yielded a slight oversampling of residents in the states and ethnic minorities. The ethnic composition of our sample is detailed in Figure 2.1.2.

Our respondents come from all states and regions of Myanmar, though very few are from Chin, Kayah, and Rakhine States. As Figure 2.1.4 indicates, a large proportion of respondents—at least a third—from Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Mon, and Shan States, as well as Tanintharyi Region, are concentrated in a single township. In contrast, respondents from other administrative units are more widely distributed across multiple townships.

FIGURE 2.1.2: THE SAMPLE BY ETHNICITY

	# of respondents	% of sample	% in ethnic state
Kachin	130	4.3	74
Kayah	29	1.0	62
Kayin	168	5.5	45
Chin	67	2.2	44
Mon	175	5.8	83
Bamar	1954	64.2	19
Rakhine	54	1.8	30
Shan	212	7.0	81
Lahu	9	0.3	
Kokang	5	0.2	
Ta'ang	6	0.2	
Pa-aing	71	2.3	
Ahkar	7	0.2	
Dawei	5	0.2	
Kayan	8	0.3	
Danu	23	0.8	
Innthar	31	1.0	
Shanni	2	0.1	
Zomi	2	0.1	
Rohingya	2	0.1	
Chinese	12	0.4	
Indian	17	0.6	
Other	55	1.8	
Total	3,044	100	

Note: The column '% in ethnic state' indicates percent residing in the state associated with the ethnic group (e.g., Kachins in Kachin State). The number for Bamar indicates the percentage residing in the states as opposed to the regions. These statistics come from the General Administration Department 2019 Township Reports, tabulated by Jap and Courtin (2022). Note that there are no corresponding statistics for other ethnic categories in the table as they lack a corresponding "ethnic state."

FIGURE 2.1.3: THE SAMPLE BY AGE GROUP

	# of respondents	% of sample
18 - 24	987	32.28
25 - 29	400	13.08
30 - 34	433	14.16
35 - 39	301	9.84
40 - 44	224	7.33
45 - 49	198	6.47
50 - 54	185	6.05
55 - 59	144	4.71
60 - 64	91	2.98
65 - 69	54	1.77
70 and above	41	1.34
Total	3,058	100

FIGURE 2.1.4: THE SAMPLE BY STATE/REGION

	# of respondents	% of sample	Township with the most respondents (%)	Township missing (%)
Kachin State	146	4.9	Myitkyina (39)	17
Kayah State	36	1.2	Loikaw (47)	9
Kayin State	151	5.1	Hpa-an (52)	5
Chin State	30	1.0	Hahka (33)	3
Mon State	265	8.9	Mawlamyine (38)	7
Rakhine State	22	0.7	Pauktaw (15), Taungok (15)	5
Shan State	536	18.0	Taunggyi (38)	< 1
Naypyidaw	81	2.7		
Sagaing Region	248	8.3	Kalay Myo (9), Sagaing (9), Monywa (9)	35
Tanintharyi Region	51	1.7	Dawei (32)	4
Bago Region	218	7.3	Taungoo (18), Pyay (13)	< 1
Magway Region	321	10.8	Magway (19), Pwint Phyu (15)	4
Mandalay Region	310	10.4	Meithilar (10), Kyaukpadaung (9)	5
Yangon Region	405	13.6	Sanchaung (5), Hlaing (4), Kamaryut (4)	37
Ayeyarwady Region	158	5.3	Pathein (16), Hinthada (15)	3
Total	2978	100		

Note: The number in parentheses in the fourth column indicates the percentage of respondents from the specified state/region who reside in the specified township (e.g., % of respondents from Kachin State residing in Myitkyina). The number in the fifth column indicates the percentage of respondents from the specified state/region whose township information is missing.

3. Findings

The findings from our study aim to provide critical insights into the perceptions and lived experiences of people in Myanmar. This section explores these key findings in greater detail, with the thematic subsections largely following the order of the survey questions: 1) Support for federal democracy, 2) Public administration, 3) Education access, 4) Perceptions of the role of government, 5) Territorial organization, and 6) Digital repression.

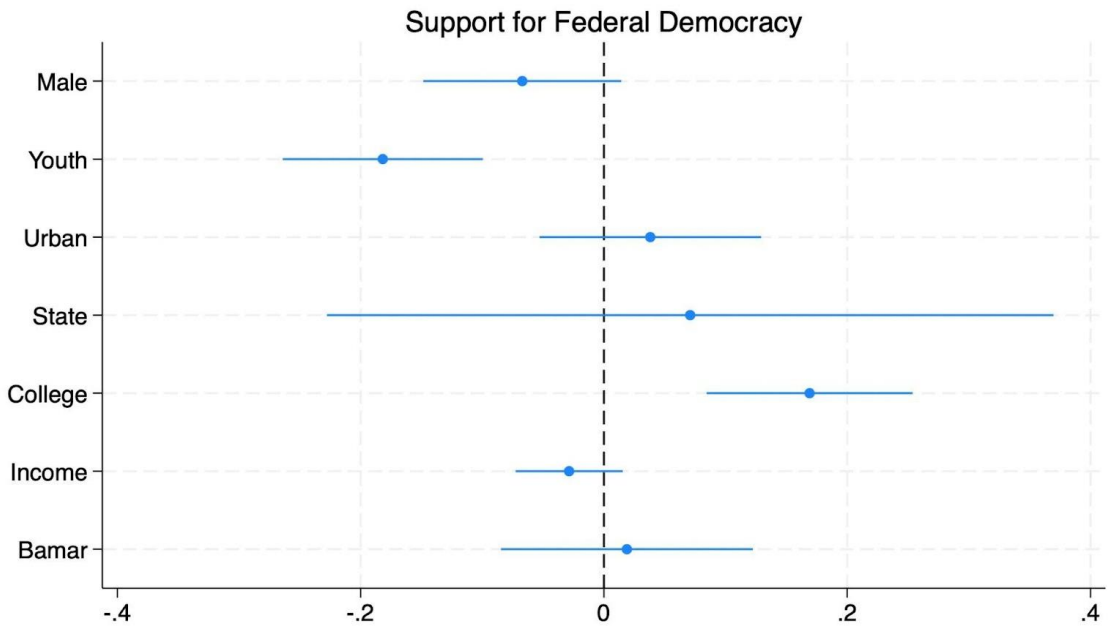
3.1 Support for federal democracy

In Myanmar's dynamic ethnic politics, federalism has become a pivotal theme in envisioning the country's future political landscape. Our survey results indicate that most ordinary Burmese want federal democracy as the form of government Myanmar should have in the future, reiterating findings from previous studies: 4.6 percent of our sample somewhat or strongly opposed federal democracy while 73.3 percent somewhat or strongly supported it. Note that nearly 20 percent selected "not sure" as their response.

Using a multivariate regression analysis, we investigate whether the support for federal democracy is driven by a particular segment of the sample. Results indicate that youth are slightly less supportive of federal democracy compared to adults in the sample and respondents who have attended college are slightly more supportive of federal democracy compared to those with lower levels of education. However, we do not find that support for federalism differs by gender, urban/rural divide, state/region divide, income level, or by ethnicity (specifically Bamar versus non-Bamar). In other words, Bamar and non-Bamar respondents in the sample are equally supportive of federal democracy. These findings suggest that support for federal democracy in Myanmar is widespread in all segments of the society.

A potential explanation for the lower levels of support for federal democracy among youth is the exodus of young people who support federalism—to the point of making personal sacrifices—to borderland areas where our survey had very limited reach.

FIGURE 3.1.1: COEFFICIENT PLOT: SUPPORT FOR FEDERAL DEMOCRACY



Note: The model region/state fixed effects. Income level and support for federalism are normalized by standard deviation. All other variables are binary. The bars indicate 90% confidence intervals.

3.2 Public administration

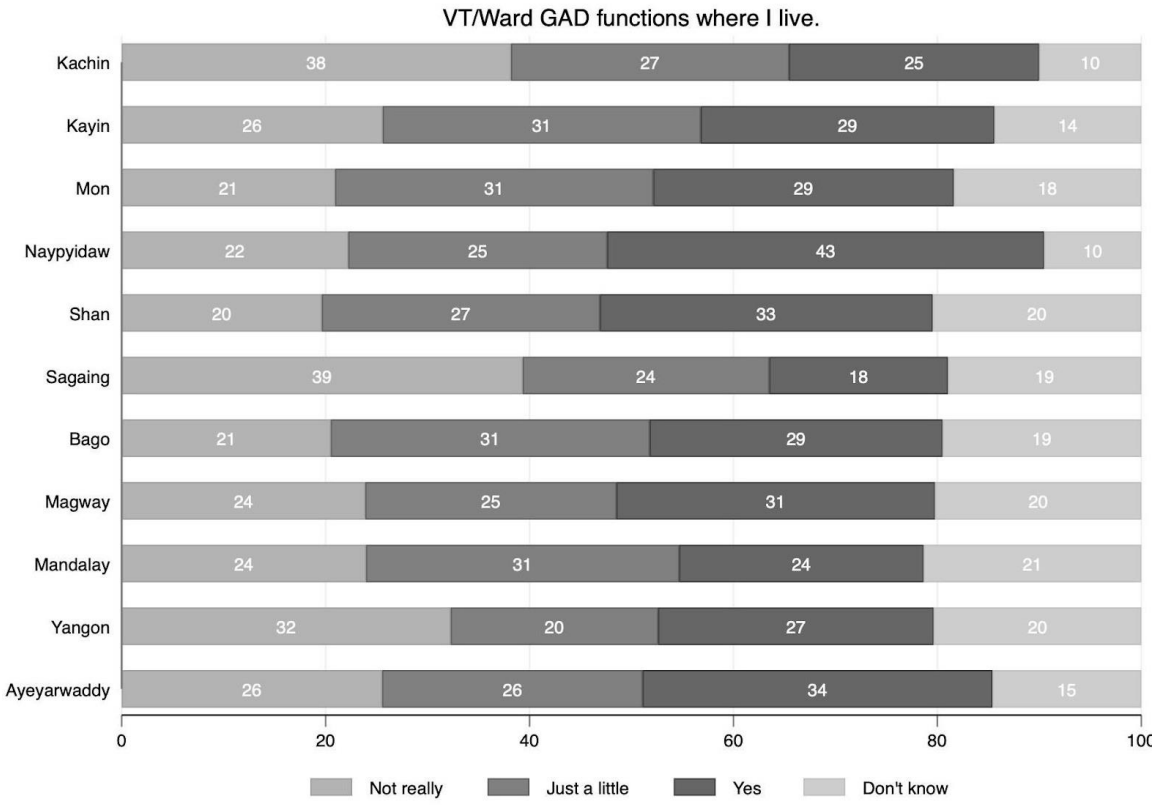
Myanmar's state public administration suffered an immediate and significant blow when the military staged a coup on February 1, 2021. The very next day, on February 2, civil servants—including healthcare workers and street-level bureaucrats—launched a protest movement that came to be known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Participation in the CDM reportedly peaked between February and March 2021, with estimates from the National Unity Government (NUG) suggesting that between 400,000 and 1 million government employees joined the strikes. While many eventually returned to work, some estimates indicate that about 214,000 civil servants remain on strike. In addition to the drastically reduced staffing, government office buildings and schools have also faced considerable violence, leading to widespread closures of government offices and schools.

In this section, we examine the extent to which public administration structure still functions in Myanmar based on people's lived experiences. To do so, we examine responses to the following survey question: 'Does the GAD village tract/ward administrator function where you live? Distribution of responses is reported by state in Figure 3.2.1.

Our findings suggest a significant weakening of the government's public administration structure across the country. Figure 3.2.1 confirms that Naypyidaw, the command center of the SAC, is where the government's public administration structure functions best—the percentage of respondents reporting 'yes' is not only the highest among all administrative units but also significantly higher than in the next highest location (Ayeyarwady Region). However, even in Naypyidaw, the functioning of the GAD appears

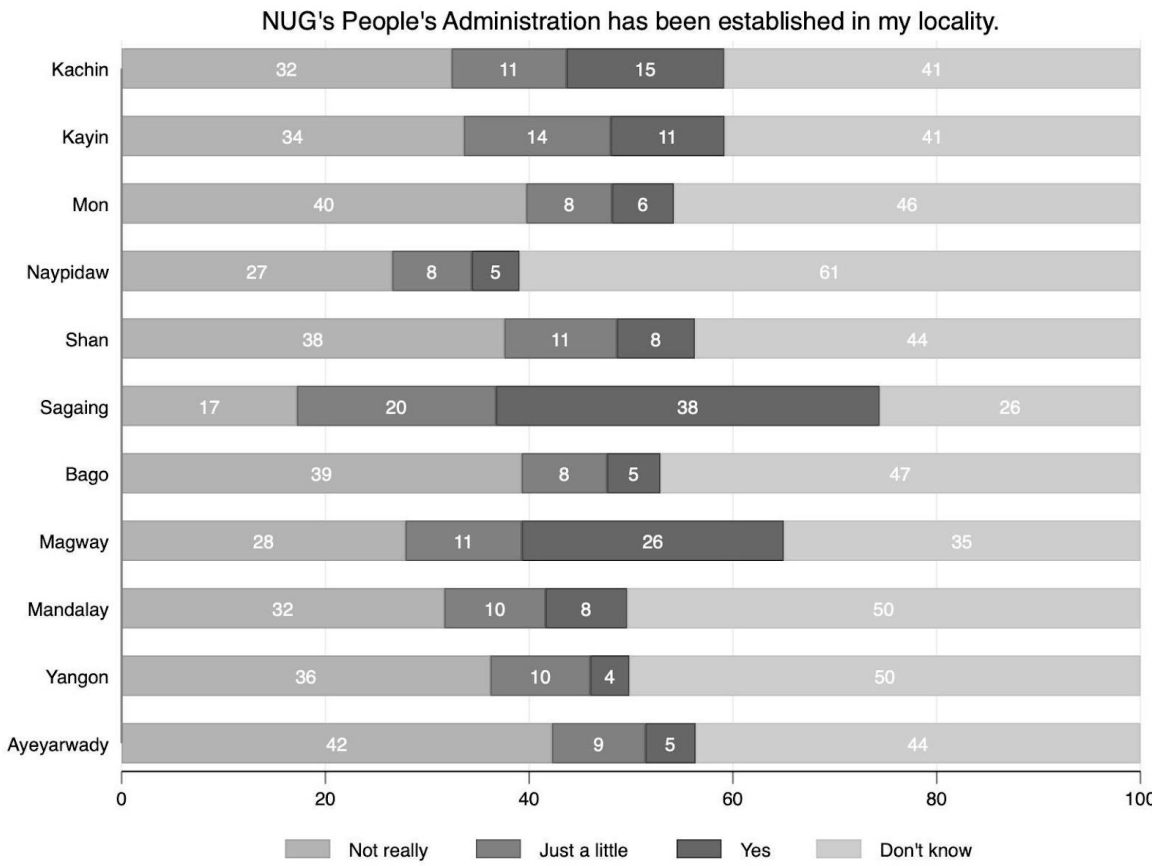
tenuous, as the percentage of respondents reporting 'yes,' while the highest, still falls short of a majority. Figure 3.2.1 also shows that the government's public administration structure functions worst in Sagaing Region, where the percentage of respondents reporting 'yes' is the lowest. These patterns align with responses to another survey question that asked about the presence of the (NUG) People's Administration: 'Has the (NUG) People's Administration been established in your locality?' Our findings, shown in Figure 3.2.2, suggest that the NUG's public administration has made the most headway in Sagaing and Magway Regions where 38 and 26 percent of the respondents reported 'yes', respectively. Its presence in other administrative units appears to be quite limited, with only 4 to 8 percent of respondents in most states and regions answering 'yes' to the question.

FIGURE 3.2.1: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONSES



Note: Administrative units with fewer than 50 respondents are not shown.

FIGURE 3.2.2: DISTRIBUTION OF SURVEY RESPONSES



3.3 Education access

Education access in Myanmar has significantly deteriorated in the aftermath of the February 2021 coup, impacting millions of students across the country. The military occupation of schools and universities has led to widespread boycotts among students and teachers ("Myanmar's Militarisation of Education" 2025). There has also been bombing, airstrikes and other violent activities in and around school buildings, leading to school closures and a climate of fear.

To fill the much-needed education gap, alternative education programs began emerging in places that were nearly solely served by the government schools; these include programs and schools administered by the NUG and private schools (Metro 2021). Since 2021, the NUG has established an estimate of 6000 interim community-based schools (*Than Lwin Times* 2024). Additionally, the NUG collaborates with both international and local education entities to further expand education access. According to the NUG's Ministry of Education (MoE) report, the NUG administered 5,949 basic education schools in the 2023/24 academic year—an increase of over 2,000 schools compared to the previous year.

Given NUG's stronger presence in the rural areas and the dry zone relative to its presence elsewhere in the country, it is not surprising that the NUG education network has a strong rural and regional focus, with over 480,000 primary school students in the Sagaing Region enrolled in NUG-administered schools. In addition to operating 75 online education programs, the NUG, in collaboration with local authorities and ethnic armed organizations, also established new universities in historically underserved areas such as the Aung San Comprehensive University for Magway, the Chindwin Comprehensive University for Sagaing, and the Kachin State Comprehensive University (*University World News* 2024).

School attendance

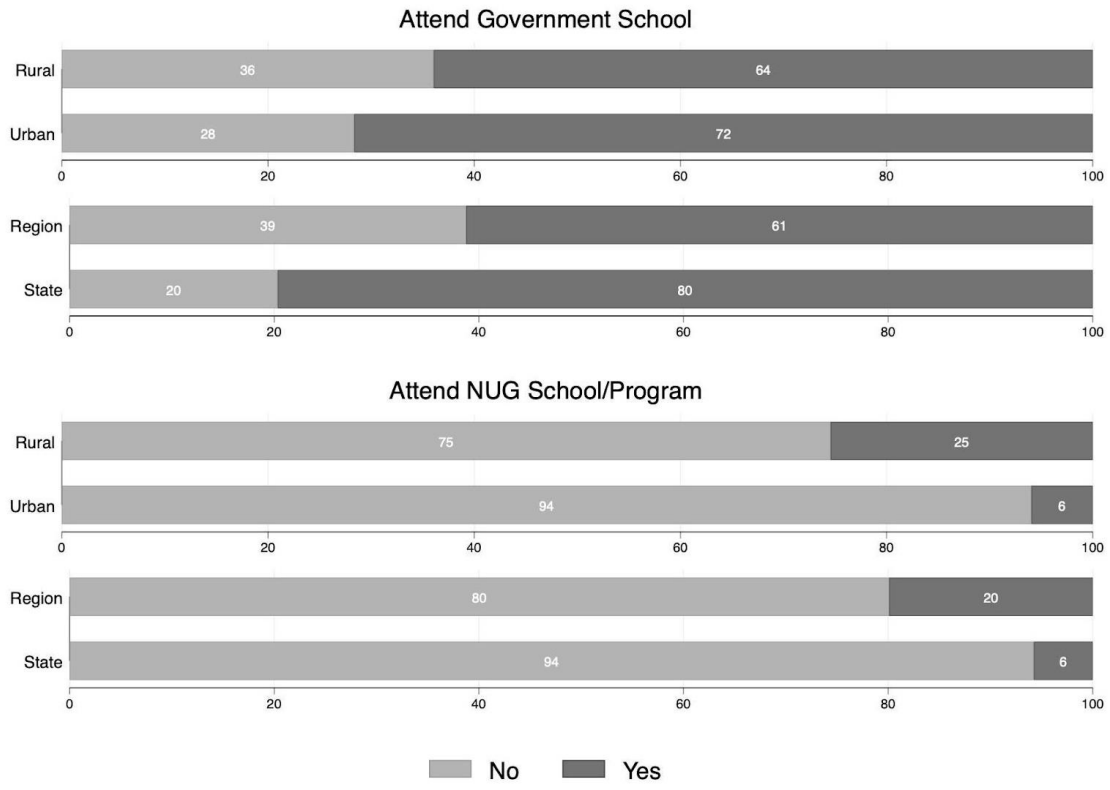
Findings from our study reveal critical insights into Myanmar's fractured education landscape following the 2021 military coup. About two thirds of the respondents in our sample live in a household with school-age children, including university students, suggesting that access to education is an issue affecting a significant portion of Myanmar households.

Of the respondents in households with school-age children, only two thirds reported that children in their households are currently attending school. While our study does not allow us to probe how much the coup and on-going crisis in Myanmar exacerbated school enrollment, a study conducted in 2023 by the World Bank suggests that enrollment among 6 to 22 year-olds dropped by about 33% between 2017 and 2023 (Bhattacharya, Saurav Dev et al. 2023).

Respondents with school-age children in the household were asked what type of school the children in their household attend. We find that government schools remain the primary avenue for education, serving well over two-thirds of the families in our sample. This finding aligns with a previous study, which estimates that up to 80% of students are enrolled in government schools (Bhatta et al., 2023). Among alternative types of schools, schools administered by the National Unity Government and private schools have some traction, with 13% and 12% of the respondents reporting enrolling in schools and programs established by the NUG and secular private schools, respectively.

Enrollment in government schools varies significantly by location (see Figure 3.3.1). Urban residents in our sample are more likely to report government school attendance than rural residents. Likewise, respondents from states are more likely to report that children in their household attend government schools compared to those from regions. Enrollment in schools and programs established by the NUG follows a different pattern than enrollment in government schools (see Figure 3.3.1). Consistent with existing reports, our findings indicate that the schools and programs established by the NUG have a stronger presence in the rural areas and the regions.

FIGURE 3.3.1: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE BY LOCATION



Security concerns

Since the coup, there have been many attacks on schools and educational institutions across the country. It has been estimated that 174 schools and universities were damaged or destroyed between February 2021 and April 2024, primarily due to airstrikes, heavy weaponry, and ground offensives by the Myanmar military (Myanmar Witness 2024). These attacks have caused at least 64 fatalities and 106 injuries, though verifying the exact numbers remains challenging. Schools in conflict zones have been particularly affected, with some facilities suffering repeated strikes (Smith 2024). In many cases, schools were not direct targets but were damaged as part of broader attacks on villages. Security and safety concerns, compounded by unpredictability of attacks affecting schools, no doubt negatively impacted school enrollment (Karen Human Rights Group 2024).

The use of schools as military bases by armed forces has also escalated, further endangering students and staff. In Karenni State, for instance, Loikaw University was occupied by military units before being attacked by resistance forces. Additionally, students and teachers have faced threats of violence, harassment, and forced recruitment under the junta's new conscription laws since 2024.

In our study, a significant number of respondents reported bombing, airstrikes and shooting on schools in their locality. While experiences of attacks on local schools do not seem to vary by urban-rural divide, a greater proportion of state residents reported attacks on their locality compared to region residents.

As Figure 3.3.2 shows, 34% of urban residents and 35% of rural residents reported attacks on schools in their locality. However, 30% of region residents and 40% of state residents reported attacks on schools in their locality. Interestingly, rural residents are more likely to perceive schools in their areas to be safe compared to urban residents and state residents are more likely to perceive schools in their areas to be safe compared to region residents (see Figure 3.3.3).

FIGURE 3.3.2: ATTACKS ON SCHOOLS

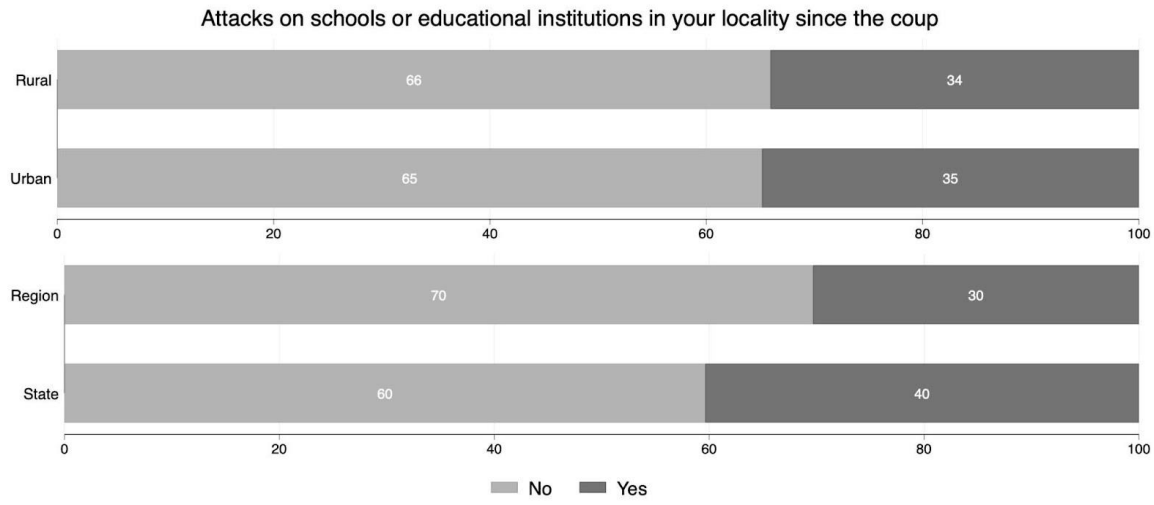
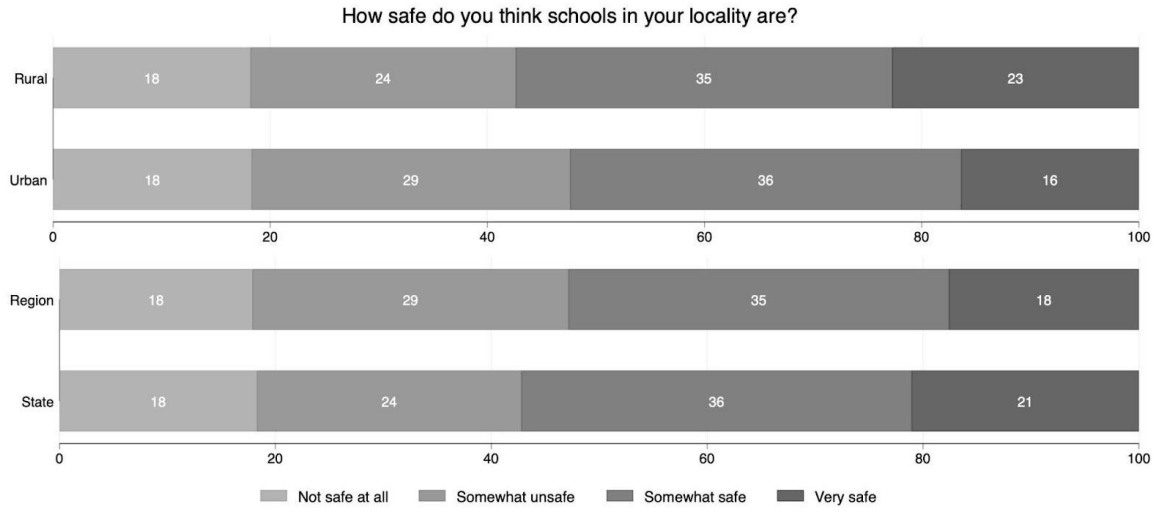


FIGURE 3.3.3: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY



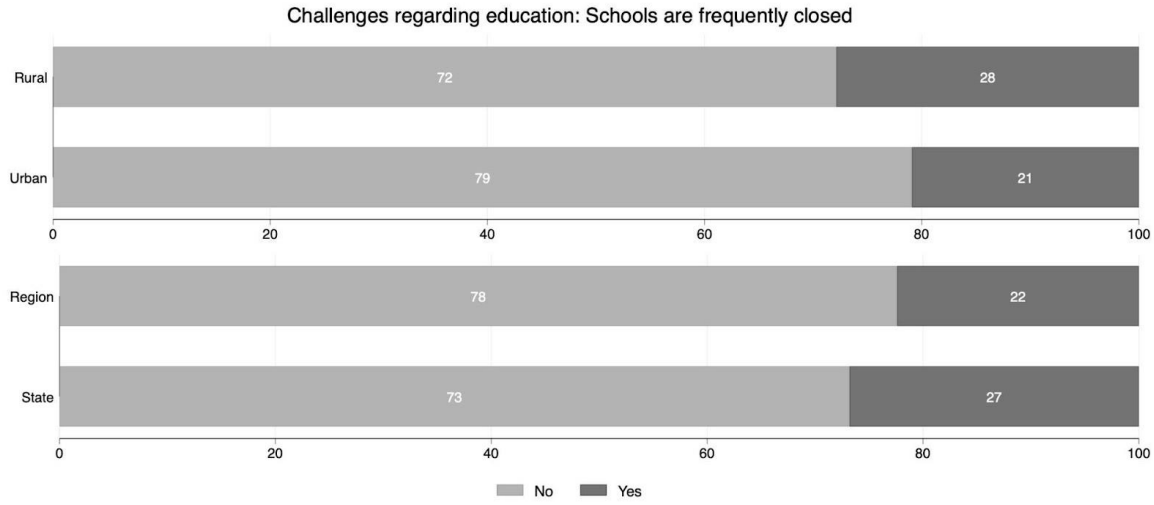
School closures

School closure is one of the biggest challenges facing students in Myanmar. Approximately 13,700 public schools, more than a quarter of all schools are closed due to ongoing conflict (RFA Burmese 2024). Some regions are particularly hard-hit. For example, only 38 out of 1,500 schools in Chin state remain operational. Similarly, Sagaing Region has seen over 4,200 school closures. Even where schools are open, challenges persist. Many lack qualified teachers, because since the coup, nearly 30% of Myanmar's teaching workforce has been dismissed or left their posts. These shortages have left schools with limited resources and untrained staff (Roy et al. 2023).

In Figure 3.3.4, the bar graph illustrates the responses to the following statement, "Challenges toward education: Schools are often closed," divided by rural vs urban areas and regions vs states of Myanmar. Among those polled in the rural areas, 28% agreed that schools are often closed, and 72% disagreed. In comparison, however, in the urban zones there were fewer respondents who agreed and only 21% agreed the schools are often closed, but 79% disagreed. In comparison between regions and states, 22% of the respondents in regions agreed that schools are frequently closed against 78% who disagreed. In states, a proportionately greater percentage of respondents (27%) agreed with the statement whereas 73% disagreed.

These results suggest that rural areas and states experience more school closures compared to urban areas and regions. This could be attributed to the greater challenges rural and state areas encounter, such as conflict, weak infrastructure, or instability, which may limit access to education.

FIGURE 3.3.4: SCHOOL CLOSURE

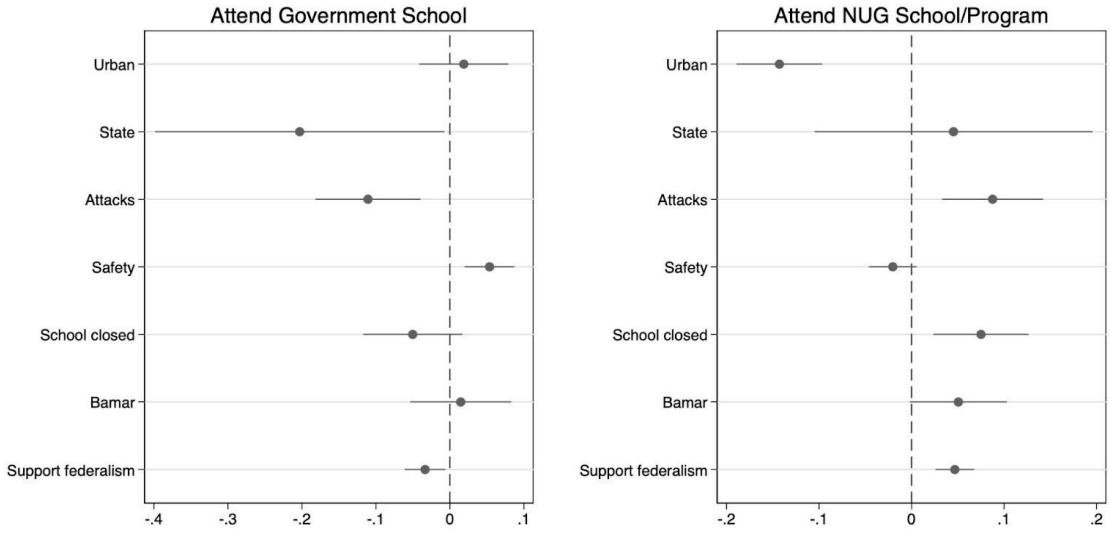


Correlates of government school attendance

We conducted a multivariate regression analysis to examine the factors associated with attendance in government schools and NUG schools/programs (see Figure 3.3.5). Our findings indicate that state/region residency, safety concerns, and ideological leanings are correlated with government school attendance. Specifically, respondents residing in states, those reporting attacks on schools in their area, and those less supportive of federalism are more likely to send children in their household to government schools. Additionally, those who perceive schools in their area as safe are also more likely to opt for government schools. Notably, urban-rural residency and ethnicity do not appear to influence this decision. Urban residents are just as likely as rural residents to enroll children in government schools, and non-Bamar individuals are as likely as Bamar individuals to do the same.

Our analysis of attendance in NUG schools/programs provides some evidence that closure of government schools is an important factor that led families to enroll in NUG schools/programs. We also find evidence that ideological leanings and ethnicity may play a role as well. Bamar are more likely than non-Bamars to enroll children in NUG schools/programs and those who are more supportive of federalism are more likely to do the same. Additionally, urban residents are significantly less likely than their rural counterparts to enroll children in NUG schools/programs. This may be because NUG schools/programs are primarily in rural areas (Irrawaddy 2022).

FIGURE 3.3.5: COEFFICIENT PLOT: SCHOOL ATTENDANCE



Note: Both models include region/state fixed effects. Perception of safety and support for federalism are normalized by standard deviation. All other variables, including the dependent variable, are binary. The dependent variable is also binary. The bars indicate 90% confidence intervals.

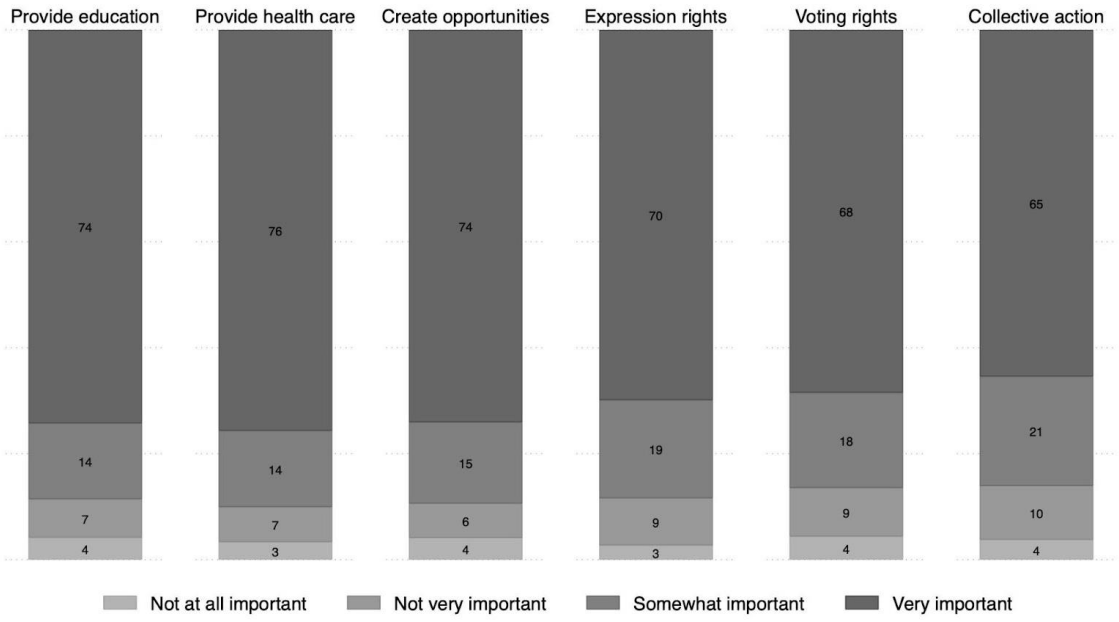
3.4 Perceptions of the role of government

This section investigates how the people of Myanmar perceive the role of government with respect to provision of tangible benefits and protection of political rights. After decades under authoritarian rule and amid an ongoing revolution for freedom and democracy, political rights are expected to be a priority. However, given day-to-day economic hardship widespread across the country, pocketbook issues are also likely to hold significant weight. To better understand how people prioritize these issues, we asked the following questions: How important is it to you that…

- The government provides quality education for you/your family.
- The government provides quality health care for you/your family.
- The government creates economic opportunities for you/your family.
- You have the right to express your thoughts freely (whether it is related to politics or not).
- You have the right to participate in the election of local and national officials
- You have the right to organize collective action for social and political purposes.

Findings from our survey confirm that both tangible benefits and political rights are highly important to the people of Myanmar (see Figure 3.4.1). Interestingly, though, pocketbook issues appear to take a slight precedence. While 74 to 76 percent of respondents rated quality education, quality healthcare, and economic opportunities as "very important" government responsibilities, slightly fewer—65 to 70 percent—considered freedoms of expression, electoral participation, and collective action for social and political purposes to be equally critical.

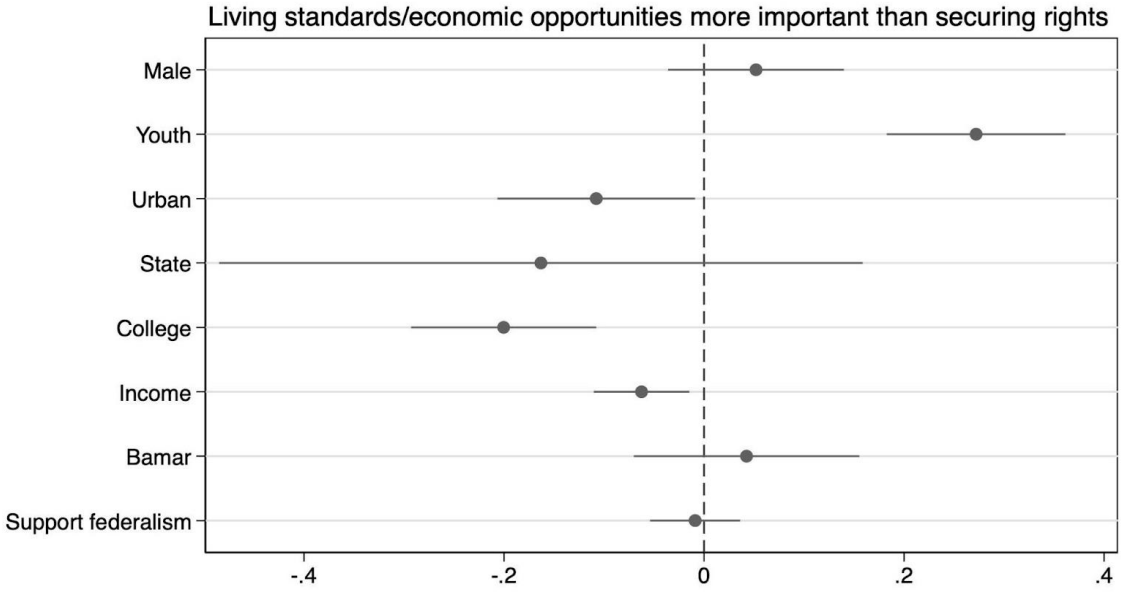
FIGURE 3.4.1: PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITIES AND POLITICAL RIGHTS



To further examine how respondents prioritize tangible benefits over political rights, we asked them how they view the following statement: Having higher living standards and better economic opportunities is more important to me than securing civil and political rights. Consistent with the findings presented in Figure 3.4.1, we find that the majority agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with just 27 percent indicating their disagreement. Thus, it appears that although political rights are certainly important to respondents almost as much as social and economic opportunities, when forced to pick one over the other, respondents prioritize the latter over the former on the aggregate level.

Finally, we conducted a multivariate regression analysis to better understand whether the aggregate finding discussed above is driven by specific demographic factors. As our findings, reported in Figure 3.4.2, indicate gender, residency in state or region, ethnicity (Bamar versus non-Bamar) or support for federalism do not seem to impact prioritizing tangible benefits over securing rights. What seems to matter however is age, urban residency, education level, and income level. The youth respondents—defined as age 34 or younger—are more likely to prioritize higher living standards and economic opportunities over political rights, compared to the adult respondents. At the same time, urban residents, those who have attended college, and those with higher income are less likely to prioritize higher living standards and economic opportunities over political rights. This indicates that provision of tangible benefits tends to be of greater importance in those populations which may be facing higher economic constraints, such as rural, non-college educated, and lower income groups. Only when those constraints are relaxed to a certain extent, political ideals can begin to take precedence over economic opportunities. Thus, although it remains true that securing political rights is important for Myanmar people, there should be no less emphasis, if not more, on the provision of tangible goods and services.

FIGURE 3.4.2: COEFFICIENT PLOT: OPPORTUNITIES VERSUS RIGHTS



Note: The model region/state fixed effects. Income level and support for federalism are normalized by standard deviation. All other variables, including the dependent variable, are binary. The dependent variable is on a four-point scale. The bars indicate 90% confidence intervals.

3.5 Territorial organization

Since its founding, Myanmar has been divided into "states" and "regions" (formerly called "divisions"). Today, there are seven regions—administrative units where the Bamar constitute the majority—and seven states, each associated with a specific ethnic group (e.g., Chin State with the Chin ethnic group). This territorial setup has significant implications for ethnic equality and recognition. First, it implicitly acknowledges "ethnic-based" administrative units, though only in theory, as Myanmar has always functioned as a unitary state. Second, several ethnic groups do not have a corresponding territorial unit. For the ethnic majority, the question arises whether the seven regions are implicitly considered Bamar areas, which could undermine the principle of ethnic equality. For ethnic minority groups, there are additional concerns about their "double minority" status—being minorities both nationally and within their own states—which may also undermine the principle of ethnic equality. This section examines three key aspects of the ongoing debates surrounding Myanmar's current territorial organization.

Ethnic-based versus territorial-based federalism

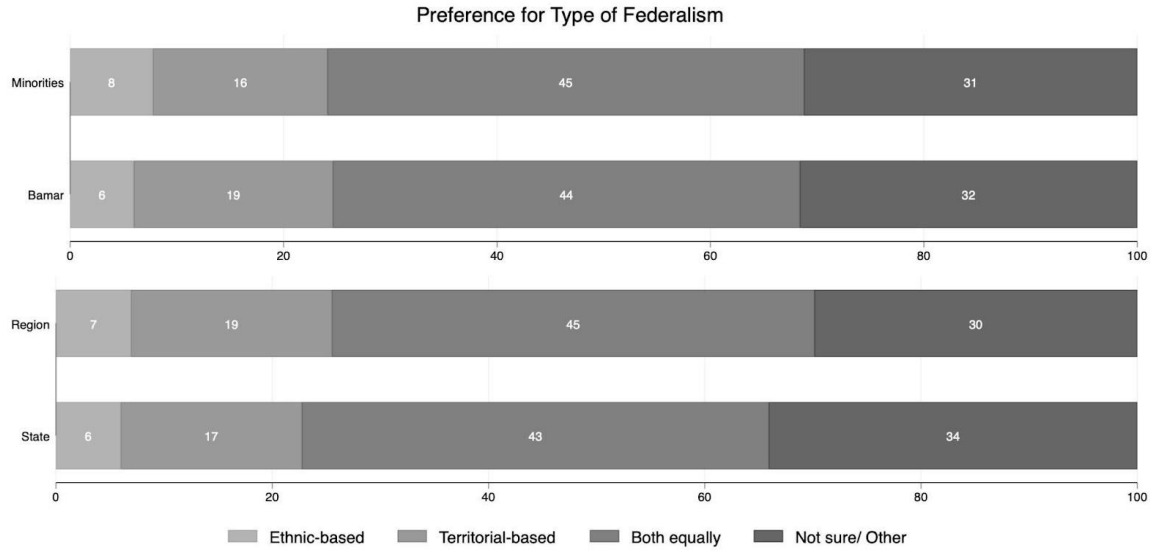
In post-coup Myanmar, Federalism not only stands at the forefront of the resistance movement but is widely perceived to be the optimal solution for managing ethnic diversity in Myanmar. At the same time, a concrete federal framework has yet to materialize. An important debate in the on-going discussion on federal framework relates to the *type* of federalism suitable for Myanmar.

Ethnic-based federalism, also known as ethnofederalism, refers to a federal system in which administrative units are explicitly defined along ethnic lines. In contrast, territorial-based federalism divides administrative units by geography, without formally linking them to specific ethnic groups—even though some units may still have a dominant ethnic group. For generations, ethnic minority leaders in Myanmar have advocated for federalism with ethnic-based constituent units, though not always exclusively. At the same time, we know very little about preferences among ordinary people in Myanmar—both ethnic minorities and the ethnic majority—regarding the types of federalism.

To better understand preferences for different types of federalism among the Myanmar public, we included the following question in our survey: 'Federalism can be ethnic-based or territorial-based. Which form of federalism do you think is more suitable for Myanmar?' Respondents could choose from five options: 'Ethnic-based federalism,' 'Territorial-based federalism,' 'Both equally,' 'Not sure,' or 'Other.' The third option ('Both equally') is most similar to the current territorial organization in Myanmar.

Figure 3.5.1 illustrates three notable patterns in the responses. First, Bamar and minority respondents expressed very similar views. Second, the vast majority—over 70 percent—did not express a clear preference for either type of federalism, selecting "both equally" or "not sure/Other." Third, among those who did express a preference, support for territorial-based federalism was twice as high as support for ethnic-based federalism. Overall, the status quo appears to be the most preferred option among the Myanmar public.

FIGURE 3.5.1: PREFERENCES FOR TYPES OF FEDERALISM



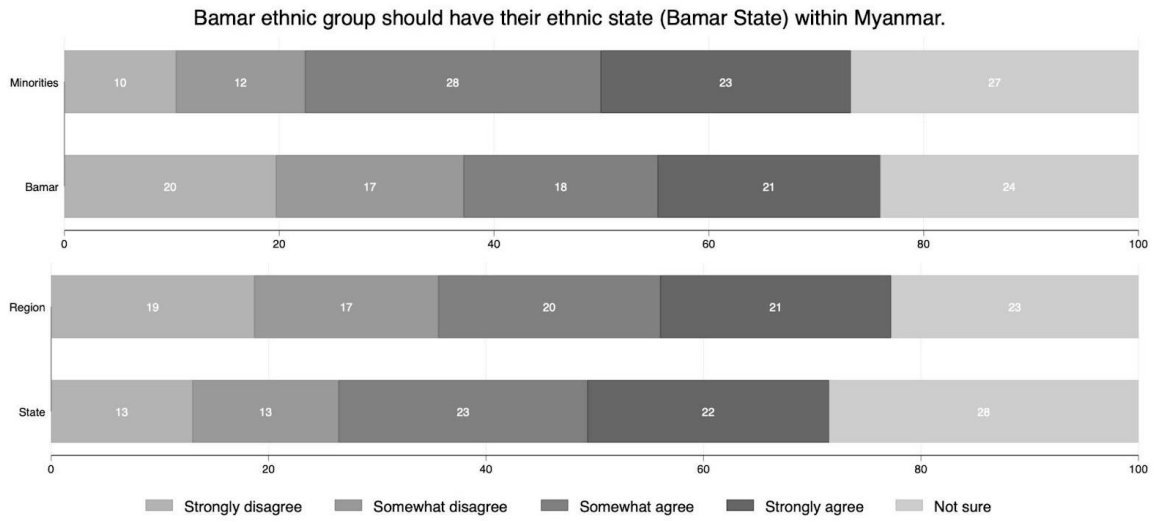
Creation of "Bamar State"

The earliest reference to the concept of "Bamar State" dates to 1961 when it was mentioned in the decisions and amendments of the Union Constitutional Amendment Steering Committee. Then in 1992, major ethnic armed organizations, including the Bamar, signed the Manerplaw Accord, agreeing to form a Federal Union with their respective ethnic states. During the 2000s, several ethnic political parties proposed the formation of the Bamar State at the National Convention held by the military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). However, when the quasi-civilian government led by Thein Sein commenced in 2011, there was no formal discussion regarding the formation of the Bamar State. Discussions about the Bamar State reignited after the 2021 military coup. Some like the Bamar People Liberation Army (BPLA), a resistance organization formed after the coup, have expressed the desire to establish the Bamar State (BPLA 2024). At the same time, the interim constitution of the Sagaing Federal Unit States that it shall be referred to as the Sagaing Federal Unit once confirmed. Unlike the Bamar State's singular ethnic-based concept, the Sagaing federal unit is more territorial. It encompasses only the Sagaing region and the people who live within it, regardless of race.

To better understand public opinion on the creation of Bamar State, we asked respondents: "Many ethnic groups in Myanmar have their own ethnic state (e.g., Chin State, Kachin State, etc.). To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The Bamar ethnic group should have their own ethnic state (Bamar State) within Myanmar?"

Figure 3.5.2 presents the responses, revealing several key insights. First, about a quarter of respondents selected 'not sure,' indicating a lack of strong opinion on the issue. Second, minority (non-Bamar) respondents were more likely to support the creation of Bamar State than Bamar respondents. In fact, Bamar respondents were nearly 70% more likely to disagree with the statement than minority respondents. Finally, among Bamar respondents, the number who agreed with the statement was roughly equal to the number who disagreed, suggesting that this is a highly contested issue among the Bamar public.

FIGURE 3.5.2: TERRITORIAL REORGANIZATION: CREATION OF BAMAR STATE



Re-imagining Shan State

Prior to 1948, what is today known as the "Shan State" was known as "the Federated Shan States" which consisted of several princely states, each ruled by hereditary rulers known as *Saophas* or *Sawbwas*. It is hardly surprising that the amalgamated "Shan State" is the largest and most ethnically diverse subnational unit in Myanmar today. Some of the largest ethnic groups residing in Shan State include Shan (estimated to be 30.1% of the Shan State's population), Pa-O (13.4%), Bamar (12.2%), Palaung/Ta'ang (8.2%), Danu (5.7%), Lahu (5%), Kokang (3.6%), Innthar (2.7%), Kachin (2.6%), Wa (2.1%), and Akha (2%) (Jap and Courtin 2022).

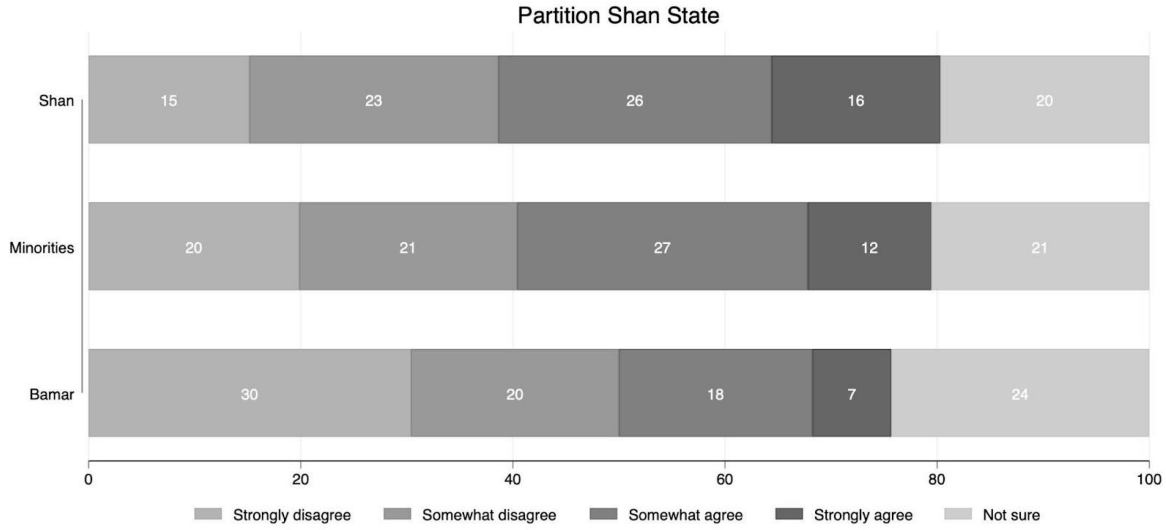
Furthermore, Shan State is arguably the most politically fragmented administrative unit in contemporary Myanmar. The northern part, in particular, is home to numerous ethnic armed organizations. Following Operation 1027, launched by the Brotherhood Alliance, SAC forces suffered significant losses, including the loss of several key military posts, such as the northeast regional command. As a result, the Kokang army (MNDAA) and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army could expand control over many territories, some of which are adjacent to areas claimed by the Kachin Independence Organization. These developments could ensue in competing territorial claims.

One potential solution to the ongoing territorial conflict is to reimagine Shan State as several distinct territorial units — in other words, to partition the currently amalgamated Shan State. To gauge how residents of Shan States view this issue, we asked the following survey question: "Shan State is home to many ethnic groups. Some people argue that Shan State should be split into many states based on the population of the ethnic groups residing within it. To what extent do you agree with this view?" 426 respondents answered this question. While this small sample is by no means representative, distribution of responses disaggregated by ethnicity provides important insights.

Figure 3.5.3 shows that a significant portion of respondents do not appear to have an opinion on this matter. When responses are disaggregated by ethnicity, we find (somewhat surprisingly) that Shan

respondents showed the least disagreement, while Bamar respondents showed the most. Among those who expressed an opinion, Shan respondents were nearly evenly split, though slightly more agreed with the position than disagreed. Among other minorities, the pattern was similar, with slightly more agreeing than disagreeing. In sharp contrast, Bamar respondents who disagreed were twice as many as Bamar respondents who agreed with the position.

FIGURE 3.5.3: REORGANIZATION: PARTITION OF SHAN STATE



3.6 Digital repression

There was a dramatic growth in internet access during the reformed period in Myanmar. Between 2010 and 2016, regular internet users increased from 0.25% of the population to over 25%. The expansion of internet access in Myanmar went hand-in-hand with Facebook usage, so much so that "the platform emerged in Myanmar as a primary online gateway, becoming synonymous with the internet for many" (Samet, Arriola, and Matanock 2024). For many, the internet and Facebook became not only the primary mode of communication but also the primary source of news and a platform for collective action.

However, since the military coup in 2021, internet access has become increasingly restricted. Since the coup, new laws have been introduced and have been used as tools for repression. For instance, the military regime has amended key legislation, including the Electronic Transactions Law and Telecommunications Law, to criminalize dissent and expand surveillance powers (RFA 2021). Under these laws, individuals can be charged for spreading 'false information' online which is a term frequently used to target journalists, activists, and opposition voices. Additionally, the Cybersecurity Law, enacted on January 1, 2025, imposed severe penalties for online activities deemed 'harmful to state stability,' granting authorities sweeping powers to block websites, intercept communications, and force tech companies to store data locally. It criminalizes unapproved VPN use, unauthorized cybersecurity services, and online gambling, with fines reaching up to 20 million kyats and imprisonment of up to three years. The law also grants authorities extensive powers to block websites, intercept communications, and mandate local data storage, severely restricting online freedoms.

There have also been internet blackouts and website restrictions (Associated Press 2025). While the regime justified these restrictions under the national security pretexts, they are no doubt politically motivated, aiming to silence dissenting voices and to limit public discourse. Authorities have frequently invoked emergency laws to justify cutting off mobile data services, blocking independent media websites, and restricting the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). The junta has enforced internet blackouts in various regions, particularly in areas with active conflicts, such as Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Chin, Rakhine, and Shan States, as well as the Sagaing and Magway Regions. Additionally, in cities like Yangon and Mandalay, security forces have conducted random inspections of individuals' mobile phones, threatening those found using VPNs with fines or arresting them. The crackdown on digital freedoms has also been reinforced by the Penal Code (Section 505A), which criminalizes criticism of the military and has been used extensively to arrest individuals based on their online activities.

In addition to heightened surveillance and internet blackouts, there is also rising data costs. Rising data costs in Myanmar have become a significant barrier to digital access. Telecom providers, under pressure from the military regime, face increased operational costs due to service disruptions and the need to comply with surveillance demands. This leads to higher data charges, further exacerbating the digital divide and limiting access to critical information, particularly for marginalized groups and activists. As many struggle with affordability, the junta's control over digital spaces tightens, reducing the ability of citizens to communicate securely or stay informed.

Below, we examine how these changes have affected internet usage and experiences of digital repression in post-coup Myanmar.

Changes in Internet use

We find that Internet use has declined significantly across Myanmar, though the decline appears to be particularly pronounced in rural areas (see Figure 3.6.1). Interestingly, the proportion of respondents who reported an increased internet use is not insignificant—about a quarter to a third of the respondents. This increase may be due to the need to rely on digital platforms for work, activism, or communication.

Not only has internet use declined, widespread experiences of censorship were also reported. As Figure 3.6.2 shows, well over 60 percent of respondents in rural areas, urban areas, states and regions. We see a similarly high percentage of respondents reporting experiences of censorship among Bamar and minorities (not shown on graph).

Open text responses reveal that these changes had a devastating impact on their academic aspirations and interpersonal relationship. A few respondents recounted the implication of digital repression this way:

> *"I have had to deactivate the personal social media accounts I used before the coup. I'm using a new account which feels like a new environment without any acquaintances. Because the internet connection was cut off, it was not easy to search, read, and write my thesis, so I have had to give up my PhD journey."*

> *"A teacher I respect unfriended me because I shared a political post. Her brother is a military personnel."*

> *"Because there is no freedom but instead surveillance, I have not been able to share anything."*

FIGURE 3.6.1: CHANGES IN INTERNET USE FREQUENCY SINCE 2021

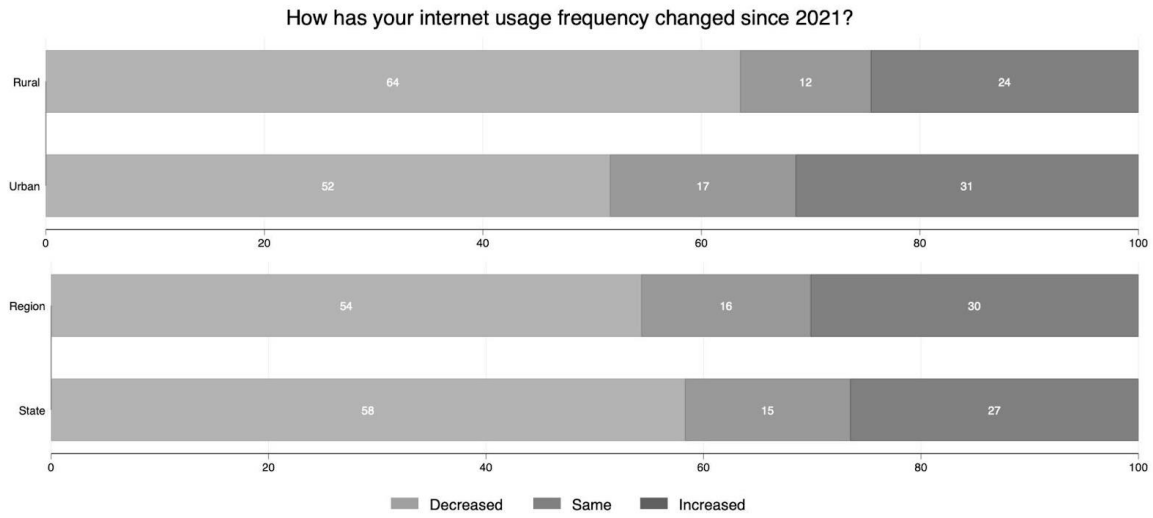
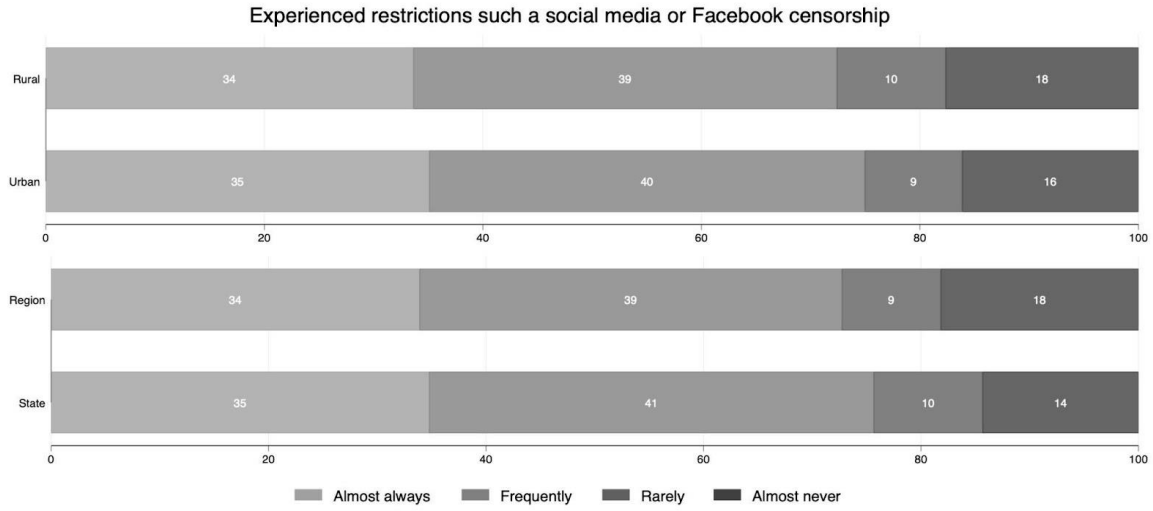


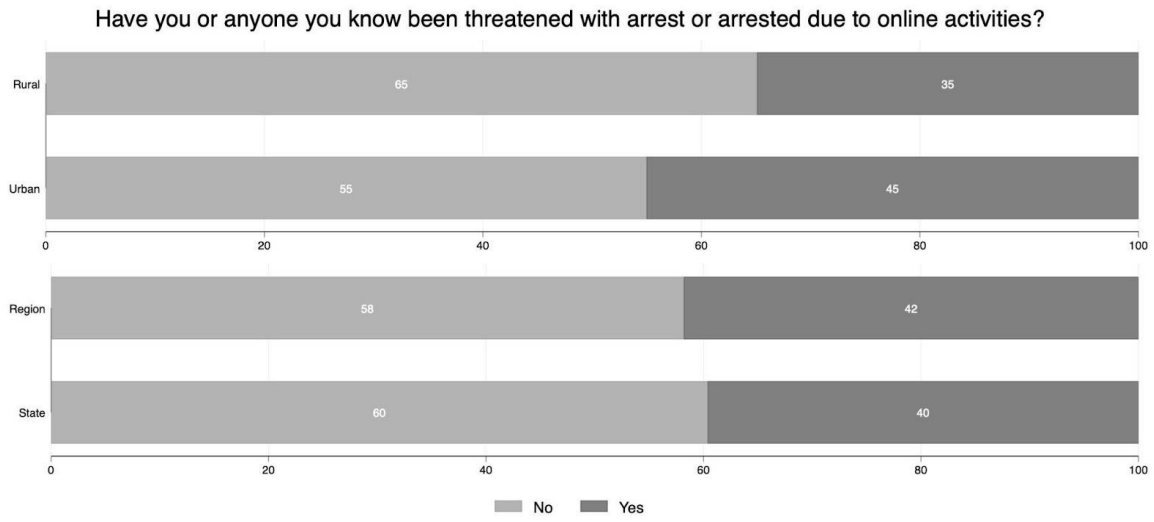
FIGURE 3.6.2: EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE RESTRICTIONS



Experiences of repression

Online activity in post-coup Myanmar has become increasingly dangerous. To better understand experiences of digital repression we asked the respondents whether they or someone they knew had been threatened with arrest or actually arrested due to posts or activities on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other social media platforms. As Figure 3.6.3 shows, urban residents were significantly more likely than rural residents to report such experiences. However, experiences of repression were reported at similar levels among residents of states and regions. Risks appear to be particularly pronounced in urban areas, where internet activity is more concentrated and closely monitored.

FIGURE 3.6.3: EXPERIENCES OF THREAT AND ARREST



Several respondents wrote open text responses reflecting on their personal experiences highlighting the extreme surveillance and life-threatening consequences faced by those speaking out against the government.

> *"I'm one of the defectors from the military. Previously I was a consultant anesthetist from a military hospital in central Myanmar, Mandalay Division. One of my colleagues changed his Facebook profile to black when an airstrike killed many civilians in Kachin State. When I saw his black Facebook profile, I asked him "What happened, friend." He responded by sending me a link to Kachin news media. That evening, he was arrested. When I got the information about his arrest, I deleted my own Facebook account."*

> *"They tried to arrest me because I posted about a fundraiser for people displaced by war. So I have had to flee."*

> *"My friends and I have been threatened with death. In Myanmar, many adults say that social media is not good. And the Myanmar military is very restrictive. I have had to move to another place—a city I lived in a few years ago—because there is absolutely no human rights or federal law."*

4. Conclusion

Four years after the 2021 coup, Myanmar remains at a crossroads. The findings from our study offer critical insights into the perceptions and lived experiences of people in Myanmar, and they have several important implications for discourse on Myanmar's current political climate and policies aimed at sustaining the struggle for federal democracy.

First, they underscore the need to recognize that for everyday people in Myanmar, tangible public goods and services—such as access to quality education, healthcare, a decent standard of living, and livelihood opportunities—take priority over abstract political ideals. This priority is particularly evident among young people who have their whole lives ahead of them. It is crucial to acknowledge that Myanmar's youth are at the forefront of the ongoing revolution not only because they believe in the abstract ideals of federal democracy but because they believe that a federal democratic Myanmar would offer them better life opportunities than the current junta-ruled Myanmar does. Recognizing these needs means the NUG must prioritize meeting them. The NUG's failure to do so has been criticized as its biggest weakness: "At the core of the problem is that the NUG styles itself as the legitimate government of Myanmar but struggles to provide public services or protect citizens on the ground" (Frontier 2023). However, it is encouraging to see the NUG shifting its focus, "prioritizing internal politics over international engagement and urging ministers in exile to return to Myanmar" (Lin 2024). It is crucial for the international community to prioritize supporting resistance forces in addressing humanitarian needs and building service provision infrastructure.

Second, the findings suggest the need for caution when predicting the collapse of the junta or reporting on territorial gains made by resistance forces. Territories in Myanmar can be thought of as areas under SAC control, areas under resistance forces' control, or areas under mixed control. Findings from our study suggest that areas under SAC control have shrunk, while areas under resistance forces' control, particularly those held by non-ERO resistance forces and those outside of the dry zone or *Anya*, remain limited. In contrast to what some have suggested—that the resistance forces have gained significant territorial control—what is more likely is that areas under mixed control have expanded significantly. If much of Myanmar is indeed under mixed control, what are the long-term implications of this reality? This question should be seriously considered by NUG policymakers, the international community, and within the public discourse in Myanmar.

Finally, several of our findings are quite surprising, highlighting the need to reassess common assumptions often made about the motives and preferences of ordinary people in Myanmar. One of the most unexpected findings in this study concerns visions of territorial organization. While ethnic minorities are often assumed to favor ethnic-based federalism, our results suggest that this may not be the case. In fact, the vast majority of ordinary people may be unsure or may not even have a preference on this matter. Ethnic leaders and organizations should recognize the possibility of such ambivalence, which could have significant policy implications. Overall, these findings underscore the need for further research into the preferences of key stakeholders in Myanmar.

For future research on Myanmar, we recommend a two-pronged approach. First, online survey tools should be used to regularly explore emerging questions and issues relevant to the country's evolving situation. These surveys could be conducted three times a year, biannually, or annually. While this

method relies on a convenience sample, it is cost-effective and provides timely insights into grassroots perceptions and experiences, helping inform key stakeholders and organizations. As with this and other survey-based studies, findings may challenge or reinforce prevailing assumptions in the current climate. Second, findings from convenience samples should be further examined using a representative sample of the target population. For example, to gain a deeper understanding of how residents of Shan State envision its future, future research should collect data from a representative sample of the Shan State population and make specific policy recommendations. By combining these approaches, future research can provide both timely and reliable insights, contributing to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Myanmar's evolving political landscape.

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