



Young Myanmar's Scholars Commentary Series

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Grievances, Identity Crisis, and Rising Nationalism: Understanding the ULA/AA's Political Aspirations after the Coup

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Introduction

The position of the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), since the beginning of February 2021, the Myanmar coup has been different compared to the rest of the Ethnic Armed Groups. ULA/AA has firmly expressed that it shall not allow anti-coup movement activities in Rakhine State. With their history with the Tatmadaw, including the travesty surrounding the wars between the Tatmadaw and the AA and the Rohingya Crisis, many observers would have expected that they would immediately jump on the bandwagon to join the anti-coup cause. Yet, to some extent, they appeared unbothered and unaffected by the political crisis. This paper attempts to examine the factors behind Rakhine's indifference to the coup, including the rise and popularity of ULA/AA's political aspirations. I argue that such decision by the ULA/AA are founded upon their political aspirations to differentiate themselves from developments "on the mainland," born out of history and strengthened by political-economic condition and growing nationalist sentiments inside the region of Rakhine, which has built their affinity for status quo amidst the increasingly complex situation. Sooner or later, however, the ULA/AA may also need to decide their position amidst the political struggle to decide Myanmar's future in the Capital if they truly wish to secure the best outcome for their own political aspirations.

Background: Rakhine's Political Aspirations

After Burma's military coup, Rakhine State, under the leadership of the Arakan Army, seems to be unheeded or act like "business as usual" despite the ravaging political crisis between the military and the pro-democracy group. The AA leadership has decided that it will not "allow" the anti-coup movements, which have spread across the country under the banner of the Nationwide protests and the Civil Disobedience Movements (CDM), to find their way into the Rakhine.¹ While the AA has some interactions with the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and even the National Unity Government (NUG), it does not seem to give any political support toward the movement.

AA's indifference to the Capital's political struggle is the extension of their political aspiration to be a much more independent region vis-a-vis the Burmese mainland. The AA, for example, has for long advocated for "*a confederation*" for the future of Myanmar's political system. Compared to the NUG championed the idea of federalism, the AA believed that a

¹ See for instance The Irrawaddy, "AA Chief Does Not Want Myanmar's Strikes and Protests in Rakhine State," *The Irrawaddy*, 12 April 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/aa-chief-not-want-myanmars-strikes-protests-rakhine-state.html>.

confederation system would be better able to serve their interests and give them better terms, to have a larger share of decision-making power and authority in governing their own lands and people.² These aspirations are facilitated by the rise in popularity of the AA's doctrines. With the rise of the Arakan Army's military strengths and administration structures in the region, its doctrines, such as the *Arakan Dream* and the *Way of Rakhita*, have emerged and become a popular sentiment for the Arakanese people, if not a shared ideology.³ These doctrines dictate how the Arakan should prioritise means to achieve Arakan sovereignty and advocate for Arakan nationalism. Based on these doctrines, it is not strange to see how the Rakhine State under the AA strives to maintain its distance from the images of the political movement on "the Burmese mainland."⁴ I argue that there are three variables that could explain the drivers of the popularity of AA's political aspirations in Rakhine: a) historical grievances; b) identity crisis in Rakhine; and c) the political-economic status of Rakhine.

Beyond the AA: Historical Grievances in Rakhine

A closer look at how the people of Rakhine have accommodated AA's rise can inform us of the reasons for AA's position amidst the current political crisis. Founded in 2009, the Arakan Army has become one of the most influential ethnic armed groups in Myanmar's civil war history. The reason for such rapid deployment of the Arakan Army's administrative and judiciary grab in Rakhine is due not only to the AA's survival strategy but also because of the influence of the characteristics and collective memories of the region's historical grievances toward the "Burmese Society."⁵

The hurt of the Rakhine people under the rule of the Capital throughout the decades are well known to international observers, from experiences of systemic violence to displacements and cultural erasure. In fact, historically speaking, Rakhine State has never been home to a cohesive society integrated as part of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. It is home to a society that continues to dream of restoring the region's sovereignty status. Its history as the

² The Irrawaddy, "Confederation the Only Option for Arakanese People, AA Chief Says," *The Irrawaddy*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/confederation-option-arakanese-people-aa-chief-says.html>.

³ The Arakan Dream and the Way of *Rakhita* are a couple of ideals/terms describing the Arakan Army's political goals. Despite having no clear and official definition of these terms/principles, they are associated with the political doctrine for the restoration of Arakan's sovereignty status, the idea to prioritize the national interests of Arakanese people, along with the Arakan Army's ways to achieve these goals.

⁴ See for instance sentiments such as Insight Myanmar, "There is No CDM in Rakhine State," *Insight Myanmar*, 17 August 2021, <https://insightmyanmar.org/burmadhammablog/2021/8/17/there-is-no-cdmnbspin-rakhine-state>.

⁵ AA's survival strategy here refers to the success of its guerrilla warfare strategies to resist the Tatmadaw's suppression tactics in recent years. Despite heavy suppression via the forces of the army, navy, and air force from the Tatmadaw, the AA has been relatively successful in establishing a solid base in Rakhine State by using its guerrilla warfare strategies.

separate kingdom of Mrauk-U, which suffered at the hand of the Burmese kingdom, has been kept firmly in the minds of those championing the Rakhine nationalist sentiment. Throughout the years, the fallen images of the Mrauk-U Kingdom have remained alive and well in the minds of Rakhine nationalists, even in the younger generation of Rakhine youths.

Such nationalist sentiment has been more recently perpetuated inside the pop culture of the Rakhine's younger generation. Most of Arakan's music and poems, particularly those popular in the younger generation, ring the tale of Arakan nationalism.⁶ These cultural artefacts have been utilised as channels to deliver Rakhine's historical grievances from generation to generation, forming an inter-generational collective memory that bodes in well with experiences of exclusion and hurt under the rule of Myanmar's Capital.

The emergence of the Arakan Army further provides a strong platform to systemically echo Rakhine's historical grievances. The current rise of the Arakan Army is the accumulation of the many interactions between grievances and nationalist sentiments. Riding the Society's grievances and history, the Arakan Army's political doctrines, "The Arakan Dream," and "The Way of Rakhita" doctrines, has managed to capture Rakhine's historical grievances inside the society's collective memories. Widely expressed and campaigned as public rhetoric by the AA, this has resulted in the strengthened position of the Arakan Army in the Rakhine society that we see today.

The Arakanese Identity Crisis

In the aftermath of the communal conflicts with Rohingya people in recent years, Arakanese identity is considered under severe threat in the public discourse. For instance, when the Rohingya issue was portrayed in the international media, the Arakanese felt that the story was unfairly presented. These portrayals are perceived as being too tendentious, as they tend to frame the Rakhine issue in a way that blames the Arakan nationalist sentiment rather than the acts of the Capital. These portrayals are believed to have severely threatened the Rakhine identity in terms of their claim to territory and history.

Amidst such a hit towards their claim to have a widely recognised identity of their own, the Arakanese are faced with two choices to proceed with their identity. On the one hand, the Arakanese people had begun to see that the Burmese government was trying to use the

⁶ Unlike other ethnic groups, whose sense of identity nationalism was carried by the literature, art, and culture, for the Arakan youth, their primary source of nationalist sentiment has been perpetuated via pop culture, such as music and poems. This has feeds well to the Arakan nationalist movement.

Arakanese identity to solve the Rohingya issues. Arakanese people had observed that the Capital had been trying to capture the Rakhine identity *as part of the collection of ethnicities under the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*. Being a part of the collection is thus recognised as an option.

On the other hand, however, the increasingly more popular option has been for the majority of the Arakanese to conserve their own Arakanese identity, which is based on the idea of preserving their race, religion, and culture continues as part of the Arakan dream of establishing a new sovereignty status of their own. The Arakanese people had accepted that living as an ethnic group under the Union would not guarantee them freedom from having to face the same type of grievances and suffering under the hand of the Burmese government.

The question of who we are has thus emerged again among the public of the Arakan, under the leadership of ULA/AA. ULA/AA's political aspiration for the restoration of the fallen national sovereignty has increasingly motivated the Arakanese People to opt for a "renewal" of their historical identity, to replace the current one that puts bet as an ethnic identity under the framework of the Union of Myanmar.

In addition to the divide between "having their own" and "being part of the Union," the Arakanese also face other rivalling "identity" narratives in their society. The first one is due to the region's geopolitical conditions, particularly the emergence of a neighbouring country with growing populations like Bangladesh, due to their shared identity with parts of the Rakhine population, which have presented another "rival identity" amidst the society in Rakhine. The second narrative is about the risk of obscurity to the Rakhine/Arakanese identity. At least two developments influence this risk: historical attempts by the Burmese government to obscure the "Rakhine identity" by associating it more with in reference to describing "the Buddhist majority ethnic groups living in the Rakhine state" that is part of the union, as well as the debate as to which ethnicity make up the "Rakhine identity."⁷ These rival identity narratives further posed as unprecedented elements in the Rakhine's identity crisis

⁷ For instance, on the attempt to obscure: the term Rakhine was born out of the decision of General Ne Win to replace the term Arakan, pulling away ethnicity association of the region. Meanwhile there is also identity debates to describe the people of Rakhine, such as the debate to describe them with the more inclusive "Arakanese" term (comprising of also minority groups) and the debate on the presence of "the Rohingya" identity, which some argued as rather more "political constructed."

and have arguably sparked more rise in the Rakhine nationalist sentiment to assert their own.

Contemporary Political Economic Status in Rakhine

Aside from historical grievances and the growing popularity of demands for a separate Arakanese identity among the people of Rakhine, the final factor that I would like to introduce as being the reason for Rakhine's indifference to the situation surrounding the coup is the political-economic condition of Rakhine. Particularly the lack of economic and political space for Rakhine under the Burmese government.

At one time, most Arakanese welcomed the political liberalisation that emerged under the 2008 constitution. After years of political turmoil, great hopes have been raised for the Arakanese people. Political participation was quite high towards the system that the Capital presented to them. The Arakanese showed high support to the Arakanese political parties in the hopes of fighting against poverty, the right to self-determination, and the protection of other political rights. Although the Arakanese political parties won the local election, the Arakanese believed that the Burmese ruling parties never saw them as equal dialogue partners. For the Arakanese, the ruling Burmese never succeeded in giving enough political space for governance, even at the regional level.

The lack of space in politics, thus representation, has led to the politicisation of all the problematic issues in Rakhine. From the issue of resource sharing to the issue of the legitimacy of the authority that conducts the approval of the regional development projects and so on, the Arakanese tend to view the Capital's decision in their region as part of the Burmese means of control. Under the control of the central government, the role of winning Rakhine political parties has diminished, gradually being sidelined outside the realm of power. Most Arakanese steadily realised that the political reforms campaigned by the Burmese government might not result from changing their socioeconomic status.

As a result, the rule of the political system under the 2008 constitution was widely considered unfair. Arakanese has always been arguing that their political exclusion was not due to the lack of the political will of the ruling parties but because of the limitations born out of the establishment of the 2008 constitution. Later on, the role of the Arakan Army, which started a different political leadership in Rakhine that guaranteed political rights and self-

determination with the help of armed strengths, became more assertive to counter the rules and political system established under the 2008 constitution.

Conclusion

The situation in Rakhine State is not a sudden story that happened only after the military coup. It was a story that has been happening for at least the past few years. This situation worsened when fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw intensified. The images of the war and the responses of power holders in the Capital to the Rakhine State during the war have pushed the Rakhine people into a polarised condition. As a result, the Arakanese people are no longer happy with the federal democracy aspirations, and they are more eager to create a more significant political reality for themselves.

Historical grievances, the Arakan identity issue, and the political-economic situation in Rakhine make up some of the understandings as to why the ULA/AA's political aspiration develops as such today, including some of the factors often hidden from the mainstream depiction of the issue. Going forward, we can expect the ULA/AA to continue to demand the vision of a Myanmar confederation, as well as to pose a different political status than the rest of the EAOs.

It should be noted that this first-hand political aspiration of ULA/AA is fast becoming a new political story for the Rakhine State and Myanmar. The political aspiration to demand a confederation has the potential to turn into the “default” position for the Arakan and became a politically mainstream expectation for the younger generation of Arakanese. In future political talks of the younger generation in Arakan, it is growingly unlikely that a Federal Democracy will be the immediately accepted solution for them, thereby presenting an issue in finding a political common ground between the leadership in NUG and NUCC and the leadership of the Arakan.

For now, at least, the concept of *“the enemy of my enemy is my friend”* rings true for the ULA/AA, especially when it comes to their strategic military aspirations and interests. The ULA/AA has shown that it is willing to engage militarily with the rest of the EAOs and also with the PDFs, despite having shown no interest in joining any political coalition nor commitment to the vision of a Federal Democracy. At the beginning of the coup, ULA/AA's decision to not allow the CDMs and anti-coup protests in Arakan's territory was a tactical valuation for its strategic political aspiration in this game, particularly as it favours to differs itself from the struggle at the central Capital. But in recent times, a different approach has surfaced. Even if they still have not decided upon joining the National Unity Consultative

Council (NUCC), the ULA/AA has seemingly decided to recalculate their indifference and open their engagement with the interim government, the National Unity Government (NUG) of Myanmar. It is as if the ULA/AA understands that the “newcomer” movement, the Spring Revolution, could be part of their winning card to overcome the pressures and threats from the Tatmadaw in the future. Indeed, sooner or later, the ULA/AA will need to deal with the politics of the Capital if they truly want secure grounds for their own political aspirations.

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