

The Arakan Army: Violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar

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Policy Brief Series No. 107 (2020)

This policy brief is about the Arakan Army, an armed group engaged in conflict with Myanmar's security forces, in particular in Rakhine State in western Myanmar.¹ Many outside the country do not yet have much information about the Arakan Army and the internal armed conflict it has waged against Myanmar. They do not realise that the fighting in Rakhine since early 2019 has been between a *Buddhist* organised armed group and the mainly-*Buddhist* Myanmar Defence Services, and that Muslims in Rakhine have not been a party to this fighting. For this reason, our brief does not focus on the response by Myanmar's military to the attacks by the Arakan Army, nor on other armed groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army ('ARSA') and its armed conflict with Myanmar in 2016-17.

1. Historical and Geographical Background

Compared to the origins of the nationalist struggle in Rakhine (Arakan) prior to the independence of Myanmar in 1948, the Arakan Army ('AA') is a relatively recent phenomenon. It was formed in April 2009 in north-eastern Myanmar by a small group of young Rakhine nationalists with the message that the central government was exploiting what was once a proud land, at the expense of the livelihood of common Rakhine people.² The group swiftly gained traction the following years. It reported more than 70 clashes in several Rakhine townships in July 2016,³ a display of emerging force.

Notwithstanding its Rakhine ambitions, the AA is based in Laiza in Kachin State on the Myanmar-China border, where it was established under the wings of the Kachin Independence Organisation ('KIO'). The KIO has supported the group ever since, as it has assisted AA's ally, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army.

The emergence of the AA should be understood in its geographical and historical context. The ancient Kingdom of Arakan is perceived by some Arakanese (or Rakhines) as having

been unfairly colonised since 1784, when it was conquered by the Burmese. It was the first area of today's Myanmar that was colonised by the British already in the 1820s. It was occupied by the Japanese Army during World War II, and then 're-occupied' by the British in 1945. The 1948 independence of Myanmar is perceived by the same actors as being the latest external imposition of power.⁴ They couple this sense of grievance with the socio-economic conditions of contemporary Rakhine: by 2017, it had become the second-poorest province of Myanmar.⁵ So Rakhine nationalist ideology has taken root in what appears to be fertile ground. Public AA statements invoke the plight of a 'neglected Arakan', echoing voices from as early as 1936 by one of the first nationalist Arakanese organisations.⁶

In the 1990, 2010 and 2015 elections, Rakhine nationalist parties performed relatively well at the Rakhine State level, compared with Burmese national parties. Civil, political and armed unrest has been a constant feature of Rakhine State, as in some other parts of Myanmar. However, the recent rise of the AA is an unusually serious phenomenon,⁷ even in a country plagued by armed groups such as the United Wa State Army ('UWSA') which exercises *de facto* control over a substantial part of Myanmar's territory.⁸ Although it is too early to make an authoritative assessment, the surge in AA attacks since 2019 seems to mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of armed conflict in Rakhine State.

2. Nature of the Arakan Army

The AA has been labelled an 'ethnic armed organisation' by domestic news agencies. In March 2020, the government of Myanmar categorised it as a terrorist group, constituting "a danger to law and order, peace and stability of the country and public peace".⁹ Such categorisation follows from the attribution of responsibility to the AA for "serious losses of public security,

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19; "Refugee Conundrum: Little Movement in Myanmar's Repatriation Schemes", *Mizzima*, 8 January 2020.

⁵ Myanmar, Ministry of Planning and Finance, Central Statistical Organization, "Myanmar Living Conditions Survey 2017", 2019, pp. 7, 13.

⁶ Smith, Arakan, p. 18, see above note 1.

⁷ "Guerrillas with Attitude: An Ethnic Militia with Daring Tactics is Humiliating Myanmar's Army", *The Economist*, 16 April 2020.

⁸ Smith, Arakan, see above note 1, p. 126.

⁹ Nyein Nyein, "Myanmar Govt Declares Arakan Army a Terrorist Group", *The Irrawaddy*, 24 March 2020.

¹ 'Rakhine State' is the official Myanmar name of the province, so it is used in this policy brief. For another approach, see Martin Smith's report for the Transnational Institute, "Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar's Western Frontier", 2019 ('Smith, Arakan') (<https://legal-tools.org/doc/ed2fd4>).

² Ye Min Zaw, "What Does the Arakan Army Bring to Rakhine State?", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2019; David Mathieson, "Myanmar's Rakhine Torched Anew by Insurgent Fire", *Asia Times*, 3 January 2019.

³ Smith, Arakan, p. 96, see above note 1.

lives and property, important infrastructures of the public and private sector, state-owned buildings, vehicles, equipment and materials”.¹⁰ Action has subsequently been taken against news agencies that have interviewed or had contact with AA leaders, in an attempt by the Myanmar authorities to reduce the visibility enjoyed by the group.¹¹ The government has also imposed Internet restrictions in 2019¹² and 2020¹³ in areas where the AA has been active.

Under international law the AA can be categorised as an organized armed group.¹⁴ With a centre of operations and training in Laiza, the AA has engaged in protracted armed violence against Myanmar security forces in Chin and Rakhine States, promoting a confederate political agenda for Rakhine, by means of conflict conducted with independently procured weapons, following a co-ordinated strategy formulated by its structured military leadership, under a definite group identity.

3. Structure, Area of Operation, Ambitions

Similar to other ethnic armed organisations, the AA is structured as an army, and consistently employs military ranks. Its leader, Twan Mrat Naing, is referred to as ‘General’, and a system of ranks and positions is used in its chain of command. As Twan Mrat Naing has stated: “taking lessons from the 70 years of civil war in Myanmar, we have changed our chain of command and our structure to ensure flexibility”.¹⁵

Whereas the AA was operating in several provinces of Myanmar in 2017,¹⁶ the Laiza camp in Kachin State in north-eastern Myanmar – where many fighters have been trained – is the AA’s oldest base, and it keeps its headquarters in a remote area in northern Myanmar. The group opened a new area of operations in Rakhine State already in 2015,¹⁷ and its objectives and activities are centred on Rakhine State.¹⁸ Territorially, the goal of the current offensive appears to be the establishment of a more stable hold in Rakhine State, in order to empower the group’s current support network, and ultimately gain leverage in its negotiations with Myanmar’s central government.¹⁹

¹⁰ The quotation is found in the governmental order designing the AA as a terrorist organization, see Thet Naing and Rikar Hussein, “More Violence Feared as Myanmar Names Arakan Army a Terrorist Organization”, *Voice of America*, 24 March 2020.

¹¹ See Paul Eckert, “Two Myanmar Editors in Hiding over Interview with Banned Arakan Army”, *Radio Free Asia*, 15 April 2020; “Myanmar Editors Go into Hiding After Arrest Fears”, *Mizzima*, 17 April 2020.

¹² Anthony Davis, “Why Myanmar is Losing the Rakhine War”, *Asia Times*, 3 July 2019.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, “Myanmar: Civilians Caught in Surge of Fighting”, 4 March 2020 (available on its web site).

¹⁴ This statement takes into consideration the jurisprudence of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, see *Haradinaj et al.*, Trial Chamber, Judgment, 3 April 2008, IT-04-84-T, para. 60 (<http://www.legal-tools.org/doc/0cac19/>); *Boskovski and Tarculovski*, Trial Chamber, Judgment, 10 July 2008, IT-04-82-T, paras.194-195 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/939486>).

¹⁵ Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, “Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye”, *The Irrawaddy*, 17 January 2019.

¹⁶ David Mathieson, “Shadowy Rebels Extend Myanmar’s Wars”, *Asia Times*, 11 June 2017.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Bertil Lintner, “New Age Rebels Winning the Fight in Myanmar”, *Asia Times*, 25 February 2020.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group, “A New Dimension of Violence in Myanmar’s Rakhine State”, Briefing No. 154 (2019), 24 January 2019, p. 4

The political agenda of the AA is to revive Arakanese nationalism, but the group has not stated that its aim is to secure complete secession from Myanmar. Twan Mrat Naing, shortly after the attacks of 4 January 2019, declared to “prefer [a confederation] like Wa State, which has a larger share of power in line with the Constitution”.²⁰ The AA’s confederation plan follows from the group’s ideology as summarised by the expression ‘The Way of the Rakhita’, pursued through the AA’s online campaign called the ‘Arakan Dream 2020’. It provides that Rakhine State should only co-ordinate with the central government on matters of defence, market regulation and foreign affairs.²¹

It is interesting to note how the AA leadership – which enjoys considerable support by Buddhist members – has not displayed the same anti-Rohingya sentiment shared by many Rakhine nationalists. Rather, the position of the AA is that Myanmar’s Defence Services seek to “sow discord between Arakanese and Muslim in Rakhine State”.²² Neither has the group voiced support for the Rohingya cause or ARSA. However, the AA’s Deputy Commander has referred to Rakhine Muslims as ‘Bengali’, which carries the connotation of not being native to Rakhine (whereas the majority population of Bangladesh and the Indian State of West-Bengal are Bengalis).²³ The government of Myanmar has maintained that the AA has ties to ARSA,²⁴ while the AA has denied any involvement.²⁵

4. Strength and Funding

Since 2009 the Arakan Army has grown significantly in numbers. It is estimated to have had 1,500 troops in 2014,²⁶ 3,000 in 2016,²⁷ and by May 2020, between 6,000²⁸ and 10,000.²⁹ In addition to those enlisted, support for the group seems to be

(‘ICG, 2019’) (available on its web site).

²⁰ “Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye”, 17 January 2019, see above note 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Nan Lwin Hnin Pwint, “Confederation the Only Option for Arakanese People, AA Chief Says”, *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2019. About ‘Arakan Dream 2020’ and ‘The Way of the Rakhita’, see “What Does the Arakan Army Bring to Rakhine State?”, 11 January 2019, see above note 2.

²² “Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye”, 17 January 2019, see above note 15.

²³ Steve Sandford, “Arakan Army in Myanmar is Recruiting and Training”, *Voice of America*, 16 October 2019.

²⁴ “Gov’t Accuses AA Army of Having Ties with ARSA”, *The Irrawaddy*, 7 January 2019; “Arakan Conflict: The Arakan Army Assertiveness or an Act of Self-Defense?”, *Mizzima*, 9 January 2019.

²⁵ “Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye”, 17 January 2019, see above note 15.

²⁶ “Arakan Conflict: The Arakan Army Assertiveness or an Act of Self-Defense?”, 9 January 2019, see above note 24.

²⁷ “Deciphering Myanmar’s Peace Process: A Reference Guide 2016”, *Burma News International*, January 2017 (available on its web site).

²⁸ The 6,000 estimate is found in several sources. For instance, see “Shadowy Rebels Extend Myanmar’s Wars”, 11 June 2017, see above note 16.

²⁹ Iftekharul Bashar, “Arakan Army: Myanmar’s New Front of Conflict”, *Rajaratnam School of International Studies (‘RSIS’) Commentary*, No. 140 (2019), 12 July 2019 (‘Bashar, 2019’) (available on the RSIS’ web site). Other reported numbers lie in between, such as the 7-8,000 mentioned in Subir Bhaumik, “India’s Rakhine Dilemma”, *Mizzima*, 17 April 2020.

widespread in Rakhine³⁰ and among the Rakhine diaspora.³¹ Even political support within Rakhine can be implied, as local lawmakers do not usually object to the group's activities.³² Direct donations from the people of Rakhine are a significant source for the AA.³³

While the AA has denied involvement, the group is suspected of being engaged in drug trafficking,³⁴ regrettably common among armed groups in Myanmar,³⁵ including in Rakhine.³⁶ Between February and May 2020, Myanmar authorities seized an exceptionally large amount of synthetic narcotics and opioids in the Kutkai area in the eastern Shan State.³⁷ Myanmar intelligence appears to have identified the Kaunghka militia, a Kutkai-based armed group, as "AA's main strategic partner in the [drug] trade".³⁸

As regards weapons, the AA is able to procure them independently, which impacts on the group's autonomy: "there is growing evidence that China's ability to control the AA is limited. One reason is that the UWSA is not entirely subject to pressure from China and can sell the AA weapons made within its territory [...]. [T]he UWSA does not have a monopoly on the supply of weapons to the AA",³⁹ which has access to the international black market and is reported to hold its own stockpile of various assault weapons, including M60 machine-guns and Barrett sniper rifles.⁴⁰ The group uses heavy weapons, improvised explosive devices and landmines, partially sourced by the UWSA⁴¹ (such as its 107 mm rockets),⁴² and employs

anti-personnel mines.⁴³ In a widely reported operation in 2015, the Myanmar authorities seized armaments and explosives in the house where AA's former 'Lieutenant Colonel' Aung Myat Kyaw lived, as well as over 300,000 tablets of methamphetamine from another tenant of the house not directly affiliated with the AA.⁴⁴

Abductions are a routine activity of the AA.⁴⁵ In the past few years, the institutions have been affected by hundreds of abductions of civil servants, politicians and members of the security apparatus.⁴⁶ There have been reports of abductions of persons in the Chin community (others being used as forced labour)⁴⁷ and workers involved in strategically relevant projects such as the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transport Project.⁴⁸

5. Mobility and Guerrilla-Style Attacks

After an escalation of AA violence late 2018, one attack in particular has affected the ongoing conflict: on 4 January 2020, four police outposts in northern Rakhine were attacked and 13 officers killed by 350 heavily armed AA-fighters who also secured weapons and ammunition.⁴⁹ The military strategy of the AA seems to focus on mobility and guerrilla-style attacks, commonly employed by other ethnic armed organisations, rather than territorial warfare aimed at securing positions.⁵⁰ Subsequently, the conflict in Rakhine State has been largely composed of frequent clashes⁵¹ rather than frontal confrontations.

The AA consistently targets the military, not limited to combat units. For example, on 23 March 2020, it attacked a military training school in Rakhine with approximately 300 AA-fighters.⁵² The attacks have also been directed against other security forces, such as the 9 March 2019 attack against a police station in which nine police officers were killed by a 60-strong AA force.⁵³ On the same day, the AA conquered frontline positions in another township, securing prisoners and weapons.⁵⁴ In May

³⁰ Yun Sun, "China, the Arakan Army, and a Myanmar Solution", *Frontier Myanmar*, 23 March 2020.

³¹ Bashar, 2019, see above note 29.

³² Sithu Aung Mying, "Rakhine Nationalism and the Rise of the Arakan Army", *Frontier Myanmar*, 7 February 2019.

³³ Roseanne Gerin, "Myanmar's Rakhine Government Bans Donations to Help War Refugees, as Fighting Wears on", *Radio Free Asia*, 11 April 2019.

³⁴ "Analysis: Arakan Army – a Powerful New Threat to the Tatmadaw", *The Irrawaddy*, 9 January 2019; ICG, 2019, p. 6, see above note 19; "Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye", 17 January 2019, see above note 15.

³⁵ Transnational Institute, "Drugs and Conflict in Burma" (available on its web site). It should be mentioned that several EAOs, such as the KIO, have actively fought drug trade, see John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar", July 2016 (available on The Asia Foundation's web site). The report mentions the involvement of some militias of the Myanmar military in the drug trade as well.

³⁶ In March 2020, millions of methamphetamine pills were seized by the Maungdaw Police. See "Record Drugs Worth over 9 Billion Kyats in Maungdaw", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 3 March 2020 (in Burmese).

³⁷ "South-east Asia's Biggest Synthetic Drugs Raid: 200m Meth Tablets Found in Myanmar", *The Guardian*, 19 May 2020.

³⁸ Anthony Davis, "New Strategy to Address Escalating Insurgency in Western Myanmar Leaves Military Locked in to Conflict", *Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Monitor*, 21 April 2020, pp. 2, 3. It is interesting to note that the AA has specifically reacted to this publication, denying AA's involvement with the militia, see Arakan Army, "Response to Allegations of Links to Kaunghka Militia", 29 April 2020 (available on its web site).

³⁹ Yun Sun, "China, the Arakan Army, and a Myanmar Solution", 23 March 2020, see above note 30.

⁴⁰ "Analysis: Arakan Army – a Powerful New Threat to the Tatmadaw", 9 January 2019, see above note 34.

⁴¹ Bashar, 2019, see above note 29.

⁴² "Shadowy Rebels Extend Myanmar's Wars", 11 June 2017, see above note 16.

⁴³ Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Myanmar-Burma", 12 November 2019 (available on its web site).

⁴⁴ "Analysis: Arakan Army – a Powerful New Threat to the Tatmadaw", 9 January 2019, see above note 34.

⁴⁵ Among recent instances of AA abductions, see "Arakan Army Detains – Then Releases – Workers from Construction Site Reportedly Used in Burma Army Attack", *Khonumthung News*, 25 March 2020.

⁴⁶ Prashanth Parameswaran, "What Does Myanmar's New Arakan Army Terrorist Designation Mean for the Country's Security?", *The Diplomat*, 25 March 2020.

⁴⁷ "Shadowy Rebels Extend Myanmar's Wars", 11 June 2017, see above note 16.

⁴⁸ Sadiq Naqvi, "Myanmar Rebel Group Releases Four Abducted Indians, Fifth Dies in Detention", *Hindustan Times*, 4 November 2019. On the Kaladan Project, see Subir Bhaumik, "The India-Myanmar Kaladan Project: Vision and Reality", Policy Brief Series No. 106 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2020 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>).

⁴⁹ ICG, 2019, see above note 19.

⁵⁰ "New Age Rebels Winning the Fight in Myanmar", 25 February 2020, see above note 18.

⁵¹ The web site of the AA reported multiple clashes with the Myanmar military in every week of March and April 2020.

⁵² Min Aung Khine, "Arakan Army Attacks Myanmar Military Training School in Rakhine", *The Irrawaddy*, 24 March 2020.

⁵³ Aung Naing Soe, "Myanmar Says 9 Police Killed in Arakan Army Attack", *Associated Press News*, 10 March 2019.

⁵⁴ "Arakan Army Claims to Have 11 Myanmar Army Prisoners", *Mizzima*, 13 March 2019.

2020, attacks have targeted a United Nations World Food Programme's convoy crossing AA-held territory in Chin State,⁵⁵ and the driver of a United Nations-marked vehicle was killed while transporting Covid-19 test material from Rakhine for the World Health Organization, although in the latter case the military and the AA are exchanging accusations as to who fired.⁵⁶

In Rakhine and the bordering Chin State, there has been a 74% increase in organised violence from January to April 2020, compared to 2019.⁵⁷

6. Further Academic Analysis Warranted

The objectives of the Arakan Army are deeply rooted in the complex history of multi-cultural relations and continuous poverty in Rakhine. Due to the geopolitical implications of its political platform and its means, the AA is likely to increasingly impact on the prospects of peace and stability in Rakhine State. The internal armed conflict between the AA and Myanmar may therefore continue to cause violence against and displacement of civilians through the attacks by the AA and the response of the military, which will attract increased attention. This policy brief offers an introduction to this internal armed conflict and the role played by the AA. While it quotes a number of sources on the AA, academic work is still lacking. The Myanmar authorities have realised the threat posed by the group at least since 2016. Informed foreign governments such as India and China have already experienced reason to deal with the group.⁵⁸ Foreign governments seem to have direct relations with the AA.⁵⁹ There are therefore several reasons why the Arakan Army should be subjected to further academic analysis.

On the one hand, the AA is but yet another 'revolutionary' armed group operating in Myanmar; on the other, it claims continuity with earlier Arakanese nationalism, it has shown some propaganda skills,⁶⁰ and it attracts local and some external sup-

port. Further to its confederate political platform, the group poses as a quasi-institutional actor, seeking to convey reliability and structure. For instance, it reacted to the visit of Chinese President XI Jinping in January 2020 by issuing a statement commending the neighbourly relations with China and the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative,⁶¹ offering support to Chinese investment in Rakhine, and welcoming Chinese involvement in the domestic peace process.⁶² The AA has declared state-like goals, such as providing for the security of the Arakanese people⁶³ and the autonomy of Rakhine State from the central government. While a quasi-institutional appearance and attitude has been displayed by other ethnic armed groups in Myanmar, one should not underestimate the impact of the AA in Myanmar more widely. For instance, the activities of the group have been seen as hindering the repatriation of displaced Rohingya Muslims in Cox's Bazar.⁶⁴ Due consideration should be given to the timing of the AA's revival of Arakanese nationalism, including the approaching 2020 Myanmar elections amidst heightened tension and foreseeable escalation of political and social unrest.

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ISBN: 978-82-8348-092-4.

TOAEP-PURL: <http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/107-nakanishi-angotti/>.

LTD-PURL: <https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/enaf5w/>.

⁵⁵ Thiha Lwin, "In Myanmar's Chin State, Rain and Attack on WFP Convoy Force Aid Deliveries by Boat", *The Irrawaddy*, 4 May 2020

⁵⁶ "Driver Killed in WHO Vehicle Carrying Virus Swabs in Myanmar's Rakhine", *Reuters*, 21 April 2020.

⁵⁷ Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, "Coronavirus Cover: Myanmar Civilians under Fire" (available on its web site).

⁵⁸ Both China and India border on Myanmar, and have strategic and economic interests in Rakhine such as ongoing infrastructure projects. See Smith, Rakhine, p. 116, see above note 1; "India's Rakhine Dilemma", 17 April 2020, see above note 29; "China, the Arakan Army, and a Myanmar Solution", 23 March 2020, see above note 30.

⁵⁹ "Indian Politician Claims Credit for NLD MP Release", *Mizzima*, 1 February 2020.

⁶⁰ In a noteworthy piece of propaganda, a widely circulated short-film shows young female trainee-fighters in the forest, who are provided with information on the Covid-19 pandemic, their schooling, and how families can be built within the AA's ranks; see Elizabeth Jangma, "For My People", *YouTube*. The producer of the film expressed that "there is still a real need to portray the bravery of women in our country. [...] I wanted to show them at work", see "RFA Journalist Wins Photography

Prize Documenting the Life Story of an AA Female Soldier", *Narinjara News*, 27 February 2020. It is interesting to note how the pictured fighters are characterised as being 'at work', a peculiar expression in relation to an organised armed group.

⁶¹ Myanmar signed 33 bilateral agreements with China on 18 January 2020 under the Belt and Road Initiative framework, see John Reed, "China and Myanmar Sign Off on Belt and Road Projects", *Financial Times*, 18 January 2020.

⁶² "Arakan Army Welcomes Chinese President's Visit to Myanmar", *Burma News International*, 20 January 2020.

⁶³ "Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye", 17 January 2019, see above note 15.

⁶⁴ "China, the Arakan Army, and a Myanmar Solution", 23 March 2020, see above note 30; SOMETAYA Ryuta, "Oppression Among the Oppressed: Inside Refugee Camps in Cox's Bazar", Policy Brief Series No. 105 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher, Brussels, 2020, p. 3 (<https://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/105-sometaya/>).