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FEBRUARY 2020 AT A GLANCE

Myanmar Takes Steps to Control Potential Spread of Coronavirus. There have been no confirmed cases of the virus in Myanmar as of March 5, but the coronavirus has impacted the economy. (Page 1)

The Government of Myanmar Launches the Project Bank. The web-based platform currently includes 58 national development infrastructure projects at various stages of development. (Page 2)

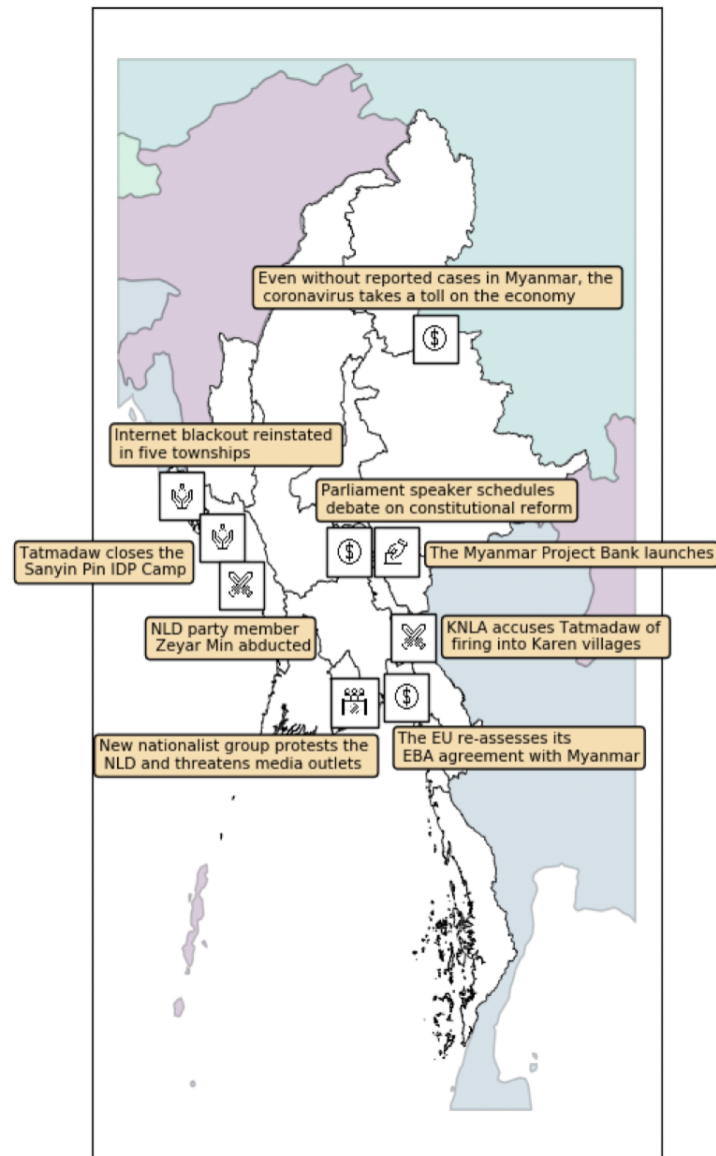
UN Security Council EU Members Call for Compliance with ICJ Case. The statement was released after an official measure to support the International Court of Justice (ICJ) was stopped by Russia and Vietnam. The European Union is also reassessing Myanmar's inclusion in its "Everything but Arms" preferential trade agreement. (Page 5)

Three Members of Dissident Group Sentenced. A Yangon court sentenced three members of The Peacock Generation Thangyat group to six months in prison. The group has now been prosecuted in eight cases in different courts across Myanmar, leading to imprisonment of its members. (Page 6)

New Nationalist Group Protests NLD Government and Constitutional Reform. The Whole Myanmar National Association group, comprised of former Ma Ba Tha members, staged a protest in Yangon against the NLD and its drive for constitutional reform. Media outlets *Khit Thit Media* and *7 Day News* were later threatened by members of the group for their coverage of the protest. (Page 7)

Rakhine Internet Ban Expanded. The Government reinstated the ban in five townships, bringing the total to nine townships in Rakhine and Chin States under an internet blackout. The decision was made following increased fighting between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army in these areas. (Page 11)

Union Parliament Announces Limit of MP Participants in Debate. Ahead of a parliamentary debate over constitutional reform that started on February 25, the Union Parliament announced that it would limit the number of participating MPs to 149. (Page 17)



ECONOMY

- GDP growth forecasts for Myanmar reduced as the economic impact of coronavirus hits agricultural goods and tourism. The garment sector's supply chain is expected to feel the impact of the coronavirus as early as next month.
- In February, the Government of Myanmar launched the Project Bank. The online database contains 58 infrastructure projects.
- The threat of western sanctions, Myanmar's entrance into the ASEAN Free Trade Area, and a strengthening kyat impact trade in Myanmar.
- High inflation rates are forcing the Central Bank to consider reducing interest rates.

THE CORONAVIRUS

THE GOVERNMENT OF MYANMAR'S RESPONSE TO THE VIRUS

The Government of Myanmar and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) have taken preventative action against a potential spread of the coronavirus. No cases have been reported as of March 5; those who had previously been suspected of contracting the virus were quarantined immediately and confirmed as negative.ⁱ Experts are concerned, however, that the virus is going undetected and that it has already spread to Myanmar.ⁱⁱ

The Government has been taking precautionary measures, including setting up a 24-hour hotline to report suspected infections, the formation of a quick-response team for field checks and public education, acquiring more test kits, setting up separate rooms in hotels for tourists suspected of infection and imposing travel restrictions, cancelling or postponing large-scale celebrations such as Shan National Day and Armed Forces Day (March 27) events,

conducting border checks, and distributing leaflets on coronavirus prevention in the Kokang Region.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Health Ministry has been quiet about the move, and there are reports that it plans to amend legislation that punishes healthcare workers who talk to the media to include the coronavirus.^{iv}

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Myanmar raised an alarm in early February, as many Myanmar workers who were based in China have returned to Myanmar, some without pay, for fear of contracting the virus.^v It is estimated that more than one million people use the border crossings with China monthly in four separate states and regions; 20,000 workers cross the border gate at Muse alone to work in China every day, and an estimated 100,000 workers cross illegally.^{vi} Health screenings at border crossings have been implemented, but many of them can only check for fever, which is problematic since the virus can incubate undetected for 14 days, posing a risk of a spread of infection.^{vii}

CORONAVIRUS'S IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY

The outbreak of the coronavirus in neighboring China has had a major impact on Myanmar's border trade and tourism. In a bid to contain the outbreak, China closed four border crossings with Myanmar. The closures have severely affected trade, especially in agriculture and food production.^{viii}

Estimates suggest that Myanmar makes \$10 million per day from exports to China, but since the outbreak the number has plummeted to \$1 million. To prevent waste, fruit farmers are trying to delay harvests, while the Myanmar Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Producers and Exporters Association is discussing with the Ministry of Commerce ways to enable exporters to sell at venues in Yangon or other domestic markets.^{ix} Market prices for fruit are much lower in Myanmar,

however, meaning farmers' incomes will decrease. As a long-term proposition, the Government is reportedly looking into the possibility of exporting goods to other nearby countries. But to negotiate such trade deals would take too long and would be costly.^x

The coronavirus has also impacted wages in Myanmar. Farm laborers in Sagaing, Kachin, and Shan States have not been paid by Chinese employers who rent farms but do not reside in the country, and have not returned since the outbreak.^{xi} Farmers have attempted to respond by delaying harvesting their crops until they have been paid or have a way to sell it, however, this can affect the quality.^{xii}

Tourism in Myanmar has been badly affected. In 2019, a third of the two million tourists who visited Myanmar were from China. On February 1, the Government of Myanmar suspended visas on arrival for Chinese tourists, and the Ministry of Hotels and Tourism has asked travel agencies to stop providing services to all Chinese nationals.^{xiii} Tourism from China has dropped an estimated 70 percent compared with last year, leaving one hotel owner with an 85 percent drop in business in Mandalay and Bagan, where Chinese tourism was prolific.^{xiv}

GARMENT SECTOR PREPARES FOR THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS

The Myanmar Garment Manufacturing Association (MGMA) warned that the garment sector could feel the impact of the coronavirus as quickly as next month.^{xv} Supply chain issues will likely lead to a shortage of raw materials because 90 percent are sourced from China.^{xvi} Although production is slowly restarting in China following an extended factory shutdown, numerous travel restrictions remain in place, and Chinese factories have reduced their operational hours. As of February 24, 60 percent of factories in China have reopened, but only 50 percent of workers have returned to work.^{xvii}

In Yangon Region alone, 500,000 people work in garment factories. Relying on raw materials from China means that factories may be forced to cease operations. The Secretary General of the Korea Garment Association in Myanmar, Ryan Kim, announced that South Korean factories in Yangon may have to temporarily shut down in early March.^{xviii} Even when normal production resumes, Myanmar will have to compete with other nations for the raw materials. The customs department has agreed to facilitate port clearance as smoothly as possible.^{xix}

GOVERNMENT LAUNCHES THE PROJECT BANK

Originally announced in 2018 to link major infrastructure investment projects with sources of finance to coordinate and facilitate development projects, the Government launched The Project Bank on February 26, 2020, listing 58 national development projects in various stages of development, from new to in-contract to in progress.^{xx}

The Project Bank helps identify, screen, appraise, and prioritize investment projects based on the aims of the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP).^{xxi} The MSDP is the overall framework for infrastructure development in Myanmar between 2018 and 2030 and guides all decisions about infrastructure development, the details of which are vague; the key areas are education and healthcare services, electricity, telecommunications connectivity, and road connections to markets and major cities.^{xxii} However, controversy remains about how exactly these projects will be prioritized with many people feeling that this will further centralize decision-making and could mean that project decisions could be politically motivated rather than based on needs.^{xxiii}

The 58 projects in road, railway, port, airport, electricity, urban development, industrial estate development, and agricultural development included a \$2.1 billion

investment in Yangon Central Station. All projects in line with the MSDP can be accessed and viewed on the site, presenting transparent information that provides more opportunities for the private sector to contribute to national development.^{xxiv}

TRADE

EVERYTHING BUT ARMS SITUATION TO BE ASSESSED

The European Union (EU) will reassess Myanmar's status as favorable under the Everything But Arms (EBA) initiative, which allows Myanmar to enjoy quota- and duty-free exports to Europe. Trade with Europe, particularly of textiles, increased tenfold since the EBA initiative was first introduced in 2013.^{xxv} The EBA will be assessed again this summer to ensure sufficient progress is being made with regards to conflict and human rights violations in Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine States. The EU is concerned that several principles from international human rights conventions, and labor standards listed under the EU Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) regulations, are not being implemented.^{xxvi} A monitoring mission will visit Myanmar in the summer to assess progress in improving human rights and labor conditions in Myanmar.^{xxvii}

The value of garments exported to the EU grew from \$900 million in 2012 to \$4.6 billion in 2018, accounting for more than 30 percent of Myanmar's total exports in 2018.^{xxviii} Growth is expected to continue as rising wages in Vietnam and China are making more manufacturers turn to Myanmar, which is hugely advantageous to its economy.

Working conditions and wages are improving in the country. The garment industry is taking initiative by demonstrating compliance with EU requirements. Khine Khine Nwe, the secretary general of MGMA, reported that local manufacturers are working very hard

with MGMA to implement international standards of self-assessment used in the EU and US to ensure labor rights. She also warned that lowering EU standards would tarnish Myanmar garment factories in the eyes of international investors.^{xxix}

MYANMAR TAKES STEPS TO IMPROVE TRADE STRATEGIES

The Government of Myanmar is taking measures to ensure demand for locally produced goods remains stable as the country integrates further within the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA).^{xxx} Under AFTA, Myanmar will be forced to substantially reduce or eliminate tariffs on imports on a list of goods, which will put local producers under pressure to compete with cheaper imports. Myanmar will be able to raise tariffs during a trial period of three years, however, if it can show that a given local manufacturer or sector has been severely impacted by the law.

Some companies welcome the change. Yin Yin Moe, the CEO of Hla Yin Moe – a garment and textile company – reported that the new trading arrangements made it possible to import cheaper manufacturing equipment, which has allowed it to increase output from 30,000 pieces of clothing per month to 100,000.^{xxxi} Myanmar will also enjoy lower export duties with ASEAN countries.

To take advantage of AFTA, Myanmar is launching its second five-year National Export Strategy (NES) 2020-2025. Under the new strategy, gems and jewelry, agriculture-based food products, textiles and garments, machinery and electrical equipment, fisheries and forestry, and digital technology will become priority sectors. The Department of Trade Promotion will create action plans for exporters, with a special focus on financing them, which will include better logistics and infrastructure to improve productivity and transport.^{xxxii}

EXPORTS RISE DESPITE APPRECIATING KYAT

The Myanmar kyat (MMK) has appreciated against the dollar and is currently trading at MMK 1,445 per \$1. Figure 1 shows changes in the exchange rate over the previous year. It hovered between MMK 1,500 and MMK 1,540 per \$1 until approximately December 2019, when it started to appreciate quickly against the dollar, and is now slowly stabilizing at around MMK 1,440 to MMK 1,460 per \$1.^{xxxiii}

In November 2019, the exchange rate was more than MMK 1,500 per \$1.^{xxxiv} Generally, when a currency strengthens, exports decrease and imports increase. This means that exporting businesses may struggle to maintain demand but imported goods will generally be cheaper. However, in Myanmar, exports are still growing and the monetary changes are still feeding through to imported goods. There are three possible reasons for this: the kyat may have been undervalued to begin with and the increased trade is helping it reach its natural equilibrium; the currency may have been affected by the new trade

agreements mentioned earlier; or the reduced border trade with China is affecting demand for the currency.^{xxxv}

CENTRAL BANK OF MYANMAR CONSIDERS LOWER INTEREST RATES

The Vice Governor of the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM), Soe Min, has said that the CBM may reduce interest rates to counter rising inflation. The current bank rate is 10 percent, the minimum deposit rate is 8 percent, and the maximum secured lending rate is 13 percent.^{xxxvi} Inflation reached a 12-month peak of 8.81 percent in December 2019 as higher electricity tariffs weighed heavily on prices.^{xxxvii} It is expected to fall to 6 or 7 percent and remain stable in the coming months once the shock of the new electricity tariffs wears off, and the temporary rise in prices goes back to normal levels.

There have been frequent calls for reduced interest rates to make borrowing more affordable for businesses and to facilitate

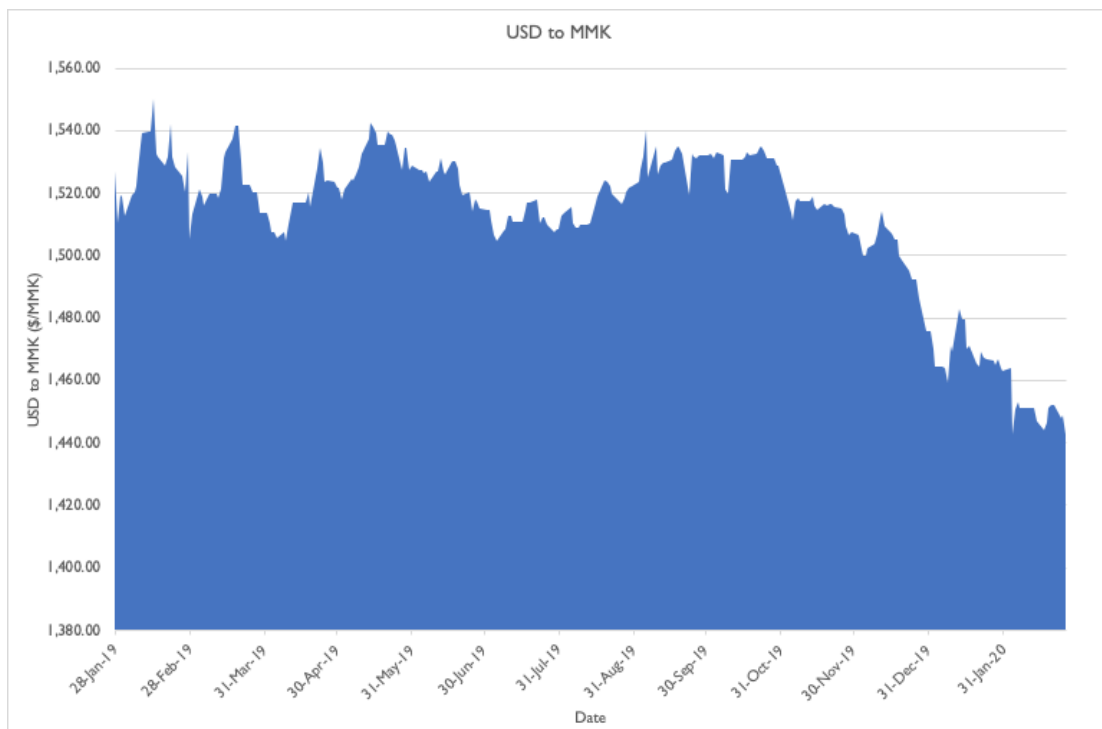


Figure 1. Myanmar Kyat to US Dollar Exchange Rate (January 28, 2019 - January 31, 2020)
MEKONG ECONOMICS, DATA SOURCE: Investing.com¹

growth. According to Soe Min, however, because Myanmar's economy and financial markets are underdeveloped, reduced interest rates will not have as much of an effect as they would in the United States, for example. Soe Min argues that the CBM needs to be wary of the risks associated with decreasing interest rates, such as increasing the number of non-performing loans or even destabilizing the economy.^{xxxviii}

SOCIAL ISSUES

- China and Vietnam stopped a UN Security Council (UNSC) measure to support the International Court of Justice (ICJ).
- The International Criminal Court (ICC) began gathering evidence for prosecution of those responsible for crimes against the Rohingya.
- Nearly 50 Rohingya were detained on their way to Malaysia, a week after an overcrowded boat, with Rohingya refugees aboard, capsized, killing at least 15.
- Lower House legislators submitted a bill to amend Myanmar's controversial Privacy Law.
- Members of the Peacock Generation Thangyat group were sentenced to six more months in prison.
- The Whole Myanmar National Association, a new nationalist group, held a rally and subsequently threatened media outlets over their coverage of it.

INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE

EU MEMBERS OF UNSC CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY FROM MYANMAR

In a move welcomed by the NLD, China and Vietnam voted against a proposed UN Security Council (UNSC) measure to support last month's order from the International

Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case against Myanmar.^{xxxix} In response, the UNSC's EU members – France, Germany, Belgium, Estonia, and former council member Poland – released a joint statement calling for Myanmar's compliance with the ruling and all its provisions, as well as to address the root causes of conflict in Rakhine, Kachin, and Shan States.^{xl} A spokesman for the NLD stated "We can buy more time as our friendly countries have objected to the decision to use the UN's power. We welcome their objections."^{xli}

There is little support for the ICJ among Myanmar people. Speaking to *Al Jazeera* reporters, people in Yangon gave very muted responses to the case, and some said they are not following it.^{xlii} Ethnic minorities and minority groups, such as the Kachin National Organization are an exception, coming out in support of the ICJ decision.^{xliii} According to a Rakhine activist, however, some local political activists view the ICJ as too narrowly focused on a single group of people, and neglects to acknowledge the hardship of other ethnic nationalities in Myanmar who have been "suffering for decades."

MALDIVES JOINS THE GAMBIA IN CASE AGAINST MYANMAR

On February 26, the Maldives announced it hired Amal Clooney and would formally join The Gambia in the ICJ case against Myanmar regarding the alleged genocide against the Rohingya minority.^{xliv} Clooney previously represented former Maldives president Mohamed Nasheed in a victory ruling which determined his 13-year imprisonment was illegal. She is filing a declaration of intervention at the ICJ on behalf of the Maldives in support of the Rohingya, a move welcomed by Rohingya leaders.^{xlv}

ICC BEGINS GATHERING EVIDENCE FOR PROSECUTION

The International Criminal Court (ICC) began collecting evidence to prosecute Myanmar officials responsible for crimes against humanity against the Rohingya. Teams of investigators were sent to refugee camps to collect evidence and speak to refugees and witnesses.^{xlvi} Phakiso Mochochoko, director of the Jurisdiction, Complementary and Cooperation Division of the ICC Office of the Prosecutor, admitted that this would be a long and difficult case, but remained confident that given prior experience with countries that refused to cooperate, it would still be able to investigate and prosecute those responsible.^{xlvii} The ICC will work with the ICJ to avoid duplicating efforts.^{xlviii} Furthermore, Mochochoko promised that the investigation would not interfere with Bangladesh's repatriation of Rohingya refugees.^{xlix}

ROHINGYA REFUGEES ATTEMPT TO FLEE TO MALAYSIA BY BOAT

The Myanmar Navy detained approximately 50 Rohingya refugees and five suspected traffickers off the coast of Ayeyarwady.ⁱ Those on board the boat were reportedly fleeing to Malaysia and were arrested, then taken in for interrogation and medical tests.ⁱⁱ The event occurred just a week after a boat with 138 Rohingya refugees sailing from Bangladesh capsized in the Bay of Bengal due to overcrowding, killing at least 15 and leaving 50 missing.ⁱⁱⁱ Authorities have responded to these incidents in a variety of ways – some refugees were returned to their homes, some sent to camps, and others were imprisoned.ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

FREE SPEECH WATCH

STUDENTS ARRESTED FOR PROTESTING INTERNET BAN

Students rallied in Yangon and Kyaukpju, Sittwe, and Toungup Townships, Rakhine

State, calling for the authorities to resume internet services in the Rakhine and Chin Townships after the Government of Myanmar reimposed the internet ban in five townships.^{liv} No arrests have been made, but formal charges were filed under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law against nine students for organizing a protest of the ban without permission.^{lv} Six of the nine were taken into custody for questioning and the police are searching for the other three.^{lvi} See page 11 for more details on the internet ban.

LEGISLATORS SUBMITTED BILL TO AMEND PRIVACY LAW

On February 18, the Pyithu Hluttaw Rule of Law and Legal Affairs Committee submitted a bill to amend the Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens, reducing the maximum prison term for defamation and making it a bailable offence.^{lvii} Legislators are hoping this amendment will curb the use of the law for small personal disputes and for silencing critics, as it was implemented in the past. Skepticism abounds whether it will work. Ye Wai Phyo Aung from Athan, a Myanmar civil society organization (CSO) focused on freedom of expression, claimed that the amendment would fail because it does not define the term “privacy” more precisely, nor does it scrap the provision that criminalizes defamation.^{lviii}

YANGON COURT SENTENCES MEMBERS OF THE PEACOCK GENERATION THANGYAT TO SIX MONTHS IMPRISONMENT

In February, a Yangon court sentenced three members of the Peacock Generation Thangyat to an additional six months in jail under Section 66d of the Telecommunications Law. The court acquitted the remaining four members. The group has now been prosecuted in eight separate cases in different courts across Myanmar. Four trials have concluded and four are pending.^{lix} Those found guilty were sentenced to a sum total of

two to three years in prison.^{lx} The sentencing time will likely increase should the remaining courts add to the already existing sentences.

Though they still face sentences from four other courts – Dedaye, Phyapon, Maubin, and Patheingyi Townships in Ayeyarwady Region – the group’s members stopped participating in trials in protest of the judiciary.^{lxi} The Peacock Generation leader said “We performed this same Thangyat [a Burmese performance art] in different areas. Then they prosecuted us in different cases for the same performance in different township courts. This suggests they prosecuted us with malice and prejudice.”^{lxii} The Regional Director of Amnesty International, Nicholas Bequelin, agreed, stating, “The fact they’ve been subjected to these outrageous trials and convictions shows just how vindictive the Myanmar military is,” calling on Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD to repeal or amend the Telecommunications Law while they still can, ahead of the upcoming elections.^{lxiii}

NEW NATIONALIST GROUP FORMED AND MEDIA OUTLETS THREATENED OVER RALLY COVERAGE

The Whole Myanmar National Association (also known as the Myanmar National Organization or MNO), comprised of former Ma Ba Tha members, and opposition USDP and pro-Tatmadaw groups, staged a protest in Yangon on February 9 denouncing threats to race, religion, and sovereignty, which they purportedly formed to protect. Members of other organizations joined in the rally, all claiming to protect race and religion, and to represent war veterans.^{lxiv}

Almost 1,000 protesters marched from Shwedagon Pagoda to City Hall to protest Aung San Suu Kyi’s administration’s failure to protect the country’s Buddhist majority by reducing the power of the military. One of the speakers at the protest claimed proponents of

constitutional reform are “more frightening than the Wuhan virus [coronavirus].”^{lxv}

Following the rally, a few nationalists threatened at least two different media outlets, *Khit Thit Media* and *7 Day News*, for their coverage of the protest in Yangon, demanding the stories be removed from their websites.^{lxvi} Reporters had to edit the articles, modifying their initial claims that speeches could induce religious riots.^{lxvii} Tharlon Zaung Htet, editor of *Khit Thit Media* and a member of the Myanmar Press Council stated, “The threats received by our news outlets are not just a threat to us, they are a threat to all the media and journalists.”^{lxviii}

The MNO is widely considered the political wing of the banned Ma Ba Tha, which in 2017 rebranded itself as the Buddha Dhamma Charity Foundation, which remains illegal under this current name.

LABOR ACTIVISTS FINED FOR ILLEGAL ASSEMBLY

On February 11, five labor activists were fined for illegal assembly in Yangon when they gathered more than 400 factory workers in protest over a garment factory’s alleged violations of labor rights and employment contracts. The factory management brought up charges against the five activists, who were then sued by the Dagon police under Section 19 of the Unlawful Assembly Act.^{lxix} Confronted with the choice of prison time or a substantial fine, the five chose the latter, and paid a total of MMK 150,000 (\$103).^{lxx} The activists unsuccessfully petitioned the NLD to take action against the factory. The activists said they may have to reconsider who to vote for in the November elections.^{lxxi}

CONFLICT

- The Government imposes an internet ban in five townships in Rakhine and Chin States; nine townships are currently without access to the internet.
- Fighting between the AA and the Tatmadaw in Rakhine and Paletwa Townships increased this month, with high civilian casualties, injuries, and displacement.
- In late January, the Tatmadaw closed Sanyin Pin IDP camp in Myebon Township, which housed around 500 people.
- Ramree Township NLD party member, Zeyar Min, was abducted on February 8; no one has claimed responsibility.
- The AA confiscated police and teachers' salaries in Paletwa Township.

Figure 2 maps conflict events in Myanmar between January 26 and February 22, 2020 as reported by the Armed Conflict and Location Event Data (ACLED) project.

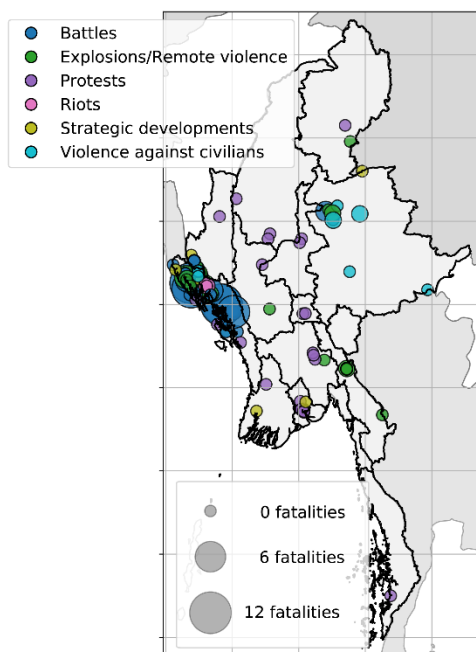


Figure 2. Conflict Hot Spot Map (January 26 – February 22, 2020)
KIMETRICA LLC, DATA SOURCE: ACLED

ARAKAN ARMY-TATMADAW

In the wake of a resumed internet shutdown (see page 11), fighting between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Tatmadaw increased in the area. Heavy weapons, navy ships, and helicopters by the Tatmadaw were allegedly used in the clashes.^{lxxii} Conflict was mostly concentrated in Buthidaung, Rathedaung, and Kyauktaw Townships, with some fighting in Minbya and Ann.

On February 19, the AA fired at a Tatmadaw helicopter travelling from Sittwe to Buthidaung, carrying NLD officials including the Social Welfare Minister and Rakhine's Chief Minister.^{lxxiii} No one was injured. The AA later admitted that they did not know the officials were in the helicopter, and issued a warning advising civilian officials against travelling with military personnel.^{lxxiv}

The increased fighting has taken a huge toll on civilians this month, with many killed and injured, and hundreds displaced,^{lxxv} as shown in Table I. Many of the displaced are taking refuge in monasteries or with relatives.^{lxxvi} Conditions in Rakhine's IDP camps are worsening as the number of the displaced increases, including shortages of shelter materials, clothing, food, and water.^{lxxvii} A Rakhine State member of Parliament called on the Government to increase support for and grant permission to international humanitarian organizations to provide assistance for Rakhine State's IDPs, who currently receive only MMK 300 (\$0.21) per day for food, which the Rakhine MP claims is not enough to cover their basic needs.^{lxxviii}

In addition, the Tatmadaw allegedly fired on and set fire to property, including houses and monasteries, in Kyauktaw and Rathedaung Townships.^{lxxix} The AA denies the Tatmadaw's claims that the property was collateral damage incurred during fighting with the AA. On February 26, the Tatmadaw arrived in Aung

Daing and Kyet Taw Pyin Villages, both in Sittwe Township, and investigated every household in the two villages.^{lxxx}

The AA and the Tatmadaw closed land and water transportation routes because of the clashes, causing shortages of food and supplies, and price inflation in Paletwa Township.^{lxxxii} Ferry services were suspended on February 6, leaving hundreds of people travelling to and from Paletwa stranded.^{lxxxii} The AA announced

it would allow food to enter Paletwa if transporters provided a recommendation letter from local government offices to prove the transported food was for civilian use; goods without recommendation letters would be seized.^{lxxxiii} The Khumi Affairs Coordination Council, a local CSO, released a statement on February 19 requesting that the Tatmadaw and the AA lift travel restrictions and provide assistance for affected residents.

Table I. Civilians displaced, injured and killed by conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw, February 2020

Location		Number of Civilians Affected	Details of Civilians Affected
District	Township		
Maungdaw	Buthidaung	5 killed, 26 injured, unknown number displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 5: an artillery shell from a fight between the Tatmadaw and the AA near San Goe Taung Village injured a Muslim man returning home after chopping wood. February 7: a girl from Nga Hlan Pyin Village was injured by shrapnel from artillery shells during a fight nearby. February 10: a woman from Sa Par Htar Village was injured at home by an artillery shell fired during a battle. February 12: three people were killed and two others injured in a Muslim-majority village, Yae Chan Pyin, by an artillery shell believed to have been fired from a Tatmadaw security outpost. February 13: an artillery shell fired during a battle landed inside a primary school in Kha Mway Chaung Village. Twenty-one ethnic Khumi students were injured, two of them seriously. February 18: a Muslim man was killed by a landmine while tending his cows near Sin Thay Pyin Village. February 19: the AA and Tatmadaw clashed, the latter using helicopters and naval ships, between Set Khaw and Man Aung Villages, causing some houses in Man Aung to catch fire and civilians from the two villages to flee. February 26: a Muslim man tending his cows near Nyaung Chaung border police checkpoint was killed by an explosion. It is unclear if he was killed by an artillery shell or a landmine.
Mindat	Paletwa	1 injured, unknown displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 18: an artillery shell seriously injured a 14-year-old student in Thea Ma Wa Village. The villagers fled to Paletwa town after the incident.
Mrauk-U	Kyauktaw	3 killed, 30 injured, at least 270 displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 3: a mother was killed and three men injured by artillery shells fired by the Tatmadaw, allegedly during a fight with the AA, though the AA disputes the claim. February 10: a 9-year-old boy was killed and five other children injured in an explosion; it is unclear if it was a landmine or an unexploded artillery shell.

Location		Number of Civilians Affected	Details of Civilians Affected
District	Township		
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 10: a pregnant woman was injured after a stray artillery shell hit a house in Myauk Taung Village. February 10: in Ya Dar Nar Pon Village Tract, a Rohingya teenager was killed and two children injured by an artillery shell fired by a Tatmadaw navy vessel. A Muslim woman who came to help the injured children was hurt by another shell. An additional Rohingya woman from a different village in the same tract was injured by another shell. February 11: an artillery shell, allegedly fired by a Tatmadaw navy vessel, landed in a football field where children were playing. Four children were injured. February 12: a woman fetching water was injured by shrapnel during a fight between the Tatmadaw and the AA near Tin Ma Village, in which the Tatmadaw were using aerial warfare. February 13: a woman was injured in Tin Ma Village during a clash between the Tatmadaw and AA. February 17: four artillery shells, allegedly fired by the Tatmadaw, landed in Wat Ma Kya Village, damaging some houses and causing more than 270 out of 300 villagers to flee and seek refuge in a nearby village. February 18: a farmer from Tin Ma Village, bathing in the Kaladan River, was injured by a Tatmadaw artillery shell. The next day, around 150 Tatmadaw soldiers entered the village. The villagers fled. February 20: a woman was injured by stray bullets fired during a battle near Tin Ma Ywar Thit Village. February 23: an artillery shell landed on a house in Kyauktaw town and injured three civilians. February 24: a woman fetching water for her cattle was injured by stray bullets from a fight near Tin Ma village. February 27: a motor boat travelling from Paletwa to Kyauktaw was hit by an artillery shell fired during a fight, and injured five of the 80 passengers on board.
	Minbya	2 killed, 5 injured, unknown displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 13: a young villager returning from cutting wood in a forest was killed by an explosion. No fighting was going on at the time, and it is unclear whether the explosion was caused by an artillery shell or a landmine. February 14: the AA and the Tatmadaw clashed near Hpar Hpyo Village. The Tatmadaw used fighter jets and rockets, and fired at civilians leaving the village, injuring three. The Tatmadaw later detained a civilian returning to the village. He was released soon after, but was badly beaten by the Tatmadaw while detained. The next day, the Tatmadaw took up positions in one part of the village, and forced the villagers to leave their houses and move into a monastery at another part of the village. February 28: a woman was killed and five other civilians injured in Minbya town by artillery shells from a nearby fight.
	Mrauk-U	6 killed, 4 injured, unknown displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 2: a boy was killed and a woman injured by an unexploded device he had found near the village. February 29: four Muslim villagers in Bu Ta Lone village were killed, and five civilians were injured (two from Tan Pyin Gyi, three from Myaung Bway, and one from Lay Myo Sar). One of the injured civilians died in the hospital from their injuries.

Location		Number of Civilians Affected	Details of Civilians Affected
District	Township		
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 28: almost all of the villagers of Yae So Chaung village fled in fear after the Tatmadaw fired shells into the village and surrounding area in a fight with the AA.
Sittwe	Rathedaung	1 killed, injured, at least 800 displaced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 1: a mother and her two sons were injured by an artillery shell fired by the Tatmadaw into Pyein Taw Village. February 2: a man from Nga San Baw Village was killed after stepping on a landmine while out looking for his cattle. February 2: approximately 200 Tatmadaw soldiers entered Ku Lar Chaung Village and fired shots, causing around 800 villagers from there and nearby villages to flee. Around 57 villagers were trapped, but were rescued on February 5. February 3: a primary school teacher was injured by a piece of shrapnel fired from Myanmar navy vessels on the Mayu River near Kone Tan Village. February 4: approximately 500 households fled after the Tatmadaw fired on mountain ranges using helicopters, allegedly targeting the AA. February 6, four women were injured by artillery shells thought to be fired by the Tatmadaw navy into Yae Poke and Sauk Khat Villages. February 10: the Tatmadaw shot and injured a Muslim man travelling with two others by boat in Nyaung Creek.

INTERNET SHUTDOWN RESUMED IN FIVE TOWNSHIPS

On February 3, the Government of Myanmar’s Ministry of Transport and Communications reinstated an internet ban in five townships: Buthidaung, Maungdaw, Rathedaung, and Myebon in Rakhine State, and Paletwa in Chin State.^{lxxxiv} The Government cited security requirements and public interest as reasons for the blackout. According to the Government’s order, the ban is expected to last three months.

The five townships had also been subject to an internet ban between June and August 2019. As illustrated in Figure 3, four other townships in the region, Ponnagyun, Mrauk-U, Kyauktaw, and Minbya, have had an internet blackout since June 2019, in spite of national and international pressure.^{lxxxv} A Rakhine activist told MAA researchers that many people on the ground believe the internet shutdown is intended to assist the Tatmadaw offensive against the AA, and view it as evidence that the Government is complying with and

providing indirect support to the Tatmadaw. The resumption of the internet ban has been criticized by CSOs, student groups, rights groups, Rakhine communities, businesses, and the UN. The blackout impedes humanitarian work, communications, and increases the likelihood of human rights abuses.^{lxxxvi} In response, the President’s Office announced that while it understands the concerns regarding human rights, security remains the top priority in the blacked-out areas.^{lxxxvii}

TATMADAW CLOSES IDP CAMP

On January 27, the Tatmadaw closed Sanyin Pin camp in Myebon Township, Rakhine State. The camp housed around 500 IDPs. The Tatmadaw claimed the camp, opened on January 17, was illegal and that the monks running it had been ordered to close it on January 26.^{lxxxviii} The Tatmadaw later claimed it closed the camps to clear landmines in the area.^{lxxxix} Residents said that late on January 25, approximately 100 Tatmadaw troops conducted a midnight attack on the camps.^{xc} The Tatmadaw allegedly fired shots into the

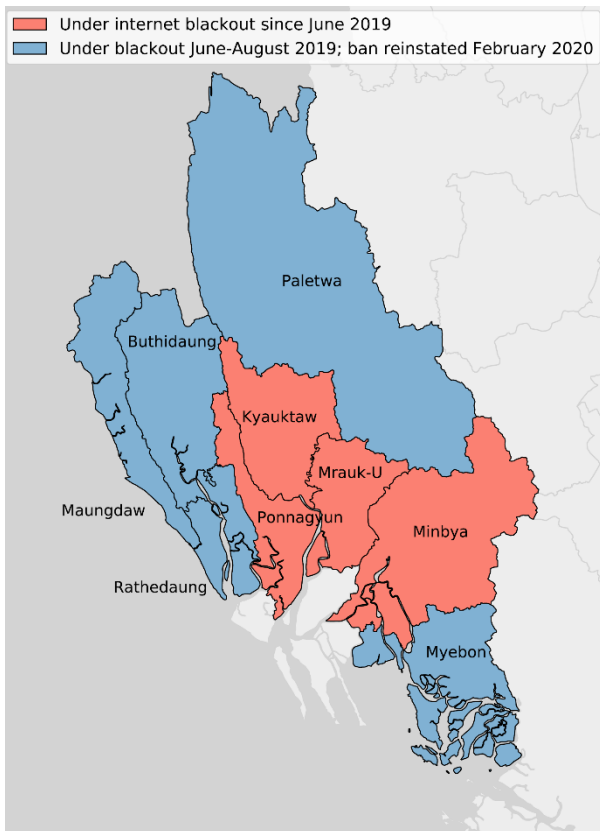


Figure 3. Townships of Myanmar under an internet blackout KIMETRICA, LLC.

air, torched three shelters, rounded up civilians and ordered them to leave. Approximately 400 people fled following the attack. A Myebon MP criticized the alleged eviction, saying that it left the camp residents with nowhere to go. He said his efforts to discuss the event in the Rakhine Parliament were rebuffed, because talking about the military was a “sensitive subject.”^{xcii}

NLD OFFICIAL MISSING

On February 8, Zeyar Min, an NLD party member for Ramree Township in Rakhine, was abducted by unknown armed men on Ramree Island.^{xciii} The Tatmadaw blamed the AA for the abduction, citing a witness who claimed the AA targeted Zeyar Min because of a public rally held in support of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi in December 2019.^{xciii} Another Ramree Township NLD member also blamed the AA, reporting that they had received threats from the AA since

organizing the December rally.^{xciv} The AA denied responsibility for the abduction.

AA CONFISCATES GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES' SALARIES

The AA continued to assert its power in Rakhine State by confiscating the salaries from several police employees and teachers working in Paletwa Township as they travelled by boat on February 5.^{xcv} The AA seized more than MMK 4 million (\$2,667) from the police staff, and more than MMK 2 million (\$1,333) from the teachers, although the AA claimed it would return the money to the teachers. An AA spokesperson claimed that confiscating the money from the police was justified because the police had attacked AA troops.

SHAN STATE

RESTORATION COUNCIL OF SHAN STATE

In spite of promising signs for peace in early February, fighting resumed between the Tatmadaw and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) at the end of the month. An 11-member military and government delegation, including Lieutenant General Aye Win and the Union Attorney-General Tun Tun Oo, attended celebrations for the 73rd annual Shan National Day, at the RCSS headquarters on February 7.^{xcvi} This is the first time such senior Tatmadaw and Government officials attended celebrations in EAO-controlled territory. According to the *Irrawaddy*, their attendance was a result of positive talks between the RCSS, Aung San Suu Kyi, and the Tatmadaw that took place in January 2020 and was widely viewed as a sign of progress in the peace process.

However, between February 27 and February 29, the Tatmadaw and RCSS fought in Mong Kai Township near Ham Ngaing Village, resulting in around three Tatmadaw casualties.^{xcvii} The RCSS alleges that the fight was started when around 400 Tatmadaw

troops attacked an RCSS camp, but the Tatmadaw claims that RCSS soldiers crossed into Tatmadaw territory and started firing. The RCSS released a statement, in which they questioned the Tatmadaw's support of decisions made at January's Joint Implementing Coordination Meeting (JICM), and said they would review their decisions to try to participate in upcoming peace process meetings in March.^{xcviii}

CIVILIANS AFFECTED

Civilians continue to be affected by the presence of the Tatmadaw and armed groups in Shan state. On February 16, the Tatmadaw arrested a 52-year-old villager near Pinlon Town, Loilen Township, accusing him of being a soldier for a Shan EAO after Tatmadaw soldiers pulled him over and found a walkie-talkie in his bag.^{xcix} He was beaten during detention, and released after two days. According to ACLED, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) allegedly abducted four villagers on February 24, and a village administrator on February 27, all in War Lu village, Namhkan Township.^c It is not clear why they were detained or when they will be released. In the past, EAOs have targeted civilians, particularly administrators, and forced them to recruit troops, work as informers, or collect money and food from civilians.^{ci}

On February 13, a man from Man Sang village, Kyaukme Township, was found shot dead in his field, suspected to be murdered by an armed group; with many groups active in the area, it is unclear which group is responsible.^{cii}

A man was killed and another injured after they stepped on a landmine while going to chop wood near Man Kan Village, Kyaukme Township, on February 3.^{ciii} On February 27, a woman in Tachileik Town, Tachileik Township, was injured after accidentally hitting an old artillery shell.^{civ}

On February 24, the Shan Human Rights Foundation put out a statement requesting the Tatmadaw stop confiscating land and forcing locals to work for them in Lashio Township.^{cv} Starting in October 2018, the Tatmadaw allegedly demanded that representatives from each of the 500 households in the 11 villages of the Mong Kyet Village Tract contribute labor toward building a new military camp, and also seized land from villages to build new barracks.

KAYIN STATE

Tensions remain high in Kayin State between the Tatmadaw and the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The KNLA accused the Tatmadaw of firing into Karen villages in Hpapun from February 3 to February 8,^{cvi} causing more than 300 villagers to flee. The KNU wrote a letter to the Tatmadaw condemning the attacks, and claiming that they violated the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). In response, the Tatmadaw claimed it fired only at a KNLA base, not villages, and that the attack was in retaliation to intermittent attacks by the KNLA against the Tatmadaw in early February, including ambushes and planting landmines.^{cvii}

At a meeting on February 19, the KNU said it would not allow the Tatmadaw to continue road construction in KNU-controlled areas, due to fighting between the Tatmadaw, the KNU, and civilians, both this month and in January.^{cviii} It is unclear whether the fighting over the last two months indicates a possible increase in violence between the two forces.

Figure 4 shows all the conflict actors and the number of violent interactions from January 26 to February 22, 2020, as reported by ACLED.

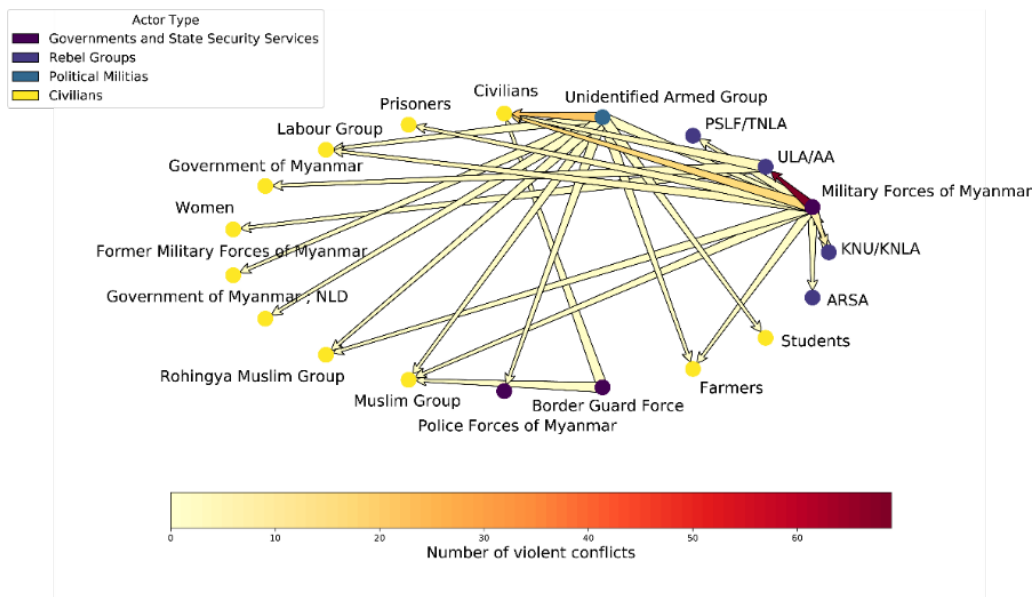


Figure 4. Conflict Actors (January 26 – February 22, 2020)
KIMETRICA LLC, DATA SOURCE: ACLED

POLITICS

- The USDP expanded its executive committee as it ramps up preparations for the November general election.
- Lieutenant General Soe Htut is named as the new Home Affairs Minister following the retirement of Lieutenant General Kyaw Swe.
- The Government proposed the resumption of the JMC meetings to start again next month.
- The Union Parliament speaker scheduled a parliamentary debate on constitutional amendment bills, limiting participation to 149 MPs.
- Yangon’s Regional Parliament drafted a bill aimed at controlling the mismanagement of funds.

ELECTION 2020 UPDATE

USDP EXPANDS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

In preparation for the upcoming general election, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP) expanded its senior management, appointing two vice-chairs and

three additional members to its central executive committee.^{cix} Spokesperson for the USDP, Dr Nanda Hla Myint, said that the positions were created to help the party campaign on a big scale ahead of the November elections.

After its crushing defeat in 2015, the USDP is aiming to capitalize on widespread disappointment in the NLD’s performance to gain more seats at the upcoming election. Interviews with key informants across the country indicate there indeed is support for USDP due to NLD’s disappointing domestic performance in some areas. Respondents from Khaunglanhpu Township, Kachin State and Mongyang Township, Shan State, said there were rumors in the townships that the USDP will win the 2020 general election.

MINOR PARTIES ANNOUNCE PACT

On February 5, eight small political parties, in competition with the USDP and the NLD, launched the United Political Parties Alliance (UPPA), announcing their intention to run in the general election “collaboratively” to boost their election chances. All parties appear to be focused on the Bamar regions rather than the ethnic states.^{cx}

All UPPA member parties were formed after the 2015 election. They are the Democracy and Peace Party, Party for People, the Public of Labor Party, the Yeomanry Development Party, the Myanmar People’s Democratic Party, the People’s Party of Myanmar Farmers and Workers, the National Prosperity Party, and the Union of Myanmar Federation of National Politics. Six more small parties are in discussions to join the alliance, according to Myo Nyunt, general secretary of Democracy and Peace Party.

Interviews about the election with key informants indicate it is unlikely small parties will be successful. There was little name recognition of these small parties among the interviewees, even for larger parties like the People’s Party, formed by the prominent 88 Generation activist Ko Ko Gyi. Only the USDP, the NLD, and ethnic parties appear to garner significant support among local communities, according to interviewees.

MILITARY POLLING STATIONS SCRAPPED

On February 20, the Lower House voted to prohibit polling stations inside military garrisons, confirming changes proposed by the Union Election Commission (UEC) in November 2019.^{cxvi} The UEC’s requirement for military officers and their families to vote outside military barracks was in response to concerns that senior officers were influencing votes inside the bases. Brigadier-General Maung Maung claimed, however, that the change was not necessary, since the previously held general elections were “free and fair.”^{cxvii}

NEW HOME AFFAIRS MINISTER ANNOUNCED

In February, Lieutenant General Soe Htut, was appointed as the new minister for the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), following the previous minister’s retirement. On February 6, President Win Myint announced the appointment following its approval in

Parliament.^{cxviii} This was considered a formality as Parliament is constitutionally barred from rejecting a nomination unless it can prove they do not meet the qualifications of the Union Minister, since the MOHA is one of three ministries controlled by the military.^{cxix} The son of Brigadier General Lun Maung, a former minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Soe Htut served as the Chief of Office of Military Affairs, Myanmar’s espionage agency, since 2016.

The previous Home Affairs Minister, Lieutenant General Kyaw Swe, reached the civil service retirement age in November 2019 and will now return to the armed forces.^{cxv} While the changeover is not expected to drastically alter the operations of MOHA, political analyst Maung Maung Thein told *Radio Free Asia* that Kyaw Swe was considered too close to Aung San Suu Kyi.^{cxvi} In contrast, Soe Htut is considered to be a military loyalist.^{cxvii}

Following the announcement, the media reported that the replacement of the Home Affairs Minister is part of a wider shake-up. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing is expected to appoint a number of military loyalists to senior positions in the coming months due to concerns that current officials are too close to the civilian government.^{cxviii}

PEACE PROCESS

In early February, there was hope the formal peace process might move forward when the Government announced its intention to reconvene the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee (JMC) next month. Following a three-day meeting between government negotiators and representatives of the ten National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signatories that took place from February 16 to 18, government peace negotiator Hla Maung Swe said both sides had agreed to hold the JMC from March 10 to 12.^{cxix}

The last JMC meeting took place more than a year ago, so there is hope that the upcoming meeting will be a step toward rekindling formal peace talks. Created with the introduction of the NCA in 2015, the JMC operates at the union, state, and local levels and is responsible for monitoring the ceasefire and troop-related provisions in the NCA and resolving disputes between sides.^{cxx}

However, several EAOs have criticized the structure of the JMC as being dominated by the Tatmadaw. The RCSS and the KNU suspended their participation in the JMC, calling for the body to be restructured to allow for greater involvement for EAOs. In particular, EAOs have called for a change to the current arrangement of Tatmadaw chairing all meetings, and to allow for international participation for international stakeholders.^{cxxi}

While Hla Maung Swe claimed that the resumption of the JMC can be seen as a sign of increasing trust between ethnic organizations and the Government, the operation of the JMC itself has come under intense scrutiny over its lack of effectiveness. A senior figure at an international NGO that works with issues related to peace told MAA researchers that the JMC’s weak implementation of its responsibilities and poor coordination with other stakeholders was emblematic of the Government’s overall approach to the peace process. The resumption of the JMC, should it occur, cannot not be seen as a “silver bullet” in the ongoing peace talks. The February meetings between stakeholders involved in the peace process are outlined below.

Table 2. Peace Process-Related Meetings, February 2020

DATE	WHO	WHERE	OUTCOMES
2/2/20-2/3/20	Government officials and NCA-signatories	National Reconciliation and Peace Center (NRPC), Yangon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formals talks on the implementation of the eight resolutions from the JICM meeting^{cxxii} Proposals for ethnic groups to hold national meetings before the next Panglong conference^{cxxiii}
2/4/20	KNU	KNU 7th Battalion at Bawkataw Camp in Sawhti Township	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public meeting to raise awareness of the peace process The meeting was shut down by the Tatmadaw The KNU issued a public statement criticizing the Tatmadaw’s prohibition of the meeting^{cxxiv}
2/12/20	Aung San Suu Kyi	73rd Union Day Ceremony, Panglong, Shan State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> State Counsellor claimed political problems are the root of the ongoing conflict in Myanmar Ethnic leaders criticized the Government for not implementing changes to Article 261 of the Constitution^{cxxv}
2/16/20 - 2/18/20	Government officials and NCA-signatories	NRPC, Yangon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government proposed the resumption of the JCM next month^{cxxvi} NCA-signatories proposed a plan to include non-signatory EAOs in the formal peace process Discussions on proposals for EAOs to draft their own charters to be presented at the next Panglong conference^{cxxvii}
2/4/20 - 2/18/20	Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP)	Wang Hai, Shan State	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual SSPP conference Discussions on negotiating with the government, Tatmadaw and other EAOs to participate in the political process and NCA^{cxxviii} SSPP released a statement after the conference refuting

DATE	WHO	WHERE	OUTCOMES
			media claims it is ready to sign the NCA ^{cxxx}
2/19/20	KNU and the Tatmadaw	Nay Pyi Taw	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion over the military's construction of roads in KNU-controlled areas • KNU reiterated its opposition to the resumption of road-building^{cxxx}

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM UPDATE

The Union Parliament announced that parliamentary debates on the two bills submitted by the charter amendment committee would take place from February 25 to March 5.^{cxxxi} Although a total of 282 MPs registered to take part in the debate, the speaker limited the number of participants to 149, with 50 MPs from NLD, 50 from the military, and 49 from ethnic parties. Figure 5 demonstrates how the speaker's decision reduced the proportion of military MPs able to attend the debate.

Of the 166 military MPs in Parliament, 164 registered to join the debate and object to the proposed amendments, many of which would reduce the military's power.^{cxxxii} Political analyst Mary Callahan stated on Twitter that military lawmakers' mass registration for the debate was evidence that relations between the civilian government and the military had not softened, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's

defense of military actions in Rakhine State at the ICJ in February.^{cxxxiii}

During the initial debates, military and USDP MPs voiced their strong opposition to the proposals, which would reduce the number of unelected military lawmakers and diminish the power of the commander-in-chief. Tin Aye, a USDP MP, argued that it was not the right time to reduce military power because of ongoing conflicts across the country.^{cxxxiv}

CORRUPTION WATCH

In order to increase oversight of the Yangon Regional Government's expenditures, the Regional Parliament drafted a bill to control the mismanagement of public funds and government corruption. The Region Funds and Investment Law would require companies "established by the regional government with public funds," such as the Yangon Metropolitan Development Co, and the Yangon Region Transport Authority, to be audited by the Auditor-General. It would also

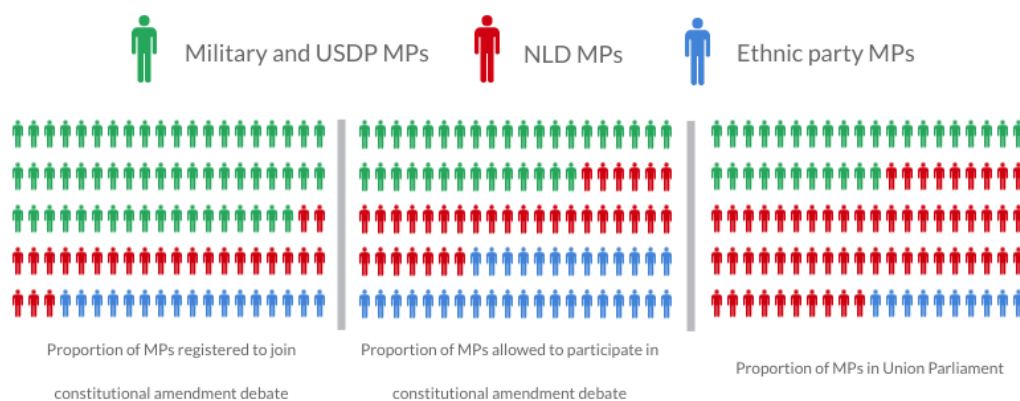


Figure 5. Proportion of MPs Debating Constitutional Amendment by Party Type
MEKONG ECONOMICS

mandate the Regional Government to submit regular reports to the Parliament on its public expenditure.^{cxv}

The draft bill is in response to alleged discrepancies in Yangon Government's expenditures, which were presented to Parliament by the Auditor-General last month. According to the Auditor-General's report, the Yangon Government failed to collect fines on late lease payments and significantly

overpaid on several development projects.^{cxvi} The bill will be presented to Parliament in June following consultations with business leaders and the bill committee.^{cxvii} Aung Thu Nyein from the Institute of Strategy and Policy questioned the law's effectiveness without support from other institutions such as the Anti-Corruption Commission, claiming that a stand-alone law would not provide sufficient checks and balances on the Yangon Regional Government.

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