

PERSPECTIVE

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Myanmar’s “Sham” Election Threatens the 2025 Goals of the Arakan Rebels

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U Oo Hla Saw, a former top leader and co-founder of the Arakan National Party, which has registered to contest for the junta projected election in 2023, was speaking at a meeting in September, 2019 in Sittwe, Rakhine State (Photo/ANP Facebook page).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- After fighting the Myanmar military fiercely for two years, the Arakan Army had, by the end of 2020, established a parallel administration and military bases in Rakhine State. It seemed that “Arakan Dream 2020” was thus accomplished.
- While the relationship between the Rakhine political parties and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) is not clear, the ULA/AA leadership seems to have much closer interactions with the Arakan National Party (ANP) than with the Arakan League of Democracy (ALD) or the Arakan Front Party (AFP).
- Six Rakhine parties including the Arakan Front Party and Arakan National Party have so far registered for the State Administration Council’s projected election in 2023. However, at least 40 political parties including the National League of Democracy (NLD) and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) have been dissolved by the junta-appointed election commission, and many Rakhine people remain sceptical about this election, for which a date has as yet not been announced.
- Tensions between AA and State Administration Council (SAC) forces grew during the first week of March 2023, with the AA warning that if junta forces kept being reinforced and if restrictions on residents in Rakhine continued, fighting could break out at any time and there would then be no reason for elections to be held.

INTRODUCTION

At the two-year mark of the 2021 coup in Myanmar, the State Administration Council (SAC) regime announced an extension of its state of emergency for another six months, causing doubt on its ability to meet its pledge to conduct an election in August.¹ The SAC also stated that they had lost control over at least 132 of 330 townships. Days after the announcement extending its term, the SAC regime imposed martial law on at least 44 townships across nine states and regions: Sagaing, Chin, Magway, Bago, Mon, Kayin, Tanintharyi, Yangon, and Kayah.²

Unlike these states and regions, Myanmar's Rakhine State is now enjoying relative stability after the second round of armed clashes between Arakan Army (AA) and SAC forces between August to November 2022 ended in a "humanitarian" truce.³ Three months before the coup in 2021, an earlier ceasefire had been brokered in November 2020 with the facilitation of Yohei Sasakawa, Japan's special envoy for Myanmar's peace process. Starting in late 2018, that first round of intense armed conflict had lasted almost two years. The informal truce was negotiated with the purpose of holding elections in areas where polling had been cancelled for the 2020 general election, due exactly to that conflict.⁴ Analysts had described the fighting then as the fiercest Myanmar had seen in decades.⁵

Formed in April 2019 in pursuit of greater autonomy for the people of Rakhine, the AA has become one of the country's most powerful armed organisations over the last decade, arraying 30,000 armed troops.⁶ As a part of its dream, the AA established a parallel administration body – called the Arakan People's Authority (APA) led by its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), which has been receiving great Rakhine public support.

In a December 2019 interview, the AA's Commander-in-Chief Twan Mrat Naing hinted that the ULA/AA held the capacity for making "some big change" before 2025.⁷ That "big change" seemed to refer to his statement in early 2019 that ULA/AA wanted "confederation statutes" for the people of Rakhine, pointing to the Wa Self-Administered Division as an example.⁸ Yet, its political dream will not be easily negotiated with the SAC regime. Although the AA agreed to a humanitarian truce in late November 2022, the junta has since seized upon the current truce to prepare for a sham election in Rakhine and for another war in the state.⁹ This paper provides a contextualised discussion of the AA's "Arakan Dream 2020", of Rakhine political parties and ULA/AA relations, of the SAC's projected election in 2023 and of challenges to AA's 2025 political goal.

ARAKAN DREAM 2020 AT GLANCE

The AA introduced the strategic concept of “Arakan Dream 2020”¹⁰ through “the Way of Rakhita” in early 2017. This vision includes establishing military bases and a Rakhine people’s government in Rakhine State. Ideologically, “the Way of Rakhita” is described as “the struggle for national liberation and the restoration of Arakan sovereignty to the people of Arakan,”¹¹ referring to the restoration of an independent Arakan kingdom. Before the Burmese Konbaung Dynasty conquered the Rakhine Mrauk-U kingdom in 1784, the latter ruled over much of what is now Rakhine State and parts of Chittagong Division in neighbouring Bangladesh.

Already by the end of 2020, the AA had largely achieved its 2020 vision. Starting in late 2018, the AA engaged in the theretofore fiercest war against the Myanmar military, until an informal ceasefire was negotiated in late 2020.¹² Before that ceasefire, the AA’s armed clashes with the Myanmar military had in early 2019 reached a new level of intensity; the AA carried out a series of coordinated attacks on four military border outposts in northern Rakhine State on 12 February, which Myanmar commemorates as Union Day.¹³ In March, it engaged the Myanmar military in a battle lasting more than 40 days, when a force of over 3,000 AA soldiers attempted to take a strategic hill¹⁴ located in Kaladan River, the site of Myanmar’s multi-modal transit transport project with India. Over the two years of the conflict up to late 2020, more than 230,000 persons were displaced, nearly 1,000 were injured or killed by artillery shelling, gunshots and landmine explosions, including more than 170 children.¹⁵

In pursuit of its 2020 dream, the AA/ULA established in December 2019 the “Arakan People Authority (APA).” This administrative entity, now renamed the ‘Arakan People’s Government (APG)’, had as its main intentions a) the collection of taxes from the operators of large-scale projects in Rakhine, starting 2020, and b) the regulation of administrative and judiciary mechanisms in parts of Rakhine and neighbouring southern Chin State under AA control.¹⁶ In July 2020, the APG started collecting taxes and arresting illegal drug users.¹⁷ Six months after the February 2021 coup, the AA/ULA claimed de-facto control over two-thirds of Rakhine State, as well as the capacity to regulate judiciary, taxation, and law and order in the territory stretching from rural areas along the border with Bangladesh to southern Chin State and from northern to southern Rakhine.¹⁸

The administration has also enjoyed public support. For example, in response to the third wave of the COVID-19 in early July 2021, residents in Rakhine State largely complied with the ULA/AA’s “Stay at Home order”.¹⁹ Similarly, they followed health and safety regulations set for the Rakhine Sangkran Water Festival (the Buddhist New Year Water Festival celebrated throughout Myanmar), which the ULA/AA administration organised in Kyauktaw in April 2022, with ten thousand participants. The ULA/AA provided security for the festival at which participants celebrated openly with uniformed AA members.

The role of ULA/AA's military bases across Rakhine State, however, remains ambiguous. These bases have nine brigades: namely Alpha 1, Alpha 2, Alpha 3, Beta 1, Beta 2, Beta 3, Nova 1, Nova 2 and Nova 3. These oversee territories reaching from southern Chin State to the Bangladeshi border, as well as the northern to the southern parts of Rakhine state.²⁰ The ULA/AA administrators are able to regulate its judiciary and administration activities based on these brigades.

In April 2021, two months after the February 2021 coup, and on the 12th anniversary of its formation, the AA stated its political goals post-coup, most notably the implementation of a governance mechanism with strong institutions including administration, judiciary, and public security.²¹

ELECTORAL POLITICS IN RAKHINE

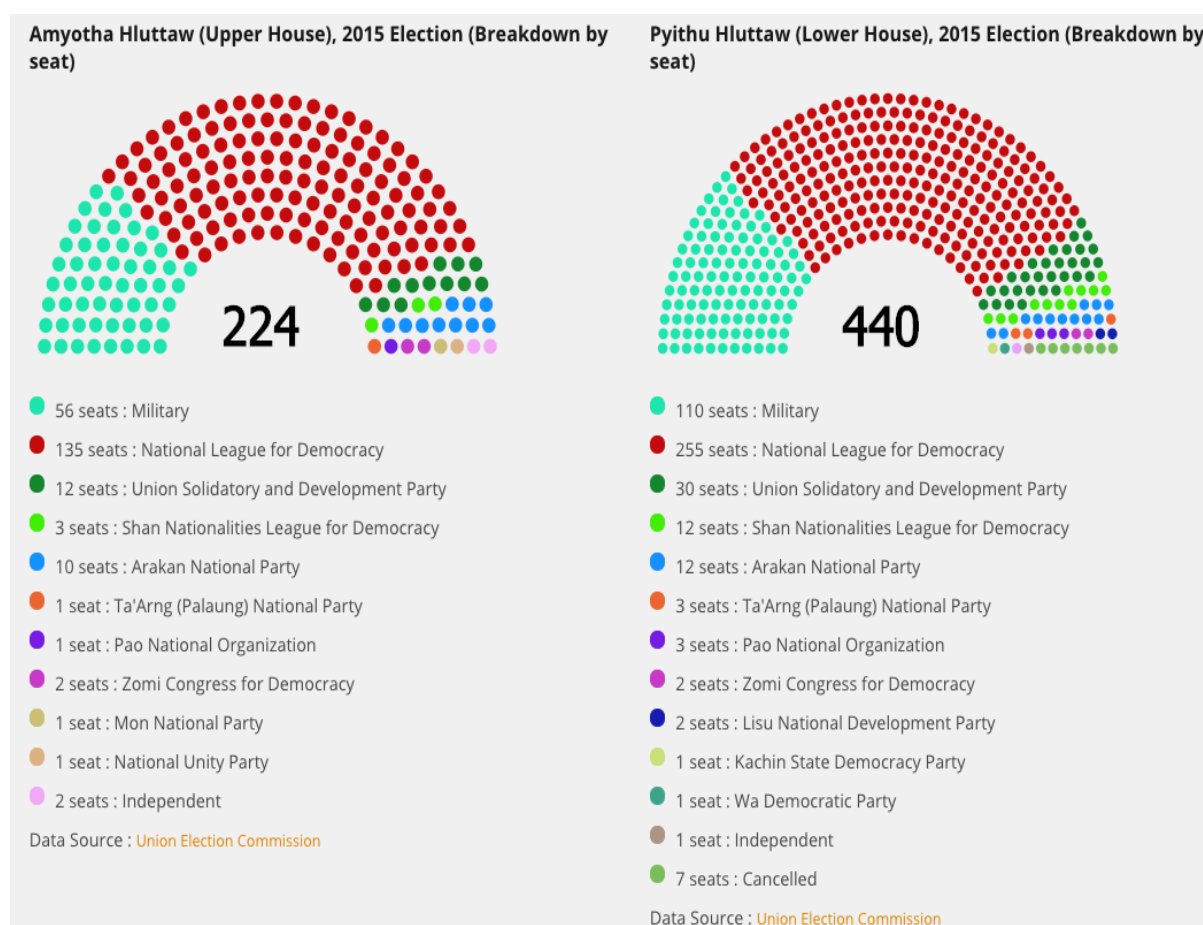
As the nationwide armed struggles escalate, the role of electoral politics in Myanmar has been narrowed down, resulting from the military coup that ended a decade-long-democratic transition, in February 2021. The country had returned to being a quasi-democracy in 2010 after several decades-long military junta rule. When the previous State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) regime held elections in 2010, the regime-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the election while National League of Democracy (NLD) and its alliance including Arakan League for Democracy (ALD) exercised a boycott.²²

In 2010, at least ten political parties in Rakhine including the Rakhine Nationalities Development Party (RNDP) contested in the election. Ahead of it, the RNDP, one of largest parties at the time, was formed by a group of Rakhine nationalists including Dr. Aye Maung, Daw Aye Nu Sein, and U Oo Hla Saw while another large party, the ALD, supported the NLD's boycott.

With the aim of self-rule for the people of Rakhine in preparing for the 2015 election, the RNDP led by Dr. Aye Maung and ALD led by U Aye Thar Aung agreed in June 2013 to merge into a single party: the Arakan National Party (ANP), which became the country's fourth largest party.²³ In the 2015 election, the merged ANP won 22 out of 29 seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and 23 out of 35 elected seats in Rakhine State legislature.²⁴

The NLD, which had won a landslide victory nationwide, ignored the ANP's demand to appoint Rakhine State's chief minister. Instead, it followed the USDP precedent of appointing its own MPs as chief ministers in all states and regions including Rakhine;²⁵ this led to an exacerbation of the long-standing Rakhine sentiments of political exclusion, and the ANP came to be seen as one of the parties vocal in opposition to the ruling NLD.

Figure 1. Seats in the Myanmar's Union-level parliament



Source: Myanmar data, Open Development Myanmar

<https://opendevelopmentmyanmar.net/dashboards/myanmar-data/>

In early 2017, the ANP split into three factions following structural and factional disagreements. Factional leaders Aye Nu Sein, Oo Hla Saw, and Khaing Pyae Soe remained under the ANP, while leaders of the previous ALD re-established it under its previous name. ANP chair Dr Aye Maung resigned in November that year, and, along with his fellows including some ANP leaders and MPs, formed the Arakan Front Party (AFP) in 2018.

Weeks before the 2020 national election, the NLD government disenfranchised three-fourths of 1.6 million eligible Rakhine voters. Citing security reasons due to conflict between the AA and the Myanmar military, voting was cancelled in Mrauk-U and eight other townships in the state, and in 152 wards and village tracts in four additional Rakhine townships.²⁶ Only 15 state parliamentary seats were contested. The ANP won 8 seats out of 13 Union-level parliamentary seats, and 7 out of 15 total state parliamentary seats. The AFP won 2 out of 13 state parliamentary seats, and only one of 12 national parliamentary seats.²⁷

Table 1. The results of the 2020 election in Rakhine State

Party	Rakhine State Hluttaw	Pyithu Hluttaw	Amyotha Hluttaw
Arakan National Party (ANP)	7	4	4
Arakan Front Party (AFP)	2	1	0
National League for Democracy (NLD)	5	2	1
Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP)	1	1	0

(Source - “Rakhine Parties Fall Just Short of Majority in Rakhine State Hluttaw,” *Frontier Myanmar* (<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/rakhine-parties-fall-just-short-of-majority-in-state-hluttaw/>)

After the February 2021 coup, the anti-NLD sentiment caused some Rakhine political parties to seek closer relations with the SAC regime. The ALD condemned the coup, but ANP joined the SAC administration. The AFP also cozied up to the SAC.

On 7 February 2021, 47 Rakhine civil society groups issued a joint statement urging the ANP to reverse its decision.²⁸ Instead, U Zaw Aye Maung, one of ANPs top leaders, accepted a position on February 13 as the SAC’s deputy ethnic affairs minister.²⁹ In March 2021, the ANP and AFP joined for the first time a meeting proposed by the SAC-appointed Union Election Commission (UEC), demonstrating their willingness to engage with the SAC.³⁰ The AFP welcomed the UEC’s meeting invitation again in May 2021.³¹

RAKHINE POLITICAL PARTIES’S RELATIONS WITH ULA/AA

Among all Rakhine political parties, the ULA/AA seems to have much closer interactions with the ANP than with the ALD and AFP. Soon after the February 2021 coup, some ANP leaders/founders and MPs transferred to the ULA/AA administration body. ANP deputy chair Aye Nu Sein and Central Executive of Committee (CEC) member Zaw Aye Maung joined the SAC governing body.³² Oo Hla Saw, a prominent Rakhine politician and co-founder of ANP, became the ULA political commissar and represented the ULA at the 74th Union Day in Naypyidaw organised by the SAC regime on 12 February 2021.³³

In the post-coup Rakhine political landscape, the ALD is less visible compared to the ANP and AFP. But the party is actively involved, alongside the NLD and its other allies, against the coup regime. The ALD also did not register to contest the junta’s election in 2023. The ALD seems

to be more a legacy movement with no strong foothold in Rakhine politics, or strong ties with the ULA/AA leadership.

The ULA/AA's relationship with the AFP led by Dr. Aye Maung seems the worst. Dr. Aye Maung had been imprisoned in 2019, during the NLD government's term, on charges of treason. He was released on 12 February 2021 in an amnesty gesture by the SAC. Soon after his release, Dr Aye Maung expressed his gratitude to coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing for his release,³⁴ and criticized for the first time the ULA/AA's political and revolutionary path and activities.³⁵

On 28 February 2023, a day after AFP registered to contest the junta's election, Dr. Aye Maung called for party leaders to resign if they were associated with ULA/AA, citing the need for accordance with the new election law established by the junta-appointed Union Election Committee (UEC).³⁶ The new election law calls for party members and leaders not to be connected to support or encouragement of those or groups who are armed against the state and who have been declared as illegal associations under the existing law.

Dr. Aye Maung is now widely seen as a pro-military regime politician, and even to be attempting to disturb the political struggle of the ULA/AA revolutionary movement. On the other hand, the ULA/AA administration has since late 2022 arrested some AFP leaders.

THE SAC'S PROJECTED ELECTION AND AA'S TRAJECTORY

Although analysts have warned that holding elections without the people's consent "will be a sham, logistically difficult...and almost certainly provoke greater violence",³⁷ by the end of March 2023, at least 50 political parties including six Rakhine parties have registered to contest in the SAC's "sham" election. Forty parties including the NLD and Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) have been dissolved.³⁸

The SAC, however, has not set a firm date for August 2023, and seems inclined to postpone polls for another year. Min Aung Hlaing has remarked that a national census would be required to ensure voting list accuracy. The SAC's immigration and population minister U Myint Kyaing told state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar that the census would be done on 1-15 October, 2024.³⁹

The military does seem to view Rakhine State differently, taking advantage of the current truce with the AA to create as much space as possible for its upcoming polls.⁴⁰ The SAC-appointed election committee in Rakhine State has started working to set up polling-stations, and ballot lists throughout Rakhine.⁴¹ A group of Rakhine youth, however, has begun campaigning against the junta's election in Rakhine.⁴² Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has visited Rakhine at least

three times in the first quarter of 2023, urging his troops to follow “command and obey”, and explaining his election plans.⁴³

Since early December of last year, the junta proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), has reportedly started its election campaign activities in northern Rakhine through meetings with its party members.⁴⁴ On March 10, 2023, USDP chair U Khin Yi visited Rakhine state for the election,⁴⁵ and a meeting with at least 80 of its members including Rakhine State USDIP chair Dr. San Swe from seven townships such as Kyaukphyu, Thandwe, Ann and Taungup at its party office in Thandwe.⁴⁶ At least six Rakhine parties including Arakan Front Party (AFP) and Arakan National Party (ANP), registered for the junta’s sham election despite the fact that many Rakhine people remain sceptical.

The AA, the real change-maker of Rakhine, has thus far made no clear statement for or against elections. On 27 February 27, AA spokesperson Khaing Thukha said in a press conference that the AA did not have any comments on the election as polls would not bring any changes or benefits to the Rakhine people.⁴⁷ Some analysts observe that the AA may end up choosing the armed path rather than negotiate with the SAC, however, since the AA’s political demand - confederation status like the Wa – would be unacceptable to the SAC.⁴⁸ Others argue that the AA has to choose both the armed path and a pragmatic diplomatic approach such as engaging with Bangladesh on Rohingya repatriation and taking a political stand on the Rohingya people. Khaing Thuka stated in September 2022 that the AA would officially disclose its policy on the Rohingya, on condition that foreign governments including Bangladesh recognise the AA as the government of Rakhine State.⁴⁹

The AA now seems keen to keep the current truce with the SAC regime, while accelerating AA administration across Rakhine. However, in early 2023, the Rakhine State SAC warned Kyaukphyu and Thandwe residents not to support the AA administration and opened multi-check points in Mrauk-U and Kyauktaw.⁵⁰ SAC forces have reinforced its troops across Rakhine State, collected food for the long-term⁵¹ and investigated AA bases in each township.⁵² In response, the AA has warned that if the SAC forces continue such actions in Rakhine, fighting could resume, and there would then be no reason for an election to be held.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The SAC’s plans for an election in August 2023, including Rakhine State, seem ambitious. At the time of writing, no firm date for the polls has been set. Even so, the Rakhine political parties have registered its willingness for involvement while the Rakhine public look forward to receiving a clear decision from the real kingmaker, the AA. If the AA remain unclear, the 2025 Arakan goal would also come to be questioned. The SAC regime would, on the other hand, keep Rakhine as stable as possible—either for election purposes or for its own political and military purposes. Similarly, the SAC would also try to keep the truce with the AA while it continues to wage war in the rest of the country against other ethnic and local resistance groups.

Holding the sham election in Rakhine would, on the contrary, be a disaster for not only the growth of AA's administration in Rakhine, in both the short and long term, but also the achievement of AA's 2025 goal. At the same time, the SAC regime would extend its bases in many parts of Rakhine State including those areas under AA control. And the AA would also probably receive much criticism and lose support in southern Rakhine State where the NLD has a stronghold. Return of war in Rakhine would, on the other hand, be the humanitarian crisis and see a brutal military assault on the population of Rakhine. Either way, Rakhine State is likely to face another unpredictable period of upheaval – militarily and politically.

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