



# IGC

## Rebel governance and political trust: Post-coup politics of ethnic minorities in Myanmar

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- This brief explores the findings from an online survey on ethnic minority people's exposure to armed rebel governance and their trust for the pro-democracy national government in the post-coup Myanmar.
- Results of the survey show that people in ethnic minority areas generally have a high level of trust for the National Unity Government (NUG) and a moderate level of exposure to various governance activities by ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), such as provision of education and medical services, engagement with community problems, and taxation.
- Individuals with higher exposure to positive rebel governance activities have higher trust for the EAOs. They also tend to have slightly lower trust for the NUG, as long as the EAO was not seen as explicitly supportive of the NUG.
- This brief recommends that the NUG build a cooperative relationship with the ethnic armed organisations in order to gain the trust of ethnic minority people.

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## Policy motivation

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Due to the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the future of politics became very uncertain. The political insecurity is especially destabilising for ethnic minority communities, who have already been under multiple authorities with overlapping governance systems. As the Myanmar military, pro-democracy forces, ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), and other local armed militias all try to exert influence over the ethnic minority areas, it remains unknown how people have been responding.

Amidst the political disorder, the National Unity Government (NUG), a pro-democracy government in exile composed of elected members of parliament, has been trying to win the support of the ethnic minority communities. In order to achieve unity of the nation and claim itself as the legitimate government of all of Myanmar, it needs the trust of the ethnic people. Some ethnic minority people have joined the pro-democracy resistance while some have taken a more neutral stance. Others are more suspicious of the NUG, expecting that they will fail to prioritise the interests of ethnic minorities, just as the National League for Democracy (NLD) government did.

One way that the ethnic minority communities have been politically distinct from the rest of the country is the presence of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs). Claiming to fight for the self-determination and political autonomy of their ethnic groups, most EAOs have been present for over three to five decades. Many of them also provide governance and social services such as education and healthcare to their population, acting like a state in their areas of influence. Thus, it is expected that EAOs would shape ethnic minority population's political environment and influence their views of other political actors.

Against such backdrop, this study examines how EAO governance impacts ethnic minority's trust and perception of the NUG. On the one hand, more experience of EAO governance may make people less trusting of the NUG. On the other hand, the NUG could be seen as an ally of EAOs since they both are fighting the military. How does exposure to EAO governance impact ethnic minority people's view of the NUG?

## Overview of the research

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To test the relationship between exposure to EAO governance and trust for the NUG, this study ran an online survey targeting all ethnic minority States of Myanmar. Respondents were recruited through Facebook ads and the survey was translated into Burmese and six ethnic minority languages. In order to ensure security for survey respondents, participants were informed that none of their identifiable information would be collected and no financial incentives were

given for participation. In total, 1,113 responses with over 20% response rate were collected.

The respondents showed a wide variation in their ethnicity, region, and exposure to EAOs. In total, respondents were from 35 different ethnic groups according to the primary ethnic identity they indicated. 23% of respondents were Bamar, while Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin ethnicities each composed about 12% of respondents. Chin, Kayah, Karen, and Mon respondents each composed around 6-9% of respondents. All 14 States and Regions were represented, although 85% came from States where ethnic minority communities are concentrated. Respondents also chose the EAO that they have the most exposure to, and the answers showed a wide variation. Some of the major ones included the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), Arakan Army (AA), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS).

Respondents were asked of their perception of the NUG through a series of nine questions with seven-point likert scale answers. These questions asked whether the respondent thinks the NUG will prioritise the interests of their ethnic group and be effective in providing governance for their ethnic group (or ethnic minorities in general, if the respondent was Bamar) if it gains control of the country.

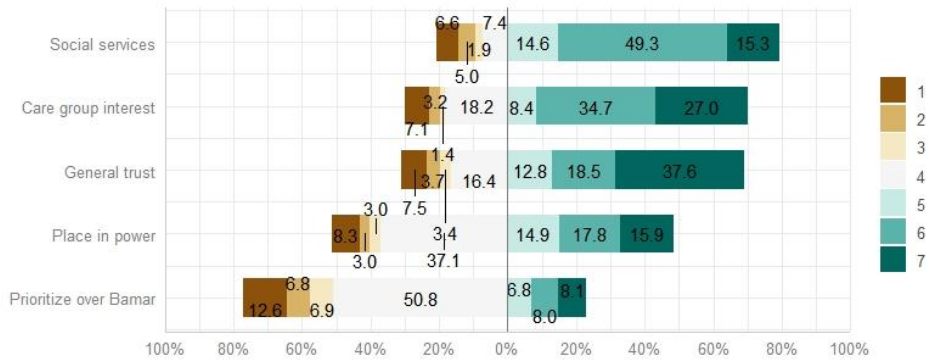
Another series of questions asked about respondents' exposure to different governance activities of the EAO of their choice. Respondents answered whether they have first-hand experience of, know someone who has experienced, have heard of, or have not even heard of various activities EAOs engage in. These included both positive governance—such as providing education and healthcare, solving community problems, and dealing with crimes and drugs—and negative governance—such as taxation, forcible recruitment, corrupt business activity, and violence.

## Key findings

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The results of the survey show three main findings. First, there is generally a high level of trust for the NUG. Out of all the respondents, 69% said they trust the NUG and 70% said the NUG will care for their ethnic group's interest. 49% said the NUG will place their ethnic group's people in positions of power, and 51% said it will prioritise the interests of Bamar and ethnic minority people equally.

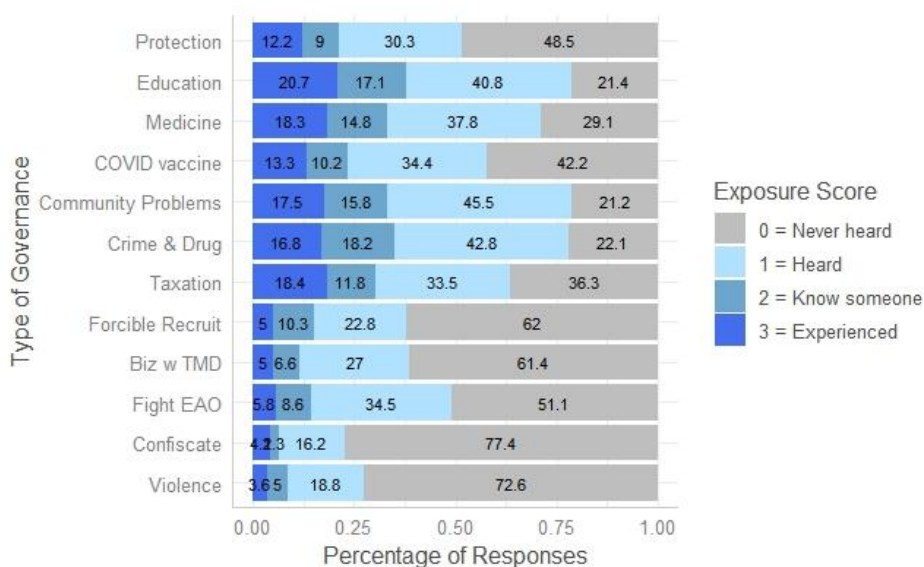
**Figure 1 Distribution of responses for various assessments of NUG**



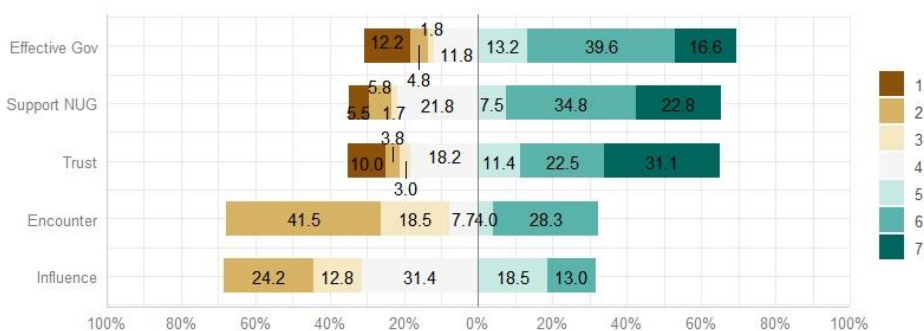
Note: Each item refers to: how well the NUG will provide social services for respondent's ethnic group; how well the NUG will care for the respondent's ethnic group's interest; how much respondent trusts the NUG; how likely the NUG will place people from respondent's ethnic group into positions of power, whether the NUG will prioritise the interests of Bamar people or ethnic minorities. Score of 7 is the most affirmative and 1 is the most negative answer choice.

Second, there is a moderate level of exposure to EAO governance, and those who have had more exposure to positive EAO governance have higher trust for the EAO. About 33-38% of respondents said they have either directly experienced or know someone who has experienced their EAO providing education and medical care, solving community problems, and dealing with crimes and drugs. Exposure to negative activities of governance was much lower in general, although 30% have directly or indirectly experienced taxation. Overall, 65% of respondents said they trust their EAO. Those with more exposure to positive (negative) governance by EAOs have higher (lower) trust for EAOs, even after controlling for other socio-political variables such as exposure to violence, strength of ethnic identity, or ethno-political beliefs. One unit increase in the average positive exposure to EAO governance (measured from 0 to 3) is correlated with a little over one unite increase in trust for the EAO (measured from 1 to 7).

**Figure 2 Distribution of exposure to various EAO governance activities**



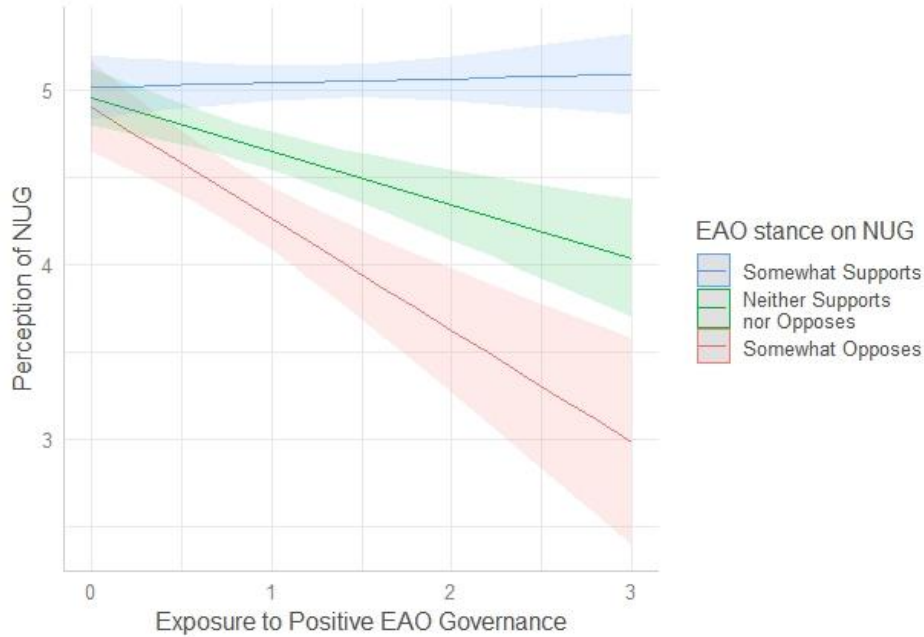
**Figure 3 Distribution of responses for various assessments of EAO of respondent's choice**



Note: Each item refers to: How effective the EAO's governance would be if it gains control; how supportive is the EAO of the NUG; how much respondent trusts the EAO; how often respondent encounters the EAO; how much influence the EAO has on respondent's daily life. The last two questions were recorded on a 5-pt scale.

Third, more exposure to positive EAO governance leads to slightly lower trust for the NUG, as long as the EAO is not seen as explicitly supportive of the NUG. If the respondent thinks that their EAO is neutral towards the NUG, then going from an average exposure score of 0 (never heard) to 3 (experienced first hand) moves their average perception of NUG from 5 (somewhat positive) to 4 (neither positive nor negative), even after controlling for respondent's exposure to NUG governance, belief in democracy, strength of ethnic identity, and other demographic variables. This is a significant result considering the near universal popularity of the NUG in Myanmar. This means that those who are more used to receiving social services and governance from EAOs are less likely to trust that the NUG will care for their ethnic group's interest if it gains control of the country.

**Figure 4 Predicted average perception of NUG based on average exposure to positive EAO governance.**



Note: The lines represent the linear trends predicted based on an ordinary least squares regression.

## Policy implications

This study presents several implications for policies shaping the future of Myanmar politics. First, EAOs are important political stakeholders that have a high level of trust among the ethnic minority population. Many of them have been recognised as major governance and social service providers as well as protectors of ethnic minority interests over many decades. They should be included in political dialogues and decision making processes.

Second, in order for the NUG to effectively meet the needs of ethnic minorities, it needs to better understand the role that EAO governance has played in the ethnic minority areas. EAOs have historically been involved in the provision of education and medical services, solving community problems, dealing with crimes and drugs, and other activities directly related to the lives of ethnic minority communities. In order for a new government in Myanmar to effectively meet the needs of these communities, it needs to carefully complement and build upon the existing governance systems maintained by EAOs.

Lastly, the NUG would benefit from directly cooperating with the EAOs in order to build trust among ethnic minority people. The study showed that the negative effect of EAO governance on trust for NUG only holds when the EAO is not seen as explicitly supportive of the NUG. This means that once an EAO is in direct cooperation with the NUG, governance provision by the EAO does not negatively affect people's trust for the NUG. By building a cooperative

relationship with EAOs, the NUG will be able to more easily gain trust from the ethnic minority communities.

In sum, the ethnic minority people of Myanmar have been influenced significantly by the governance provision of ethnic armed organisations. This has affected their perception of the new national political actor, NUG. In order for the NUG to build trust among the ethnic minorities, it should build a cooperative relationship with the EAOs.