

MYANMAR'S FRAGMENTED FUTURE

Evolving Governance and Conflict Dynamics Five Years after the 2021 Coup

Gun Mai Sumlut and Kimana Zulueta-Fülscher

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar stands at a critical juncture five years after the military's 2021 coup d'état. Due to the ongoing conflict, neither the armed forces nor resistance groups, including established ethnic armed organizations, maintain control over the entire territory. External actors, such as China and Russia, have further shaped these dynamics, profoundly influencing both the balance of power and prospects for peace. Against this backdrop, local and regional governance structures are emerging as potentially significant players in Myanmar's future.

This policy brief describes the evolution of different stakeholders after the 2021 coup d'état, examining their efforts and visions for the development of a governance framework for a future Myanmar, including the military's efforts to consolidate power and the multifaceted opposition's response. It also provides an overview of the different processes aimed at drafting a constitutional framework for Myanmar's transition at different levels and the many, mostly internal, constraints and obstacles actors face in attempting to reach agreement on the design of a future federal system for Myanmar. The brief also examines the interaction between armed forces and governance structures at the local and regional levels. It concludes by outlining potential scenarios for the country's near- and mid-term future. In doing so, the brief highlights the opportunities and obstacles facing Myanmar as it grapples with the twin challenges of conflict and state building, and considers the implications for both domestic stakeholders and the broader international community.

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1. BRIEF CONTEXT

1.1. The Myanmar armed forces after the 2021 coup d'état

After decades under military rule, Myanmar began a democratization process when its 2008 Constitution entered into force in 2010. However, the transition to democracy was cut short in 2021 when the military staged a coup d'état. The military violently suppressed peaceful protests that arose in response to the coup, leading to the emergence of armed resistance and precipitating widespread civil conflict that continues to this day.

Although the Myanmar military first ceded territory to multiple resistance groups amid broad public opposition to the coup, by 2025 it had managed to re-establish control over many areas that had previously been lost (Lorimer 2025). This reversal was primarily due to mandatory conscription (reintroduced in February 2024) and significant diplomatic and military assistance from China (Peter 2025) and Russia. Notably, China shifted its position and openly supported the military after the latter lost important territory to the Three Brotherhood Alliance—established in 2019 and including the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army—during a coordinated offensive that took place in October 2024. This shift placed significant pressure on members of the Three Brotherhood Alliance to return portions of the territory they had captured.

At the same time, the military organized so-called elections under the framework of the 2008 Constitution, which concluded in late January 2026. The elections were held in three separate rounds and were limited to areas under the military's control, covering 236 out of a total of 330 townships. The elections were therefore widely perceived as fraudulent and designed to legitimize military rule rather than enable a genuine democratic transition (Chi 2026).

As anticipated, a military proxy—the United Solidarity and Development Party—emerged victorious, securing 232 out of 263 contested seats in the lower house and 109 out of 157 seats in the upper house (Yumlembam 2026). Senior General Min Aung Hlaing assumed the presidency on 3 April 2026, with the new 'civilian government' consisting of retired former generals (Democratic Voice of Burma 2026b). Parliament and other state institutions will hence remain subservient to the presidency. Although Min Aung Hlaing had to formally withdraw from his position as commander-in-chief, he made sure that key military positions were filled with individuals loyal to him in an attempt to maintain control over the military while serving as President of the Union of Myanmar.

1.2. The resistance to the military junta

Despite recent gains by the Myanmar military, clashes continue across multiple regions between junta forces and a wide range of resistance groups. Myanmar's opposition landscape includes a number of actors and institutions that were established after the coup, as well as some of the long-standing ethnic armed organizations that decided to side with the democratic

opposition and continue fighting the military, becoming the ethnic resistance organizations (EROs).

In November 2020, three months before the coup, Myanmar held a general election, which the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide. However, the military prevented elected members of parliament (MPs) from taking their seats on 1 February 2021 (Head 2021). After the coup, a number of these MPs formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). After consultations with other members of the resistance—including ethnic organizations, civil society groups, political parties, trade unions and student leaders, among others—that were part of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), mainly a consultative body, the CRPH established the National Unity Government (NUG) in March 2021. The NUG has since positioned itself as the legitimate government of the Union of Myanmar in the international arena.

Five years after its establishment, however, the NUG has come under increasing criticism, largely due to its inability to unite different parts of the resistance and bring influential EROs, which also control much of the borderlands, under its umbrella. This lack of cohesion has also hampered the effectiveness of efforts aimed at opposing the junta. Furthermore, the NUG's governance performance in areas under its emergent control has attracted considerable scrutiny. There have been increasing allegations of inadequate transparency and accountability, particularly surrounding matters such as tax collection. Reports of corruption and abuse of power, in particular in local administrative bodies linked to the NUG, have further eroded public confidence (Win 2025). This situation will likely have an impact on citizens' support for armed-resistance campaigns, particularly those linked to the NUG, weakening their position vis-à-vis the military.

At the same time, while the NUCC has, since its inception in 2021, developed policy guidance on a range of issues, its popularity has also declined to a notable extent, mainly because of its inability to foster cohesion and collaboration among its members, in particular between the CRPH and others, resulting in the withdrawal of some of its members, including the CRPH, the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party in November 2025 (Democratic Voice of Burma 2026a). Moreover, the NUCC has struggled to incorporate new and influential resistance groups.

The CRPH's withdrawal from the NUCC was itself rooted in internal divisions within the National League for Democracy regarding how the party should position itself during the revolutionary period. It has become apparent, for instance, that while some advocate for the party to engage proactively in drafting a transitional constitution, others favour postponing major decisions until key leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi, have been released. This disagreement has created uncertainty about the party's stance and has made it harder to build consensus inside the NUCC and on a unified transitional governance framework at the union level.

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1.3. Constitutional developments at the union level

While the military junta has symbolically retained the 2008 Constitution, resistance forces rejected it shortly after the coup and adopted an interim framework, the 2021 Federal Democracy Charter, which mandated the drafting of a transitional constitution ([National Unity Consultative Council 2021](#)). However, the process soon became deadlocked over several disagreements, including over which body would be responsible for adopting the transitional constitution and over the role of elected MPs in the drafting process. One part of the NLD argued that elected MPs, who were mostly NLD members, should be given priority over other representatives of transitional institutions. These disputes stalled the transitional constitution-making process and led the NUG to draft its own proposal for a transitional constitution, which was completed in September 2023 and submitted to the NUCC.

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In 2024 the NUCC attempted to reset the process by shifting its objective from drafting a transitional constitution to drafting Articles of Federal Transitional Arrangements (AFTA), intended to synthesize proposals from the NUG and key ethnic organizations, including the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party.¹ Yet the same disagreements persisted, and participation narrowed further as some elected MPs and ethnic organizations disengaged. Meanwhile, the NLD faction favouring the preferential role of elected MPs also developed its own draft and signalled that it would enter negotiations only once the AFTA process concludes. The process has hence become increasingly fractured, reflecting deeper political divisions over legitimacy, representation and the structure of the future federal union.

1.4. Governance at the local and regional levels

Simultaneously, there have been significant political and administrative developments at the regional level that are closely associated with the emergence, and sometimes the integration, of various local people's defence forces (PDFs) under local or regional governance structures.

Soon after the coup, local PDFs emerged spontaneously in many parts of the country ([International Crisis Group 2021](#)). These groups operate primarily within their own localities, and their capacities vary widely—from small community-based units to forces comprising thousands of members. While some of these forces continue to operate autonomously or under ERO command structures (more on this below), the National Unity Government has also either established its own PDFs or integrated previously independent PDFs under its authority. At the same time, independent PDFs have gradually

¹ The proposal to reset the constitutional drafting process from a transitional constitution to the AFTA was primarily advanced by the Karen National Union and the Karenni National Progressive Party, which are key members of the Multi-Ethnic Council. The Multi-Ethnic Council consists of nine ethnic armed organizations and ethnic political organizations, seven of which are also members of the NUCC's Transitional Constitutional Working Group. Before being formally referred to as the Multi-Ethnic Council, the grouping was sometimes described as the 9+ Group, reflecting its claim that it also consulted with additional organizations beyond its nine core members. It is also worth noting that other coordination platforms exist among ethnic resistance actors, including the K3C coalition—comprising the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front—which has also played an active role in resistance coordination. Discussions within the K3C framework have recently included the possible establishment of a federal steering council between the National Unity Government and key ethnic resistance organizations.

begun forming more structured alliances across different areas to enhance operational effectiveness and improve coordination in military activities.

Alongside the development of security structures, several regions (or federal units) have also begun establishing interim political institutions. Parliamentary structures at the regional level in Sagaing, Magway, Mandalay and Yangon—partly based on the 2020 elections—have adopted interim constitutions or interim arrangements to guide their civil administration during the transitional period (Centre for Ah Nya Studies 2025). Sagaing has established an interim government, Mandalay has formed an interim governing council, and Magway is in the process of constituting its executive body. While Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay have been able to start implementing their interim frameworks in areas under their control, albeit with limited capacity, developments in other regions—most notably Yangon—remain largely symbolic, as resistance forces have yet to secure territory there.

Among ethnic states, only Chin and Karenni have announced and begun implementing interim arrangements or constitutions. Some of these frameworks have been (or are in the process of being) reformed in order to become more inclusive and responsive to minority groups living in a given territory. Other ethnic resistance organizations continue to operate under other, mostly long-standing, governance systems, which remain functional but are not formalized in constitution-like frameworks.

There is also significant variation when it comes to the implementation of interim arrangements across regions. Implementation often faces challenges, including the massive displacement of people and frequent territorial contestation that impacts the provision of public security and basic services. As a result, in regions such as Sagaing, Magway and Mandalay, which have come under repeated attack, interim governance structures are being developed, but implementation is slow. At the same time, these developments underscore a trend towards the emergence of governance structures at the regional level that aim to carve out administrative as well as political and fiscal autonomy vis-à-vis central state structures. The role and influence of the NUG in relation to regional actors and governance arrangements remain uncertain and are likely to diminish further, at least in the short term.

1.5. The ethnic armed struggle

The last component of the opposition consists of Myanmar's long-established ethnic armed or resistance organizations. Before the coup, there were more than 20 of these groups claiming to represent Myanmar's minority ethnic populations. Most of them have been in open conflict with the military since the late 1940s, with some signing bilateral ceasefire agreements in the early 1990s and 2010s and/or signing the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. After the 2021 coup d'état, many of them declared that either the bilateral or the collective ceasefires were no longer in force and resumed armed fighting against the military (Zan 2023). Some have also played a central role in the broader revolutionary movement, providing military training, weapons and operational support to both NUG-aligned PDFs and local defence forces,

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especially in the aftermath of the coup. Some of those PDFs operate directly under the command of ethnic resistance organizations.

As a result of military operations by resistance forces across the country, many EROs have expanded their territorial control considerably, sometimes creating tensions between different groups. The Arakan Army, for example, now controls nearly all of Rakhine State, with the exception of three townships. Similarly, the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union and Karenni forces have captured substantial areas compared with their pre-coup positions (Mon 2024). Even organizations such as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army have expanded their territory despite recent losses as part of ceasefire deals mediated by China. In these newly secured territories, which sometimes include other ethnic populations beyond those that the given ERO purports to represent, the respective EROs and associated administrative bodies have begun implementing their own governance systems.

EROs and the ethnic groups they claim to represent continue to hold divergent views about the type of federal system that Myanmar should adopt.

Despite the fact that resistance forces, or at least those that initially signed the Federal Democracy Charter, agreed that Myanmar was to become a federal democratic union once the military had been defeated, the reality is that EROs and the ethnic groups they claim to represent continue to hold divergent views about the type of federal system that Myanmar should adopt. Some of these EROs have also recently changed their stance. While they previously argued that they were fighting for their full independence, they now see the benefit of being part of a future federal union. The current picture includes groups whose aspiration is for the territory they control to become a confederate state within Myanmar (e.g. the Arakan Army in Rakhine State). Others are de facto governing territories they control as if they were quasi-independent from the central state (e.g. the United Wa State Army). There are also groups that are currently carving out significant autonomy for the territories they control and calling for a highly decentralized federal state, including the Kachin Independence Organization, the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party and many others. The specific design of such a decentralized federal state would still need to be agreed.

Notably, several organizations, including the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Pa-O National Liberation Organization, have advocated making the territories they control, which are currently situated within the larger Shan State, ethnically based autonomous states. At present, these groups maintain control over areas within broader regions where their ethnic group is a minority. The National League for Democracy, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and significant groups within the National Unity Government and the National Unity Consultative Council are also divided as to the type of federal system Myanmar should adopt, with some arguing for a more centralized version of federalism, and others recognizing that the federalization process has already started from below and that centralization is no longer viable.

2. FUTURE SCENARIOS

Territorial control has been relatively fluid since the 2021 military coup. While the military has recently regained territory it had previously lost, these gains are mostly due to China's direct support. At the same time, while some EROs are still resisting, such as the Kachin Independence Organization or the Kachin Independence Army, the Arakan Army and the Karen National Union, as well as post-coup resistance forces, the fragmentation of military structures hampers their effectiveness.

Politically, few national and international actors have recognized the results of the junta's fraudulent elections. One significant exception has been China's Government, which was the first to congratulate Myanmar 'on a steady and orderly general election with active turnout' in an attempt to boost the junta's legitimacy and maintain Myanmar's strategic alignment (Yumlembam 2026). Conversely, while the national governance functions of the resistance are currently facing challenges, there is evidence that local and especially regional governance structures under the resistance are gaining strength—albeit unevenly. These entities are asserting increasing autonomy from the centre and arguably establishing a foundation for a gradual (bottom-up) process of federalization. At the same time, actors at the regional level and their governance structures diverge in their longevity and commitment to democracy. Local elections and basic standards of transparency and accountability, for instance, often face substantial limitations.

Given the different parties' current military might, territorial control, internal divisions and levels of legitimacy, this brief proposes three possible scenarios for the near- to mid-term future.

Scenario 1: Strengthened military and increasingly divided resistance

The resistance lacks significant international support and struggles to unite, while China (among others) continues to support the Myanmar armed forces and the military-led government. As a result, the military manages to sustain and expand its territorial control, in particular throughout the centre of the country (the plains), by either overpowering or co-opting PDFs. In the border areas—controlled by ethnic armed or resistance organizations—with the support of China, the military continues to strike deals with some resistance organizations, further dividing and weakening the opposition to the military.

With or without mediated deals with the military, ethnic armed groups may continue developing their own governance structures in the territories they control. In the medium to long term, some may go as far as declaring their independence if no better deal can be struck.

In this scenario, as has historically been the case, while the military partly manages to sustain and expand its territorial control, it is unlikely to control the entire territory of Myanmar. Pockets of resistance to the military may persist or newly emerge. Institutions set up by the resistance in the aftermath

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of the coup, however, may become increasingly irrelevant as public support increasingly weakens.

In this situation, the military government may gradually lift some restrictions on the political opposition and permit previously banned parties to take part in the political process. This move could further divide and weaken the resistance—particularly if, as some expect, prominent figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint are released from captivity. The resistance may decide it is in its interest to engage rather than continue to boycott military-sponsored processes.

Scenario 2: Prolonged stalemate with entrenched military control and increasingly consolidated resistance

In this scenario, the military fails to expand its territorial control but maintains control over key cities, including Mandalay, Naypyidaw and Yangon. This situation may also lead the military to consolidate control over certain parts of the territory, especially the plains, where it has historically dominated. Resistance forces also consolidate their control over certain areas while facing constraints, including the impact of decreasing international support and public resources, as well as the exhaustion of local communities that have sustained the fighting for the past five years and that have not seen commensurate improvements in their day-to-day lives. In this situation, the ongoing conflict results in a military stalemate.

At the same time, governing structures continue to emerge and develop at the local and regional levels. Some local and regional authorities may manage to carve out autonomy in the territories they control and build semi-functioning statelets. This would most likely happen in the borderlands, which have historically benefited from greater autonomy, as well as in other parts of the territory where local and regional authorities have been able to establish their own institutions and processes. The longer this situation lasts, the more difficult it will become to find a comprehensive and negotiated solution to the conflict. Deepening divisions among resistance groups, a lack of unified leadership, persistent mistrust and the erosion of legitimacy on all sides undermine prospects for meaningful dialogue and compromise. A prolonged stalemate could also open the door to bilateral negotiations between the military and some resistance forces, further weakening the resistance.

Scenario 3: Increased collaboration among resistance groups and development of better governance structures from below

Although China and others provide support, the military has been considerably weakened by five years of civil war and continues to face challenges in achieving even limited territorial gains. The prospect of re-centralizing authority under military rule becomes increasingly remote. Regional structures, in both the centre and border regions, accelerate their institutional development, learning to better respond to people's needs and demands.

In the medium term, the continued weakness of the Myanmar military and its government reinforces the resistance, which increasingly coordinates on the battlefield, managing to counter the military and win back parts of the territory. One indication of this outcome may be the formation of the Spring Revolution Alliance, which brings together 19 post-coup resistance groups and points to a growing trend towards deeper coordination, at least among existing people's defence forces.

Resistance actors at the local and regional levels may be newly incentivized to pursue negotiations aimed at finding a compromise that would allow Myanmar to build a democratic and federal state. Resistance actors would need to develop a strategy aimed at bolstering coordination and developing a cohesive approach vis-à-vis the military, in parallel with coordination on the battlefield. In the long term, and given various groups' distinct levels of capacity and legitimacy, negotiators are likely to design an asymmetric federal system that allows each region the degree of autonomy it has already carved out for itself, at least during the transition. Such union-level political arrangements will take time to consolidate, as bringing all key stakeholders together and reaching agreements remains complex.

Even with improved coordination, the resistance is unlikely to trigger a sudden, complete collapse of the military. Instead, sustained military pressure by both the National Unity Government and allied people's defence forces and ethnic resistance organizations could force the junta to the negotiating table, perhaps with less leverage than before. Such negotiations could open up a pathway towards a future democratic settlement in which the military's political role is significantly reduced compared with the pre-coup era. Overall, this scenario creates an opportunity for Myanmar to move towards a federal democratic system with no formal political role for the military. However, the exact shape of federalism—and how competing visions among stakeholders are reconciled—will remain a major challenge.

3. CONCLUSION

The overall trajectory points towards increasingly decentralized governance. This shift is driven both by local demands for greater autonomy and by the inability of any central authority to re-establish unified, functioning state institutions. Importantly, the push for decentralized governance is no longer confined to ethnic states or historically autonomous areas. It is now visible in Bamar-majority regions such as Magway and Sagaing, with other regions likely to follow as local actors seek administrative arrangements that better reflect their security needs and political aspirations.

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At the same time, external actors have a significant impact on the strength and resilience of parties in this conflict. The shift in China's position in favour of the Myanmar military clearly shows the impact of its support in shaping conflict dynamics and needs to be taken into account by other assistance providers when engaging with actors in Myanmar.

Critically, the international community could play a constructive role in Myanmar's conflict by focusing on initiatives that help local, regional and national stakeholders improve governance at all levels, increase coordination and ultimately build a federal state (as actors may agree) that is able to better respond to communities' needs and demands, thereby strengthening their legitimacy and resilience.

The international community and individual assistance providers could take the following steps:

1. *Recognize decentralized governance.* The fact that governance in Myanmar is highly decentralized and multicentred would need to be recognized. Authority is dispersed across resistance-aligned local administrations and emerging regional structures, as well as ERO governance systems. These substate forms of governance may have distinct relationships with nascent central state structures.
2. *Engage directly with local and regional governance structures.* Assistance providers could engage with actors in specific regions (or localities) that may be in the process of establishing governance frameworks and help them develop mechanisms and build their capacity in order to increase their responsiveness and accountability. Strengthening these structures could help build credible alternatives to military rule at the substate level and lay the groundwork for future federal arrangements.
3. *Support structured dialogue in search of consensus and compromise among resistance actors.* Assistance providers should continue their engagement with resistance organizations at the regional and national levels and develop dialogue programmes with strong mediation and negotiation elements aimed at reaching consensus on key issues related to Myanmar's future transition. These issues include mechanisms to enhance transparency and accountability, the horizontal and vertical division of powers, the development of a national army and police from below, citizenship and human rights, and tools for public engagement.
4. *Prepare for the day after.* Given that the conflict is unlikely to conclude imminently, and that the military government will remain in place, resistance forces inside and outside the country should also be supported in preparing for the post-conflict period and for potential negotiations with military representatives. To take part in such negotiations, these forces will need to further develop their negotiation and mediation skills.

5. *Monitor military-sponsored organizations.* To the extent possible, military structures and related organizations should continue to be monitored for potential splits among both high- and low-ranking officers and soldiers regarding the way in which governance is conducted and its consequences for the military's legitimacy across the country.
6. *Regularly address the conflict.* The United Nations Security Council should regularly address the conflict, and ongoing discussions—both public and private—should focus on the interests of individual UN member states concerning Myanmar's development and stability.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFTA	Articles of Federal Transitional Arrangements
CRPH	Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
ERO	Ethnic resistance organization
MP	Member of parliament
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's defence force

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief is part of a series of policy briefs developed following the 12th Edinburgh Dialogue on Post-Conflict Constitution Building held in December 2025, where the participants discussed the changing nature of mediation when negotiating political settlements in particular contexts. The Dialogue was organized by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the University of Edinburgh, as part of the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). We would like to thank Sumit Bisarya, Nathalie Ebead and Monalisa Adhikari for their helpful reviews of this paper.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gun Mai Sumlut is an independent consultant working on democracy, governance, conflict dynamics and humanitarian issues in Myanmar. From 2020 to 2025, he worked for two consecutive programmes at International IDEA's Myanmar Programme, focusing on constitutional governance and building federal democracy in Myanmar. He previously served as Project Manager for the Durable Peace Programme and a Humanitarian Assistance Project at the Nyein (Shalom) Foundation. His work includes research and policy analysis, programme management and engagement with civil society organizations, ethnic administrations and international partners. His interests focus on constitutional development, federalism and evolving governance and humanitarian responses in Myanmar. He holds a Master of Public Policy and Management from the University of Melbourne and a Master of Applied Conflict Transformation Studies from Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia and the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies.

Kimana Zulueta-Fülscher is Acting Head of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) Constitutional Governance and the Rule of Law Programme, and Non-Resident Fellow at Cornell University's Center on Global Democracy. Previously she was Senior Advisor (2022–2026), Acting Head (2020–2021), and Head of the MyConstitution Programme, located in Yangon, Myanmar (2018–2020). She has engaged in different capacities with transitional processes in Armenia, Chile, Gabon, Myanmar, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand, among others, and has published widely in the field of constitution-building processes in fragile settings. Before working for International IDEA, Kimana was a senior researcher at the German Development Institute (now the German Institute of Development and Sustainability) and published in the area of political transformation in fragile contexts. Kimana has a PhD in political science and international relations from the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (Spain).

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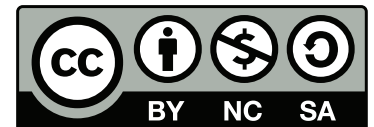
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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK Government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

Design and layout: International IDEA

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31752/78969>

ISBN: 978-91-8137-138-3 (PDF)



International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int