

Chapter 4

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A few notable points emerge from an examination of how Myanmar's states were formed and of the more fine-grained ethnic landscape within each subnational administrative unit.

- Historians sometimes note the arbitrariness of the boundary demarcation by the colonial authorities. In Myanmar, like elsewhere, these boundaries outlived the colonial period, and the state/region boundaries in present-day Myanmar were demarcated more or less along the colonial district boundaries.
- While seven ethnic groups have titular status in seven states, the titular groups do not neatly fit into their home states. A substantial portion of some of the titular groups have resided in the territories demarcated as regions as well as in other states since the colonial period (and most likely since pre-colonial times).
- Several titular groups do not constitute the numerical majority in their home states because the post-independence state boundaries were not drawn with the aim of creating ethnically homogeneous administrative units. Instead, many states are products of political negotiations and recognition of a unique territorial status in the colonial state.
- While the regions are generally thought to be Bamar areas, the Bamar are the numerical minority in several townships in the regions, particularly in the townships bordering the states.
- Ethnic diversity in Myanmar is apparent down to the township level. Aside from the central and western parts of Myanmar, where townships are highly homogeneous (ethnically), two or more ethnic groups coexist in most townships elsewhere.

Myanmar is currently at a critical juncture, and these key takeaways are essential to how we imagine a new Myanmar. In this chapter, we discuss ways in which these takeaways could inform how we think about (a) infrastructure to generate better administrative data; (b) administrative and electoral units; and (c) inclusive institutions.

BETTER ADMINISTRATIVE DATA

One of the biggest changes in Myanmar during the last decade was the sheer production of quantitative data, ranging from public opinion surveys to administrative records. However, data quality is sometimes questionable, data sources are often inaccessible, and the accessible data is not utilized to the full extent.

Currently, the census reports and GAD Township Reports offer the most comprehensive and easily accessible data (Myanmar n.d.b). However, while the 2014 Census offers relatively extensive and enumerated data, it remains—as Whipple’s Index shows—approximate. In a similar vein, while the GAD Township Reports are more comprehensive and vaster than the 2014 Census, as noted in Chapter 1 of this report, the data sources and quality are questionable.

A variety of data also exists at the mezzo and micro levels, produced by non-governmental organizations—domestic and international—and international institutions. A lot of this data is publicly available through the Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), which remains the key resource for practitioners, analysts and scholars.⁴⁰ However, the data is sometimes of poor quality and limited in scope. The methods behind the data collection often lack transparency, and available information remains in the hands of a limited number of people.

Since the 2021 coup, numerous initiatives have emerged that have been compiling existing resources or collecting new ones, with the objective of making sense of the current situation and helping address the needs of the people of Myanmar (e.g. Data for Myanmar, Open Development Myanmar and Myanmar Spring Revolution [n.d.]). Such initiatives should not only be supported; they should also be promoted and connected with relevant data users. Furthermore, domestic and international organizations contributing to progress in Myanmar should invest more resources in generating better-quality data, and they should promote data sharing across organizations and among relevant stakeholders, practitioners and academic circles.

Such an investment is a task for emerging national institutions and the Government of Myanmar itself as well. Something akin to a central statistical office, and a related central cartography office, should also be considered in tandem with ongoing discussions over the institutional design for the new Myanmar. Furthermore, there should also be strategic plans for all ministries and departments down to the township level to systematically collect data and coordinate with the central statistical office. As local population characteristics change over time, good-quality statistical data, along with cartographical data, will serve as crucial information that will help the government determine how and where to direct resources. The legacy of the GAD structures could serve as the basis for quality data collection—granted that, under a new democratic

⁴⁰ Established in late 2007, MIMU is a service of the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator and is overseen by the United Nations Development Programme. Over the years, Myanmar has relied on MIMU not only to produce and manage data but also to create related (official) maps.

government, it is reformed and provided with the necessary resources. It is also paramount to create a unified set of ethnic categorizations in the new data collection infrastructure.

In a highly decentralized future federal Myanmar, it may be challenging to create a national institutional grid to organize and coordinate data collection. Nevertheless, it is necessary to reach out to all stakeholders that have been involved with Myanmar on a programmatic level to have access to data that could be of importance.

During the interim period, it is also crucial to closely examine and analyse available administrative data (e.g. data based on the 2014 Census and the 2019 GAD Township Reports) in order to better prepare for the new Myanmar. As mentioned already, the analysis presented in this report is one of the first, if not the first, systematic examinations of ethnicity data in the GAD Township Reports. There is much more data, related to public service provision, education, health, development and so on, buried in these reports that has yet to be examined. These resources should be explored and exhausted to the full extent so that we can better understand patterns of challenges and inequalities in the old Myanmar and identify ways to address them in the new Myanmar. Additionally, more engagement with existing administrative data may also reveal ways to improve data quality.

REIMAGINING SUBNATIONAL UNITS

Federal units

Following the 1962 coup in Myanmar, discussions of federalism were sidelined from the mainstream political discourse, though it continued to be an important topic in ethnic minority circles. In the aftermath of the 2021 coup, however, federalism came to be at the very centre of how the pro-democracy movement and the people of Myanmar envision their country. In fact, Myanmar's current juncture is thought to offer 'the closest approximation since the 1947 Panglong Conference of the idea that a federal union should emerge out of agreements among sovereign states' (South 2021). As such, the discussion of a federal design for Myanmar is both timely and crucial.

There are several important questions to consider regarding the nature of Myanmar's emerging federalism. First, to what extent should federalism be based on ethnic affiliation? Second, which ethnic group should be titular? Third, should the titular groups be given preferential rights in their respective units? Fourth, should boundaries be redrawn to create more homogenous units?

Perhaps one of the most basic questions in the mix is the following: what are the constituent parts of the federal union? As noted above, while the FDC identifies states as the federal units, it does not define the nature of the states. A few arrangements have been formally or informally proposed, however.

In some proposals, there seems to be an implicit assumption that the federal units would be the existing seven states and seven regions, plus Nay Pyi Taw as a federal territory. However, several ethnic minority activists and community members have noted that this arrangement would undermine ethnic equality because it would allow the Bamar ethnic group to have more political influence (more constituent units) relative to other ethnic groups. Thus, there have been proposals to create eight constituent states—one each for the existing seven titular groups and a single one for the Bamar.⁴¹ This was, for instance, the arrangement laid out in the 2008 Federal Constitution Drafting and Coordinating Committee (FCDCC) worked out by ethnic group representatives and academics (Weng 2016).⁴² Under this arrangement, eight ethnic groups should theoretically have equal access to power, but other ethnic groups, some of which are quite substantial in population size, would need to negotiate with the titular groups for their political rights and representation. Yet another alternative is to retain the existing seven states and create additional states from the regions. One such proposal calls for 10 so-called national states, with the possibility to create more.⁴³

Despite the subtle variations in these proposals, they share an important common denominator—the acute tendency to maintain the existing seven states. This tendency suggests that the existing states are perceived as fixed—at least by those involved in the constitutional discussions thus far. However, the historical evolution of how state/region boundaries were demarcated suggests the possibility of imagining Myanmar's federal units beyond the status quo. The federal units could be collectively imagined and reimagined in a way that they would provide the basis for a greater degree of equality between ethnic groups in Myanmar. Furthermore, federating Myanmar should facilitate not only minority–majority equality but also minority–minority equality.

Electoral units

Other important subnational units integral to the functioning of a federal democratic union are the electoral units. In the past, the most basic electoral unit had been the townships, and the ongoing discourse, including the FDC, assumes townships to be the electoral unit in future Myanmar elections. Given the importance of the electoral unit in facilitating representation, it should be noted that, like district and other administrative units in Myanmar, existing township boundaries are relics of the colonial era and have not been significantly altered since independence (Ostwald and Courtin 2020). As such, it may be worthwhile to evaluate the extent to which existing electoral units facilitate equality and minority representation. Like the state boundaries, electoral units could be perceived as amenable to the nature of the future Myanmar. Many democracies around the world, including Australia, Germany

⁴¹ According to Aung Htoo, the principle of eight states was adopted at the Taunggyi Constitutional Conference in 1961. See Weng (2016).

⁴² Also note that the draft constitution produced by the United Nationalities Federal Council in 2016 was based on this proposal by the FCDCC. See Bulmer (2022: 71).

⁴³ The indicated states are as follows: Arakan National State, Bama National State, Chin National State, Irrawaddy Nationalities State, Kachin National State, Karen National State, Karenni National State, Mon National State, Shan National State and Tenasserim Nationalities State.

and the United States, regularly redraw their electoral units. Such tools could also be utilized in Myanmar to increase political opportunities for ethnic minorities, including ethnic and regional political parties (Ebead and Hirakawa 2022).

INCLUSIVE INSTITUTIONS

Throughout most of its recent history, Myanmar not only was a highly centralized state, but it also had very limited inclusive institutions. During the reform period under the 2008 Constitution (2011–2021), national race affairs ministers (NRAMs) and special administrative areas (i.e. self-administered zones) were perhaps the sole institutions that were intended to help facilitate the political inclusion of various ethnic groups. While the institution of NRAMs has not been examined extensively, a few existing studies have raised concerns about the ambiguity of the role of these ministers and their effectiveness in promoting minority rights and inclusion (Thawnhmung and Yadana 2017).

An examination of fine-grain demographic data raises another concern about NRAMs and future inclusive institutions similar to them. As Chapters 2 and 3 of this report indicate, there is ethnic heterogeneity at every level of subnational administrative units. Yet, institutions such as the NRAMs existed at the state/region level of government until 2021, but no such institution existed at the lower levels of government. It is imperative that the township level administrative apparatuses (i.e. street-level bureaucracy), which are the primary interface between the government and ordinary citizens, be inclusive and reflective of the diverse population they serve.

When thinking about inclusion, it is important to consider how ethnic minorities are included, not just whether they are included. In the past, the inclusion of ethnic minorities in the government was specifically for the purposes of so-called ethnic affairs (*taingyintha yeyar*).⁴⁴ However, seemingly non-ethnic affairs (e.g. defence, education, immigration and population, labour and many more) are issue areas that concern ethnic minorities, not just ethnic majorities. Thus, ethnic minorities included in cabinet positions should not be limited to ethnic affairs portfolios. To that end, it is reassuring to see that, in the NUG, many ethnic minorities are assigned to portfolios beyond those directly related to ethnic affairs.

Furthermore, the discourse on inclusion should extend beyond the ethnic dimension. Ethnicity is highly salient and politicized in Myanmar and thus takes up much of the space in our discussion of inclusion. However, other

⁴⁴ It should be noted that several ethnic minority politicians, such as Sama Duwa Sinwa Nawng (Kachin), U Aung Zan Wai (Rakhine) and U Rashid (Muslim of Indian descent), were appointed as ministers of home affairs and defence, social services, and housing and labour in the national cabinet during the parliamentary period. See People's Literature Committee and House (1961).

social identities, including religion and gender, have been the grounds for discrimination in Myanmar. And exclusion based on these identities should be addressed at the same time as the ethnic dimension.

Finally, the focus on inclusive institutions should not be discarded and left aside under the pretext of a broader conversation around the federal nature of a future Myanmar state. It is crucial to think of the question of inclusive institutions alongside questions about the nature of federalism and federal units in Myanmar. Especially given that there cannot be inclusive institutions in a country as diverse as Myanmar without decentralization, discussions around inclusive institutions should animate the discussions about federalism.