

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE MYANMAR GOVERNMENT'S ILLIBERAL PEACEBUILDING IN THE KAREN NATIONAL UNION (KNU) ARMED CONFLICT

Salsabilla Azzahra¹ and Adhi Cahya Fahadayna²

^{1,2}Department of Politics, Government, and International Relations, Universitas Brawijaya

²Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance,
University of Massachusetts, Boston.

E-mail: jusstayals@student.ub.ac.id; a.fahadayna@ub.ac.id

ABSTRACT. This article examines the Myanmar government's illiberal peacebuilding practices in addressing the ongoing conflict with the Karen ethnic group. Using qualitative descriptive methods and a literature review, the author analyzes the dynamics of the relationship between the state and the Karen ethnic group, examining how security strategies, co-optation, and discriminatory policies are employed to suppress resistance. Using Comparative Historical Analysis as its method, this article will discuss the issue of this conflict from 2015 to 2021. The study shows that the 2015 nationwide ceasefire agreement failed to achieve inclusive peace; the Myanmar government prioritized stability and territorial control through repressive actions, human rights violations, and the implementation of the "Four Cuts" military strategy. The practice of media censorship, journalism, and the dissemination of false information further strengthened the regime's illiberal character. The author concludes that although this strategy temporarily reduced the intensity of open conflict, Myanmar successfully implemented illiberal peacebuilding procedurally but failed to achieve genuine justice and reconciliation for the Karen ethnic group. The conflict continues and is prone to escalation, demonstrating that a false peace without democracy and substantive justice will always be fragile in Myanmar.

Keywords: Illiberal Peacebuilding; Myanmar; Karen National Union (KNU); conflict resolution; armed conflict; and historical analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar has been ruled by two successive military regimes, both dominated by the Bamar ethnic group. The latter established a partially democratic constitution, and the military has since overseen a gradual process of democratic reform. Previous studies of the situation in Myanmar by Kristian Stokke have suggested that the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) has used coercion and co-optation to stem armed resistance to militarized and centralized state-building and thereby strengthen the state's territorial control and authority. The military-led USDP government (2011–2015) instituted a hybrid regime as a framework for the political transformation of ASEAN member states, and tolerated some degree of dual territorial, administrative, and resource control at the local level. However, this has failed to address Myanmar's ongoing conflict (Stokke et al., 2022). Some other studies says the Myanmar government's strategy in dealing with ethnic insurgency during this period of political transition presents counterinsurgency policy from the Myanmar government's perspective and examines two main dimensions: economic and military. The government uses a combination of military pressure and economic incentives to counter the insurgency (Stefano Ruzza, 2015). Since the 1990s, the Karen National Union (KNU) has strongly supported the National League for Democracy (NLD) and has called for the establishment of a democratic federal union. The first period of conflict in Myanmar refers

to the early democratic period from independence in 1948 to the military coup in 1962. This occurred during the turmoil leading up to independence. In 1947, the Panglong Agreement was concluded. This agreement included the transfer of power to Burma (Myanmar), which later became the basis for the 1947 Constitution and granted ethnic groups the right to self-determination. Ethnic distrust stemmed from the Panglong Agreement, when the Karen were excluded from the agreement and denied autonomy that would have allowed for the establishment of an independent Karen state (Gravers, 2015). So they fought for separate state status through political dialogue by joining the colonial rulers before Myanmar's independence, by military means.

The late 1980s marked a critical point in Myanmar's armed conflict. The Ne Win regime relied heavily on military might to win the war, but this failed because they failed to monopolize violence through peace. When the National League for Democracy and other ethnic parties won a landslide victory in the 1988 war, Myanmar's military rulers refused to cede power, insisting instead on strengthening the military and securing state authority as prerequisites for a new political opening in the future. The ethnic groups in Myanmar, particularly the Karen, began to fight for their rights as a minority community. In 1956, the Karen National Union congress was formed, which discussed four key aspects of the Karen National Union's main goals. First, they wanted to establish a Karen state with the right to self-determination. Second, they wanted to establish a "National State"

for all other ethnic groups in Myanmar. Third, the establishment of a Federal Union with all states having equal rights. Fourth, the Karen ethnic group wants to pursue national democracy. This resistance from the Karen ethnic group has prompted the Myanmar government to launch a counter-offensive to stop their actions.

Not only that, in a pamphlet from 1992, the Karen people were described as being persecuted because of their ethnic identity and “enslaved” by the Burmese and “suffering untold misery at the hands of the Burmese/Myanmar rulers” (Gravers, 2015). Then, in 2015, after signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), the KNU pushed for constitutional reform through multilateral political dialogue. Before the ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Myanmar government in 2021, the Karen had experienced discrimination, which was a factor in their resistance against the government. The Karen are one of the largest ethnic minorities in Myanmar. They have long demanded greater autonomy and greater recognition of cultural and political rights. Furthermore, the government frequently exploits resources in Karen tribal areas and provides no significant benefits to the Karen people. Then, in 2021, the KNU (National Nuclear Forces) declared a ceasefire, which had a significant impact on Myanmar. This was due to the military coup on February 1st. The KNU openly opposed the military junta and increased its military activity. On March 27 2021, KNU forces attacked and seized a Myanmar military base near the Thai border. Numerous civilian casualties resulted, prompting the Myanmar government to take decisive action to quell the rebellion.

METHOD

In this journal analysis, the author uses the Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA) research method. This includes analyzing the sequence of events that occur in a case/issue. Using a qualitative data collection process through literature studies and several journal sources or related documents, this method begins by observing related issues and then exploring whether the issue reflects cause and effect by looking for mechanisms that connect cause and effect in a particular case. This method also uses a tracing process that requires researchers to retrace history through sequential stages. The concept of Illiberal Peacebuilding refers to Authoritarian Conflict Management. Illiberal peacebuilding is an effort to build peace without upholding liberal democratic values such as human rights, civil liberties, and good

governance. This concept is often associated with a security approach that emphasizes stability and order rather than justice and participation.

In this theory, there is the concept of Authoritarian Conflict Management, which, according to Lewis et al., includes 3 strategies of authoritarian countries to produce and maintain long-term order during wartime or post-conflict, namely discursive practices, spatial practices, and political economy. Discursive Practices in question include the dissemination of false information by the government, which then illustrates the use of hegemonic discourse to control public perception, and by influencing the interpretation of events, authoritarian countries usually want to impose hegemonic discourse in society. Spatial Practice then highlights the use of coercive measures to manage land conflicts. Authoritarian states view opposing actors as opportunists who exploit space, and this is evident in how they recruit, organize, and generate counterproductive discourse, often achieved through military force. The political economy, then, reflects the patron-client system and clientelism that support oligarchic power. In this strategy, ACM seeks to achieve two goals: first, there are actions such as denying the insurgents access to economic and financial resources in the process of peacebuilding, and second, ensuring that loyal client groups are the primary beneficiaries of financial flows. Therefore, when there is loyalty to managing resources at the local level, ACM argues that rebel groups will find it more difficult to organize.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Karen are one of the largest ethnic groups in Myanmar (Burma), originating from the Kayan branch of the Burmese ethnic group. The Karen primarily inhabit the mountainous border region between Myanmar and Thailand. This ethnic group has been involved in a protracted conflict with the Myanmar government, demanding greater autonomy and the protection of their rights alongside other ethnic groups. The Myanmar government then adopted an illiberal peacebuilding approach to address this ethnic conflict. Illiberal peacebuilding is an effort to build peace without upholding liberal democratic values such as human rights, civil liberties, and good governance. This concept is often associated with a security approach that emphasizes stability and order over justice and participation. Myanmar has used coercion and co-optation to stem armed resistance to militarized and centralized state-building and thereby strengthen the state's territorial

control and authority. Furthermore, Myanmar then exerted military pressure on ethnic groups to gain control. The Karen ethnic group's position in Myanmar supports political reform. The Karen's primary political agenda is the creation of a federal system of government that guarantees ethnically designated states' internal autonomy, in addition to a power-sharing arrangement at the "Unitary" or central level (Jolliffe, 2016). The Karen were once the Myanmar government's most persistent opponents, the Ethnic Armed Organization. However, as the Myanmar government shifted its focus to other ethnic groups, the Karen became one of the Ethnic Armed Organization members who could cooperate with the government.

Signing of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015

The conflict between the Myanmar government and ethnic groups continued in 2015. Several aspects changed after the signing of a nationwide ceasefire agreement. Around eight ethnic groups signed the agreement, including the oldest, the Karen, through the Karen National Union. During this period, there was a significant exchange of fire between Myanmar military forces and armed ethnic groups in northern Myanmar, while these groups held occasional talks with the government's Peacebuilding Working Committee (UPWC). Unfortunately, the ceasefire agreement was violated that same year. This occurred because not all ethnic groups wanted to sign the agreement. As a result, armed conflict continues in areas controlled by ethnic groups that did not sign the agreement. Furthermore, it turns out that the Myanmar military and several armed ethnic groups frequently violate the ceasefire to strengthen their bargaining position in negotiations or maintain control over strategic areas, making violations part of a political and military strategy. The Myanmar government allowed this to happen because it preferred to protect ethnic groups that were easily compromised. This also shows that neither party to the nationwide ceasefire agreement is committed to carrying out its duties.

Myanmar's stance on handling ethnic conflicts in 2016 – 2017

In 2016, Myanmar appeared to experience a significant surge in conflict. Myanmar implemented discriminatory policies against an ethnic group not recognized as an official ethnic group in the country. These policies included denying citizenship and restricting freedom of movement, the right to marry, worship, and access to education and healthcare

(Hanifaturrahmi, 2016). This then worsened the Myanmar government's relations with other ethnic groups. Furthermore, this year, it turned out that the Myanmar government was still implementing its military strategy, the Four Cuts. In this case, Myanmar implemented the Four Cuts strategy against the Karen ethnic group. In the 1960s, in an attempt to quell armed resistance in areas controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU), it cut off four main sources of support (Emily Fishbein and Nu Nu Lusan, 2021). The goal of re-implementing this strategy in 2016 was to cut off the supply of food, funding, information or intelligence, and recruitment of new fighters. By cutting off these four elements, the military hoped to weaken the KNU's ability to survive and resist. The Myanmar government carried out relentless military attacks on Karen villages, burning homes and rice barns, and bombing areas suspected of being KNU support bases. It also forcibly relocated Karen residents to tightly controlled areas, restricting their movement with fences and tight security, and arrested thousands of residents suspected of supporting the government's rebels. Furthermore, the government carried out massive confiscation of customary land and resources belonging to the Karen ethnic community, including the construction of military facilities on customary land without adequate compensation. This certainly violated the agreement previously agreed upon in 2015.

Myanmar's conflict with the Rohingya and Karen ethnic groups in 2018

Still related to the failed ceasefire agreement, Myanmar experienced a significant conflict in 2018 against two ethnic minorities, the Rohingya and the Karen. The Rohingya are experiencing a humanitarian crisis in Rakhine State. Following the mass expulsion and intensified violence carried out by Myanmar in August 2017, in 2018, the Rohingya remained extremely vulnerable, living in refugee camps in Bangladesh and dire conditions in Myanmar (Angela & Siba, 2018). In the Karen ethnic conflict, despite a ceasefire and ongoing peace efforts, tensions and friction with the Myanmar military remain. The military continues operations in Karen territory, and Karen armed groups remain active in defending their territory and rights. These tensions have caused civilian suffering, including displacement and damage to infrastructure. Approximately 50,000 Karen have fled to the Thai border and into the jungle to escape the impact of Myanmar's military attacks. The construction of large-scale projects in traditional Karen territory, such as dams and highways, much of

which is exported and provides no direct benefit to local communities, was a root cause of the conflict in 2018. The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) again took up arms to fight off government attacks. They managed to capture several military posts and force Myanmar troops to withdraw, leading to fierce fighting in Karen state, including on the border with Thailand.

Karen Ethnic Resistance against the Myanmar Government in 2019-2021

The Myanmar military continues to carry out attacks on ethnic minorities, especially the Karen. Increasingly frequent military violence and human rights violations have led to an increase in refugees and difficulties in accessing basic services for the Karen people. In February 2020, more than 2,000 Karen people were forced to flee due to the military offensive, with many villages burned and community infrastructure destroyed. The Myanmar military even ignored calls for a ceasefire issued by various ethnic organizations, including the KNU, as well as calls from the international community and the UN. This culminated in a coup in 2021 following the general election on November 8, 2020, in which the National League for Democracy won 396 of the 476 seats in parliament, a wider margin than in the 2015 election (Muhamad Iqbal & Dwiprigitaningtias, 2021). The Myanmar military detained several key figures, including State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. Hours after the arrests, the military declared a one-year state of emergency and seized full power, appointing Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing as the country's ruler. The military carried out these arrests because they suspected fraud in the November 8, 2020, general election process, although the Myanmar Election Commission has stated that there is no evidence to support these allegations. This coup then ousted the civilian government that had been transitioning to democracy since 2015 and marked the return of direct military rule after several decades. After taking power, the military junta faced fierce resistance from the Myanmar people, especially ethnic minorities who protested massively, but the military responded with brutal and repressive measures.

Ethnic armed groups and armed civilian forces such as the Karen National Defense Force (KNDF) adopted a more coordinated and effective strategy to counter the junta, although they faced limited weapons and ammunition and relied on diaspora support (Quentin Sommerville, 2024). As a result of military repression, Myanmar's ethnic minorities, including the Karen, have collaborated with other

ethnic groups to oppose the Myanmar military. Ethnic armed groups, including those in Karen State (also known as Kayin State) and Karenni (also known as Kayah State), have escalated their fighting against the military. Conflicts and armed struggles, such as the Karen "revolution," as the Karen National Union (KNU) calls their struggle, are often termed "ethnic" and treated as if the ethnic dimension were the determining factor and the internal substance and quality of ethnicity (Asshiddiq et al., 2024). The Myanmar military has imposed numerous restrictions on Myanmar's people, drawing international attention to the conflict. Several countries have imposed sanctions on Myanmar for human rights violations and for staging a military coup against the government. These sanctions are predominantly economic.

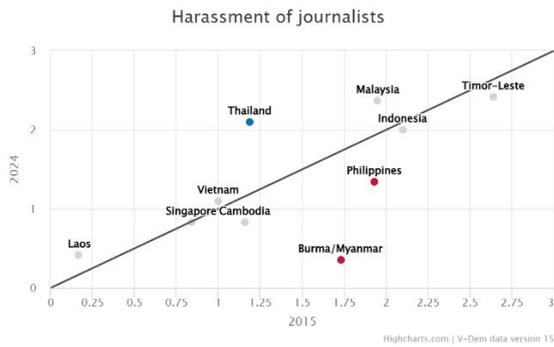
Karen National Union has tried an alternative approach to gain peace with the government. Using the Political Imaginary, they saw that the peace process, as defined by the NCA, was not followed step-by-step, then the NCA has been violated and should therefore be reviewed or restarted and also is a belief shared by policy opponents, but is not necessarily shared by the policy negotiators, then, is identified by 'the process' and the urgency of national (political) dialogue (Malcolm, 2018). In the end we can see that this two factors are interlinked, as the national dialogue is a step in the process. Other than that, this conflict has gained the attention of international organizations such as ASEAN. ASEAN has also played a role in addressing the Myanmar government's atrocities against this ethnic group. One of their strategies is demonstrated through the ASEAN Ways initiative. In April 2021, an ASEAN leaders' meeting was held and resulted in a consensus that Myanmar's repressive actions must be stopped and ASEAN is willing to provide humanitarian assistance in Myanmar (Hidayat & Simatupang, 2024).

Transnational ethnic networks also form within this conflict between the Karen and the Myanmar government. Organizations such as the International Karen Organization and the European Karen Network lobby foreign governments so that they can be send aid to Myanmar. Transnational networks are also often deeply embedded with the Karen National Union (KNU) itself, and it help them to continue the social and financial infrastructure so they can function as a government-in-exile.

Myanmar's Illiberal Peacebuilding Practices *Discursive Practices*

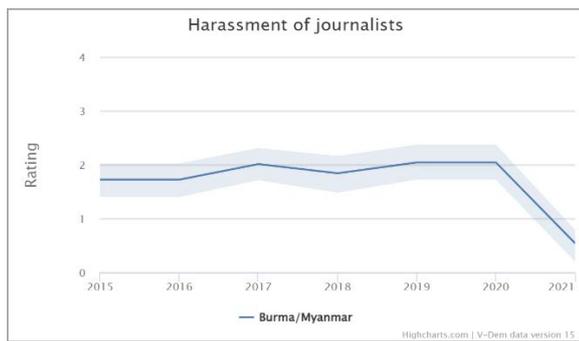
The Myanmar government has engaged in several discursive practices, including harassment of journalists, by restricting the processing of news coverage of the conflict in Myanmar. The Myanmar government continues to severely restrict access to reporting in the country. Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, Myanmar has a relatively high level of harassment of journalists. The domestic conflict is one reason why Myanmar has a low Freedom Index compared to most other Southeast Asian countries.

to ethnic conflicts, the government also frequently censors news in the country. Since the coup, there has been a sharp increase in internet censorship in Myanmar, across various dimensions (Padmanabhan et al., 2021). Myanmar is a country that directly censors sensitive content that concerns the state. The data below shows that Myanmar has a very high level of government censorship compared to most other Southeast Asian countries. In 2015, Myanmar had a government censorship index of 2.45, indicating that the Myanmar government's efforts at censorship were direct but limited to highly sensitive issues. Several years later, the graph shows that these efforts were still carried out in the same manner until 2021. In 2021, this was the lowest point in Myanmar. The Myanmar government's index value for media censorship efforts fell to 0.15, indicating that government censorship is becoming increasingly severe. Government media censorship efforts are direct and routine.



(Source: V-dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

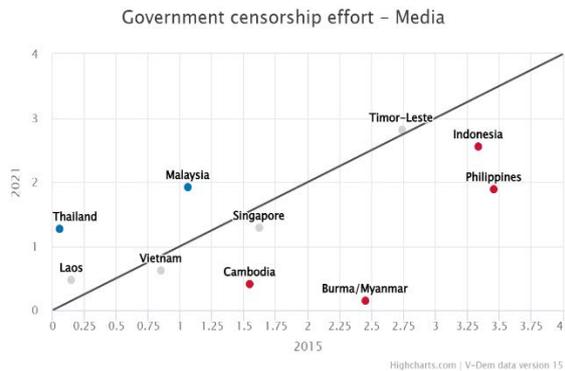
Figure 1. Comparative data on Harassment of Journalists in several Southeast Asian countries from 2015 to 2021



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

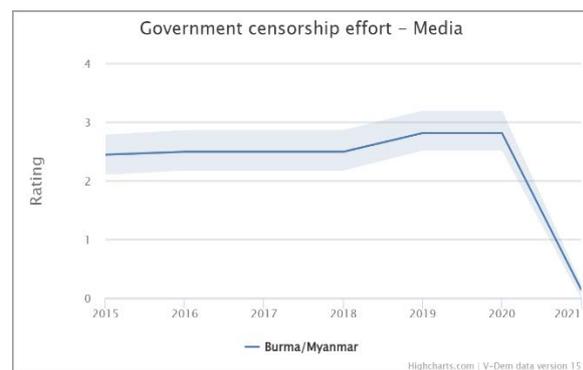
Figure 2. Data on Harassment of Journalists in Myanmar 2015-2021

The data shows that Myanmar had an index of 1.73 in 2015, indicating that journalist harassment was common. Some journalists who covered the news occasionally offended authorities, but they were almost always harassed, or worse, and ultimately forced to resign. Meanwhile, in 2021, this index dropped to 0.55, indicating that the Myanmar government's bullying behavior towards journalists was very severe. As a result, no journalist dared to engage in journalistic activities that offended those in power, as harassment or bullying was inevitable. Coverage of armed conflicts between ethnic groups, especially the Karen and the government, became even more difficult. Violence against journalists also peaked in 2021, with the coup d'état that Myanmar experienced at that time. In addition to the Myanmar government's harassment of journalists in response



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

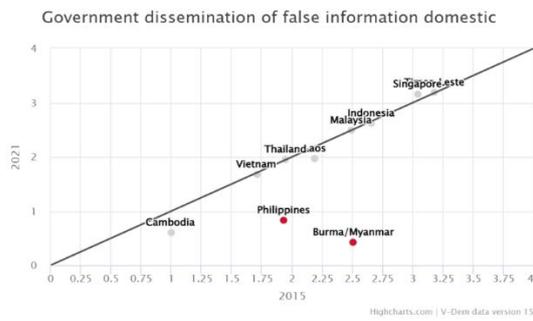
Figure 3. Comparison of data on government censorship efforts in media in several Southeast Asian countries from 2015 to 2021.



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

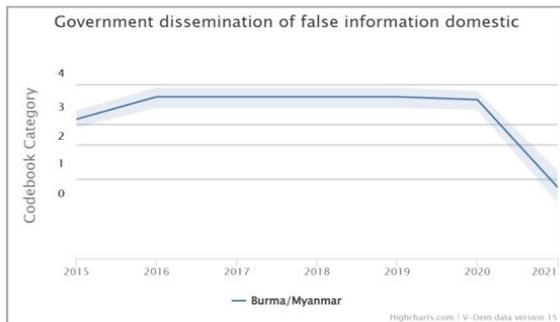
Figure 4. Data on Government Censorship Efforts - Media in Myanmar from 2015-2021

The final discursive practice of the Myanmar military government is the government's dissemination of false information domestically. This is done to shape public opinion regarding government information.



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 5. Comparative data on domestic government dissemination of false information in Southeast Asia from 2015 to 2021



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

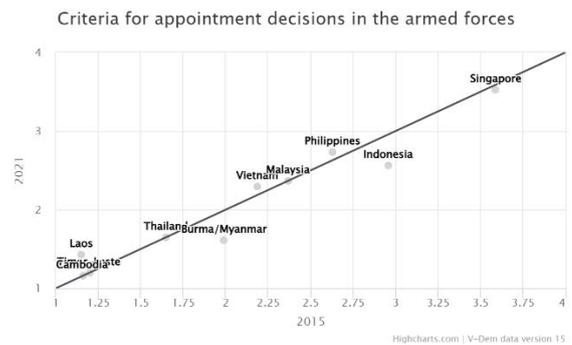
Figure 6. Data on government dissemination of domestic false information in Myanmar from 2015 to 2021

The two data points above show how frequently the Myanmar military government disseminates false information within the country. Compared to other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar has remained at the bottom of the rankings from 2015 to 2021. In 2015, this practice was not common, with perhaps only a few pieces of information being falsified. However, since the military coup in 2021, the dissemination of false information has increased. The data table shows that in 2021, the indicator reached 0, indicating that the government frequently disseminated false information on all major political issues in Myanmar.

Spatial Practice

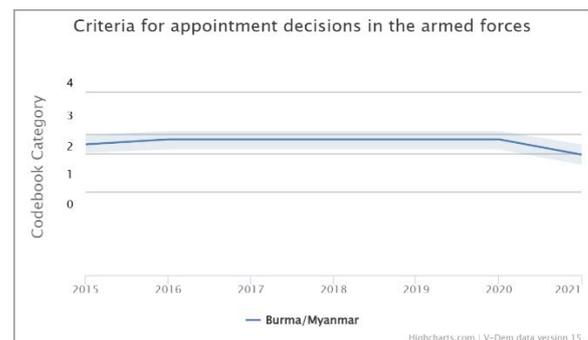
The KNU has been under heavy pressure from Myanmar’s military offensive since the 1980s and has particularly suffered since the failure of ceasefire negotiations in the past, when most other ethnic rebel groups signed ceasefires with the government (Brenner, 2018). Although there was a ceasefire agreement in 2015, it did not last long. In discussing special practices, the author wants to see whether there is political manipulation in the Myanmar military in determining military members so that it can carry out a coup in 2021. Appointment decisions include recruitment, dismissal, and promotion in

the armed forces. Comparisons between Myanmar and other Southeast Asian countries are not that far apart. The criteria for appointment decisions in the Myanmar Armed Forces or Tatmadaw are primarily under the authority and direct control of the Commander-in-Chief, who has full authority to appoint high-ranking officials and members of important military and government institutions from among the military (Noel, 2022). The data below shows that in 2015, the recruitment indicator was at 1.99, nearly reaching 2. This indicator indicates that in 2015, most, if not half, of appointment decisions in the armed forces were based on personal or political connections. Only a small percentage was based on skills and achievements. This practice persisted until 2021, despite changes in the indicator for 2021. This data demonstrates that the Myanmar military has its motives in recruiting military members: to strengthen its strength and power. They will only select loyal citizens to prevent rebellion within the Myanmar military.



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 7. Comparative data on criteria for appointment decisions in the armed forces in Southeast Asia from 2015 to 2021.

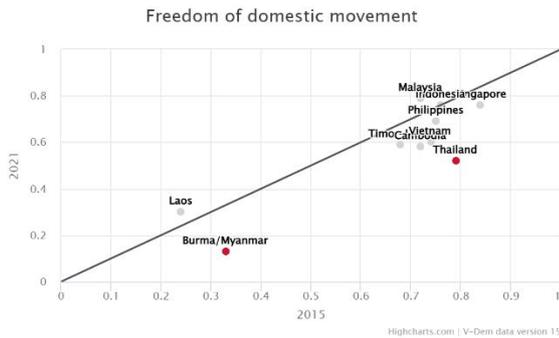


(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 8. Criteria for appointment decisions in the armed forces in Myanmar from 2015 to 2021

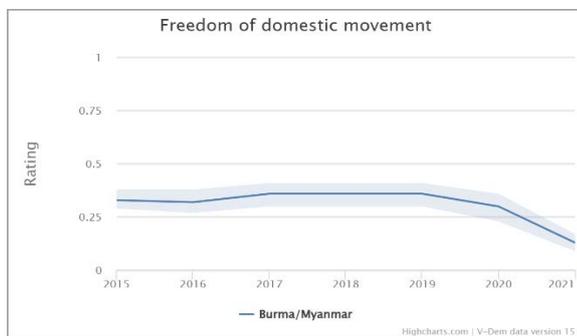
Furthermore, in spatial practice, there is the variable of freedom of domestic movement for Myanmar’s citizens amidst the chaos of conflict. This variable explains how citizens’ ability to express themselves domestically is functioning. According to Freedom House data, Myanmar has a weak level

of freedom of expression. This is due to the long-standing ethnic conflict in the country. Furthermore, the coup and other political interests have led Myanmar to restrict access for its citizens.



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 9. Comparative data on freedom of domestic movement in Southeast Asia from 2015 to 2021



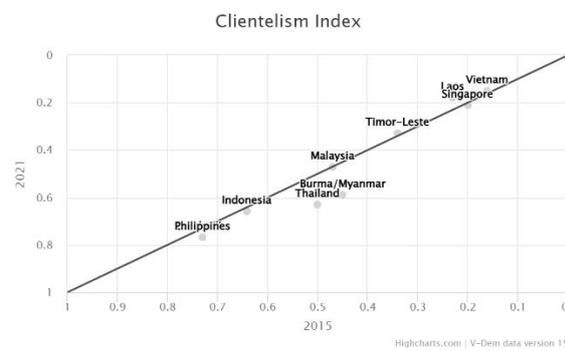
(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 10. Freedom of domestic movement data in Myanmar from 2015 to 2021

According to the data from V-dem above, Myanmar ranks lowest in terms of freedom of expression and movement. Besides Myanmar and Laos, other Southeast Asian countries have strong freedom of expression policies. From 2015 to the military coup in 2021, freedom of expression among Myanmar’s people was already very low. This culminated in the military coup, when the Myanmar military junta imposed strict restrictions on movement, particularly in conflict zones and areas controlled by rebel groups. Military checkpoints and heavy administrative controls often delay or even block the movement of citizens and humanitarian aid. This is especially true for ethnic minorities like the Karen. The Karen in Myanmar face severely restricted freedom of movement due to armed conflict, military construction projects, and repressive military policies. This stems back to the implementation of the “four cuts” military strategy, which limits access to resources for the Karen. The military government can also seize customary land belonging to the Karen, which further pressures the Karen people’s living space and access to movement.

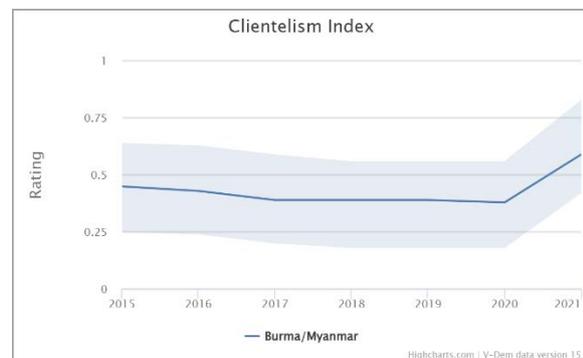
Political Economy

The focus of the discussion on political economy is on economic interventions undertaken for political stabilization, with overall economic growth as a key concern. Authoritarian states often have significantly greater control over their country’s economic resources, thus exerting greater political influence over their own populations. Myanmar, which was taken over by a military junta in 2021, certainly has an authoritarian government system that upholds the Myanmar military. The first variable that can be analyzed is clientelism, which is used to examine patterns of patron-client relations in extractive activities in Myanmar to strengthen military power. This variable also examines the economic conditions of ethnic groups in Myanmar.



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 11. Comparative data on the Clientelism Index in Southeast Asia from 2015 to 2021



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 12. Clientelism Index data in Myanmar from 2015 to 2021

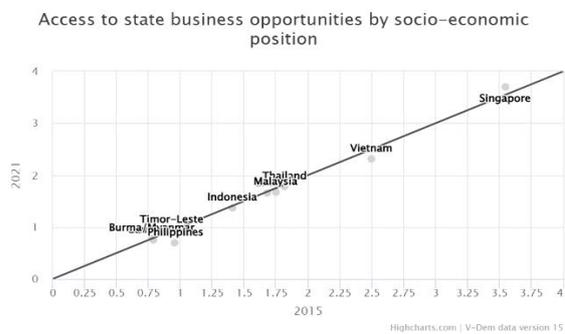
This clientelism relationship involves the targeted and contingent distribution of resources such as goods, services, jobs, and money in exchange for political support. A higher graph indicates a stronger clientelism relationship, and vice versa. Myanmar’s comparison with other Southeast Asian countries is not bad. Myanmar is in the middle. However, the Myanmar Military (Tatmadaw) uses this clientelism to maintain political and social control, especially in ethnic conflict areas such as Rakhine, Karen, and Shan. The Myanmar military then offered gifts,

access to resources, or positions to local figures loyal to them and who did not rebel. The military strengthened the support or at least neutrality of local groups to facilitate security operations or hinder armed resistance. Furthermore, because the Myanmar government and military were still in conflict from 2015 to 2021, economic, social, and political disparities emerged. They then exploited this situation by forming and maintaining patron-client networks that divided ethnic groups and created economic and political dependency to maintain power and suppress minority groups such as the Rohingya and Karen. This clientelism hampered peace efforts between ethnic minorities and the government. This dependence, which then emerged, caused some actors to remain dependent on the military and neglect the basic needs of ethnic communities. This practice also created and reinforced socio-political fragmentation within the Karen community itself, weakening solidarity and making it easier for the military to control territory and discredit or isolate resistance groups. Furthermore, in addition to clientelism, another variable that can be analyzed is access to state business opportunities based on socio-economic position. This variable indicates complete control in the extractive business economy and the denial of economic resources to rebels.

CONCLUSION

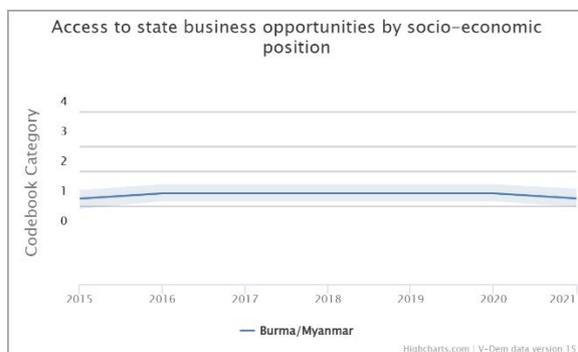
Myanmar has indeed implemented illiberal peacebuilding to achieve peace in their country and pressure ethnic groups not to rebel. The government has consistently employed illiberal peacebuilding characteristics to address ethnic conflicts, including with the Karen ethnic group. The illiberal dimensions of peacebuilding in Myanmar are also reflected in discursive practices: such as journalist and media coverage that are restricted, news censorship is increasingly widespread, and the spread of false information that are encouraged to support the regime's narrative. These actions make data on the conflict and humanitarian dynamics difficult for the public to verify, reduce press freedom and transparency, and limit public participation in the peace process. In terms of spatial practices, military operations and development policies on ethnic groups' customary lands often violate peace agreements and human rights. Land grabbing, restrictions on community movement, and development without compensation exacerbate structural injustice and strengthen state control over conflict areas. The political economy variable also explains that Myanmar, particularly among ethnic groups, is currently classified as impoverished, making it extremely difficult for them to access certain businesses designed to strengthen their military. The Myanmar government uses two main channels in implementing illiberal peacebuilding.

First, the Myanmar military government employed a security and military approach, prioritizing stability through coercion, repression, and the co-option of local elites. Second, the Myanmar military government centralized administrative, legal, and economic practices in the hands of the military elite, thus hindering participatory peace initiatives from ethnic groups. The signing of the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, which was expected to herald an inclusive peace, instead marked a new chapter in illiberal peacebuilding practices. Furthermore, the participation of ethnic groups such as the Karen National Union (KNU) does suggest compromise, but it is more about elite co-optation and negotiation, rather than peace based on justice and human rights. Furthermore, violence and military operations continue in ethnic areas that have not signed the NCA, and ceasefire violations are often used as bargaining chips to gain political advantage or territorial control. In other words, Myanmar has succeeded in implementing illiberal peacebuilding procedurally, but has failed to achieve a substantive, inclusive and peace. Stabilization efforts through



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 13. Comparative data on access to state business opportunities by socio-economic position in Southeast Asia from 2015 to 2021



(Source: V-Dem data, accessed July 5, 2025)

Figure 14. Data on access to state business opportunities by socio-economic position in Myanmar from 2015 to 2021

military approaches, discrimination, elite co-optation, and information control have only suppressed surface unrest without addressing the roots of the conflict. These practices have produced a false peace that is vulnerable to rupture and has reinforced injustice and inequality within Myanmar society.

REFERENCE.

- Angela, M., & Siba, M. (2018). Pelanggaran Hak Asasi Manusia Dalam Konflik Rohingya Human Right Violations On Rohingya Conflict. *Journal of Islamic World and Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.18196/jiw.2221>.
- Asshiddiq, A. I., Sosial, J. I., Humaniora, D., Etnis, K., Myanmar, D., Politik, D. K., Hingga, I., Alif, G., & Asshiddiq, I. (2024). Konflik Etnis Di Myanmar: Dari Kontestasi Politik Identitas Hingga Genosida. *JURNAL ILMIAH MUQODDIMAH*, 8(1). <http://jurnal.um-tapsel.ac.id/index.php/muqoddimah>
- Brenner, D. (2018). Inside the karen insurgency: Explaining conflict and conciliation in Myanmar's changing borderlands. *Asian Security*, 14(2), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/014799855.2017.1293657>
- Emily Fishbein and Nu Nu Lusan, V. (2021, August 5). What is the Myanmar military's 'four cuts' strategy? *Aljazeera*.
- Gravers, M. (2015). Disorder as Order: The Ethno-Nationalist Struggle of the Karen in Burma/ Myanmar-A Discussion of the Dynamics of an Ethicized Civil War and Its Historical Roots. In *The Journal of Burma Studies* (Vol. 19, Issue 1).
- Hanifaturrahmi. (2016). "Kebijakan Diskriminatif Terhadap Kelompok Minoritas Rohingya di Myanmar." *Jurnal: Kebijakan Politik*, 7(1).
- Hidayat, K. S., & Simatupang, H. Y. (2024). Efektivitas Peran ASEAN Dalam Penanganan Kudeta Myanmar Tahun 2021 Effectiveness of ASEAN'S Role Handling the 2021 Myanmar Coup. In *Journal of Global Perspective* (Vol. 2, Issue 1). <http://kti.potensi-utama.ac.id/index.php/globaperspective>
- Jolliffe, K. (2016). *Policy Dialogue Brief Series No.16*. [http://www.knuhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2013-Aug-The-KNU-and-Malcolm_S_\(2018\)_The_Role_of_Karen_Policy-Networks_in_Myanmar's_National_Peace_Process.pdf](http://www.knuhq.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/2013-Aug-The-KNU-and-Malcolm_S_(2018)_The_Role_of_Karen_Policy-Networks_in_Myanmar's_National_Peace_Process.pdf)
- Malcolm, S. (2018). *The Role of Karen Policy-Networks in Myanmar's National Peace Process*.
- Muhamad Iqbal, F., & Dwiprigitaningtias, I. (2021). Kudeta Militer Myanmar Dalam Perspektif Hukum Internasional. In *Jurnal Dialektika Hukum* (Vol. 3, Issue 1).
- Noel, T. (2022). *Unconstitutionality of the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar*. <https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2022.16>
- Padmanabhan, R., Filastò, A., Xynou, M., Raman, R. S., Middleton, K., Zhang, M., Madory, D., Roberts, M., & Dainotti, A. (2021). A multi-perspective view of Internet censorship in Myanmar. *FOCI 2021 - Proceedings of the 2021 Workshop on Free and Open Communications on the Internet*, 27–36. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3473604.3474562>
- Quentin Sommerville. (2024, May 22). Armies of young insurgents are changing the course of a forgotten war. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c0600jgey2po>
- Stefano Ruzza. (2015). There are Two Sides to Every COIN: Of Economic and Military Means in Myanmar's Comprehensive Approach to Illiberal Peacebuilding. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 14(1), 76–97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44163059>
- Stokke, K., Moo Kham, K. K., Nge, N. K. L., & Kvanvik, S. H. (2022). Illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime. Authoritarian strategies for conflict containment in Myanmar. *Political Geography*, 93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2021.102551>