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Research Article

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Agency during Armed Conflict: Everyday Life under Competing Authorities in Myanmar's Rakhine State

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Abstract

The paper looks at the relationship between ordinary people and competing authorities during armed conflict. In particular, the paper investigates the sources of agency that enable civilians to engage with armed actors, for instance, to ensure their own protection. The analysis rests on extensive fieldwork conducted in Myanmar's Rakhine State, where the Arakan Army (AA), the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA), was in active conflict with the military government, the State Administrative Council (SAC), at the time of research in 2023. Drawing on Bourdieu, the paper shows that people's agency is shaped by their ability to access and mobilize different types of capital. What type of capital matters is influenced by structural dynamics, especially how armed actors exercise control within their often-overlapping spheres, but can include economic resources, social networks, and other types of capital. In the context of Myanmar's Rakhine State, economic capital in the form of bribes, social capital in the form of personal connections to the armed actors, and ethnic capital in the form of belonging to a specific group are particularly crucial. Different types of capital enable civilians and communities to employ different practices for their engagement vis-à-vis different armed actors. However, many people in Rakhine State lack any relevant capital and therefore try to be as friendly or inconspicuous as possible, avoiding any interaction—especially with the SAC—as much as they can.

Resumen

Este artículo estudia la relación entre los ciudadanos de a pie y las autoridades rivales durante los conflictos armados. En concreto, el artículo investiga las fuentes de agencia que permiten a los civiles relacionarse con actores armados, por ejemplo, para garantizar su propia protección. El análisis se basa en un extenso trabajo de campo realizado en el Estado de Rakáin, en Myanmar, donde el Ejército de Arakán (AA, por sus siglas en inglés), el brazo armado de la Liga Unida de Arakán (ULA, por sus siglas en inglés), estaba en conflicto activo con el Gobierno militar, el Consejo Administrativo Estatal (SAC, por sus siglas en inglés), en el momento de esta investigación en 2023. El artículo utiliza los conceptos de Bordieu y demuestra que la agencia de las personas está moldeada por su capacidad para acceder y para movilizar diferentes tipos de capital. El tipo de capital que importa depende de la dinámica estructural, especialmente de la forma en que los actores armados ejercen el control dentro de sus esferas, a menudo superpuestas, pero puede incluir recursos económicos, redes sociales y

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otros tipos de capital. En el contexto del Estado de Rakáin en Myanmar, el capital económico en forma de sobornos, el capital social en forma de conexiones personales con los actores armados y el capital étnico en forma de pertenencia a un grupo específico resultan particularmente cruciales. Los diferentes tipos de capital permiten a los civiles y a las comunidades emplear diferentes prácticas para su enfrentamiento con los diferentes actores armados. Sin embargo, muchas personas en el Estado de Rakáin carecen de cualquier capital relevante y, por lo tanto, tratan de ser lo más amigables o discretas posible, evitando cualquier interacción, especialmente con el SAC, en la medida que esto es posible.

Résumé

L'article s'intéresse à la relation entre le peuple et les autorités concurrentes lors d'un conflit armé. Plus précisément, l'article examine les sources d'agence qui permettent aux civils d'interagir avec les acteurs armés, pour assurer leur propre protection par exemple. L'analyse s'appuie sur un important travail de terrain réalisé dans l'État de Rakhine, au Myanmar, où l'Armée d'Arakan (AA), la branche armée de la Ligue unie d'Arakan (ULA), était impliquée dans un conflit avec l'armée du gouvernement, le Conseil administratif d'État (CAE) en 2023, quand s'est déroulée la recherche. Se fondant sur Pierre Bourdieu, l'article montre que l'agence du peuple est fonction de sa capacité à accéder à différents types de capitaux et les mobiliser. Le type de capital qui importe dépend de dynamiques structurelles, notamment du mode d'exercice du contrôle par les acteurs armés au sein de leurs sphères respectives, qui se chevauchent souvent. Peuvent y figurer des ressources économiques, des réseaux sociaux et d'autres types de capitaux. Dans le contexte de l'État de Rakhine, au Myanmar, le capital économique, sous la forme de pots-de-vin, le capital social, sous la forme de relations personnelles avec les acteurs armés, ainsi que le capital ethnique, sous la forme d'une appartenance à un groupe spécifique, s'avèrent particulièrement cruciaux. Différents types de capitaux permettent aux civils et communautés d'avoir recours à diverses pratiques pour interagir avec des acteurs armés distincts. Néanmoins, nombreux sont ceux dans l'État de Rakhine qui ne possèdent aucun capital pertinent et donc essaient, autant que possible, de se montrer sympathiques ou de passer inaperçus, en évitant toute interaction, surtout avec le CAE, dans la mesure du possible.

Keywords: armed conflict, agency, capital, fields, control, Myanmar, Rakhine, Bourdieu

Palabras clave: conflicto armado, agencia, capital, campos, control, Myanmar, Rakáin, Bourdieu

Mots clés: Conflit armé, agence, capital, domaines, contrôle, Myanmar, Rakhine, Bourdieu

Introduction

"We fear the SAC [Myanmar military] because they are armed. If there is any misunderstanding, they arrest and beat the people. The unlucky ones sometimes lose their lives after being arrested,"[1] a young schoolteacher in Sittwe, the capital of Myanmar's Rakhine State, described the situation to us in April 2023.

People in Myanmar's Rakhine State have long suffered from armed conflict. In this region, the State Administration Council (SAC), Myanmar's military junta that gained power through a coup on February 1, 2021, is in active conflict with a recently formed ethno-nationalist armed group, the Arakan Army (AA), that operates as the armed wing of the United League of Arakan (ULA).[2] In the aftermath of the coup, Rakhine became a key battle-

1 Interview, Rakhine schoolteacher from Sittwe, Rakhine State, April 2023.

2 The AA is an armed group operating in western Myanmar, which was founded in Kachin State in northern Myanmar in 2009. With the ULA as its governing head, the administrative body is operating under the name of the Arakan People's Authority (APA), which was established in December 2019. This paper uses the term AA to refer to the ULA/AA as well as the APA, as this is how the group is known and was usually referred to by respondents.

field in a conflict driven by the AA's struggle for autonomy and long-standing grievances over military-led resource extraction and environmental exploitation (Ong 2023).

At the time of our research in 2023, the AA had expanded its influence over territory and populations far into areas of Rakhine that were tightly controlled by the military before, with many people having to navigate checkpoints and other practices of control by both the SAC and the AA on a regular basis. The SAC is known for its ruthless treatment of the civilian population that severely limits civilian agency, as also the example of the schoolteacher from Sittwe illustrates. This includes indiscriminate shelling of villages, arbitrary arrests, and, more recently, forced conscription of civilians (e.g., Loong 2022; Fortify Rights 2024). However, the AA has also been accused of putting civilians at risk, particularly during military operations.[3]

There is a long history of violence against civilians in Rakhine State such as, most prominently, the large-scale prosecution, killing, and displacement of the Rohingya population. The Rohingya population has faced systematic violence at the hands of the Myanmar military, including a genocide in 2016/2017 (Human Rights Council 2018). Direct violence against the Rohingya population continued and saw a resurgence in the aftermath of the coup. In addition, the Rohingya have faced structural violence (MacLean 2018; Shahpur and Wardani 2022), with the state imposing severe restrictions on the community, for instance, by limiting their movement.

Living under such conditions and facing competing authorities, what enables people to engage with armed actors to protect themselves from violence, gain passage at checkpoints, or negotiate tax rates? Can some people engage more effectively than others? If so, why? Or, put differently, what enables agency in conflict zones—where civilian voices are often stifled, where communities frequently experience violence, and where they seemingly have little influence? Building on an extensive number of interviews conducted in northern and central Rakhine State in 2023, this paper sets out to address these questions.

The literature on agency during armed conflict provides important insights into how civilians navigate violence. The scholarship on "protective civilian agency" (e.g., Krause 2017) and "unarmed civilian protection" (UCP, e.g., Ridden and Bliesemann de Guevara 2023) has shown that people employ a range of strategies to protect themselves, including evasion, resistance, rescue, and adaptation (Krause et al. 2023). The literature emphasizes how factors such as the characteristics of armed actors (Weinstein 2007; Sanín and Wood 2014) or community organizational capacity (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017) shape the space for civilian action.

Building on such work, this paper explores the dynamics in Rakhine State to advance our theoretical understanding of agency—and what underpins it. This is particularly important in a context of what Brenner and Han (2022) call "forgotten conflicts," as armed conflicts in Asia have played a comparatively limited role in shaping our understanding.

The paper argues that *capital* is central to *agency*. Civilians do not engage with armed actors on equal footing; their ability to negotiate, evade, or resist depends on the forms of capital they can access and mobilize. The paper further shows that the spheres of control established by competing authorities shape distinct fields where the structural conditions imposed by each actor determine which forms of capital are valuable for civilian agency. Each armed actor has its own practices and enforces its own rules and governance structures, shaping how civilians can leverage different forms of capital—such as money, social connections, or ethnic identity—to navigate daily life and interact with authorities.

Drawing on Bourdieu (1986), various forms of capital may exist, including social, economic, symbolic, and cultural capital. In Bourdieu's work, society is divided into social "fields"—structured spaces where different types of capital are valued and contested depending on the rules and power dynamics within each field. In conflict zones, these fields are shaped by the often overlapping "spheres of control" (Bahiss et al. 2022) established by competing authorities, creating environments with unique conditions that determine which types of capital are most effective for civilian agency. What type of capital ultimately enables agency in a certain geography at a certain point of time depends on the influence of the competing authorities and on how these authorities exercise control, particularly their practices vis-à-vis civilians, such as the way they operate checkpoints and control movements, how they tax, and how they provide services such as justice.

Using this framework and applying it to the context of Myanmar's Rakhine State, the paper illustrates that several different types of capital matter in this conflict environment: *social capital*, *economic capital*, *ethnic capital*, and *coercive capital*. The distinct fields created by the SAC and AA influence which forms of capital are

3 For instance, in October 2022, the AA conducted strikes against SAC military bases in the outskirt of Maungdaw Township and in Paletwa, where civilians lived near the bases (Hlaing 2023).

valued, affecting how civilians can navigate these overlapping spheres of control. *Ethnic capital*, in the form of belonging to the "right" group, for example, stemming from a dialectic identity formation between religion and ethnicity in the case of the majority Rakhine population, enables civilians to engage with the authorities more easily. Similarly, *social capital* in the form of an extended network such as friendships and family ties to the authorities enables civilians to engage with the armed actors. Ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, *economic capital* in the form of financial resources is crucial for civilian agency in Rakhine State. Paying bribes enables civilians to engage successfully, even, with sufficient resources, when lacking other forms of capital. In addition, some people may accumulate *coercive capital* by departing from civilian agency and joining an armed group.

Following a discussion of the framework, which draws on key concepts and the wider literature, the paper sets out to investigate the conflict dynamics in northern and central Rakhine State. The paper then explores how the two main conflict parties exercise control over civilian populations and how different segments of the population perceive their control. This section sets the scene for understanding the context in which civilians operate, accumulating different types of capital that matter to navigate the structures. In the following main empirical section, the paper discusses the various practices applied by civilians to engage with armed actors, linking them back to different forms of capital. In the conclusions, the paper summarizes the main themes and makes suggestions on how to take the study of agency and capital in conflict zones forward.

Developing a Framework: Agency in Armed Conflict

Agency and Civilians

Capturing concepts in dynamic contexts of armed conflict is not without challenges, even when simply trying to describe the people whose agency this article sets out to explore. Much of the literature uses the word "civilian" to distinguish those people fighting from those who are not. However, using this concept, which is closely associated with international humanitarian law (IHL),[4] narrows the scope to specific people and contexts, for instance, excluding contexts where violence is driven by criminal gangs and therefore also the armed actors are legally speaking "civilians" (see, e.g., Jackson et al. 2023). In addition, it introduces a binary, which frequently does not capture empirical reality, where the association with particularly non-state armed actors is more fluid and may have different levels of degree. For example, in Rakhine, the lines between civilians and fighters often are blurred, with people working in administrative positions in the AA, people getting forcefully recruited into the SAC, and people who aid and assist armed actors voluntarily or at risk of coercion.

In line with the literature on civilian agency, however, conscious of the concept's limitations, this paper frequently uses the terminology of "civilians." Meanwhile, the paper also simply talks about "people" and "communities," in line with scholars from peace studies (e.g., Mac Ginty 2021).

Agency and Engagement

The "amount" of agency unarmed people have during armed conflict has been discussed in different evolving fields of literature. In a particularly comprehensive study of the topic Krause et al. (2023, 1) note that "knowledge on the topic remains highly fragmented, as it has developed within the confines of specialized subfields." With a focus on protection, the authors define civilian agency as "actions carried out by individuals and communities to protect themselves and/or others in violent settings" (Krause et al. 2023, 2) and outline a helpful conceptual framing, distinguishing four different forms of agency and corresponding strands of literature: evasion (e.g., Baines and Paddon Rhoads 2012), resistance (e.g., Arjona 2016), rescue (e.g., Fujii 2009), and adaptation (e.g., Krause 2018). They suggest that various conditions in the conflict environment—such as the type of armed actors present, the level of their territorial control, and their organizational capacity as well as community structures—matter and shape the space in which civilians can act. Crucially, coining the term "protective civilian agency," they conclude that civilian agency can have positive protection dividends.

In contrast to the literature on civilian agency, the literature on UCP is more applied and centered around the questions of how civilians can be supported at times of conflict, either through local or international organizations. UCP draws on the practices of organizations like Nonviolent Peaceforce, emphasizing relationship-building between local communities, armed groups, and other authorities (Ridden and Bliesemann de Guevara 2023).

4 According to IHL (API Arts. 43, 50), civilians are defined as those individuals who are not a member of armed forces (including regular armed forces, other armed forces of a party to the conflict, such as a militia, and other organized groups and units, such as resistance movements).

Meanwhile, work of other scholars such as Jackson (2021) illustrates that civilian agency can exceed "protective" goals. Her work on Afghanistan shows that civilians use their agency for survival, but also to negotiate access to education or other services. Building on such findings, Jackson et al. (2022, 6) argue that civilians negotiate for three main reasons: security, services, and advantages, also acknowledging that "individuals might try to gain access to jobs or economic benefits—or use their links to armed groups to sabotage their rivals."

Drawing on these findings, this paper looks at agency through the lens of engagement with armed actors in all its forms and for all purposes, covering both direct and indirect interaction. It maintains that agency is crucial for people's engagement with armed actors and that, in turn, by studying how people engage with armed actors, we can learn about civilian agency.

Agency and Capital

What remains poorly understood—despite the growing research on civilian agency and engagement—is what enables agency in a conflict setting. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of "capital," this paper argues that what matters for civilian agency is determined by different forms of available capital.[5]

Bourdieu (1986, 280; see also 2020) argues that "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e., the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices." He further notes that capital exists in three interconnected forms: economic capital, which can be directly converted into money and institutionalized as property rights; cultural capital, which can transform into economic capital under specific conditions and often takes the form of educational credentials; and social capital, which consists of social connections or obligations and can, in some contexts, convert into economic capital, such as through titles or status (Bourdieu 1986, 281).

Ultimately, according to Bourdieu (2020), capital is a form of power, which enables people to engage with the world around them and determines their success in doing so. However, he makes clear that what type of capital matters, or what even amounts to capital in the first place, depends on the structuring conditions of the specific context. Following his earlier work on colonial Algeria, Bourdieu studied capital mainly in France, in the context of a strong monopoly of the legitimate use of force in a given territory—in stark contrast to conflict zones like Myanmar's Rakhine State, where the monopoly of force, territory, and legitimacy are contested.

Meanwhile, in the context of armed conflict, the exercise of control by armed actors becomes the structuring framework for capital and agency. Existing case study work indicates that both social and economic capital are particularly important in conflict environments. For example, drawing on the case of Afghanistan, Breslawski (2021) finds that strong institutions on the community level, such as various types of local councils in the case of Afghanistan, make communities feel safer in the context of violence. Meanwhile, looking at northwest Nigeria, Buba (2023) shows that payments matter, however, often have negative unintended consequences.

This study of Myanmar's Rakhine State is going to further investigate the role of different types of capital in conflict zones further, shedding light on what enables agency.

Capital and Structure

The conditions for different types of capital to function are shaped by the surrounding structures, making what type of capital matters context-specific. In Bourdieu's theory, society is divided into various social "fields"—such as the economic, cultural, and political fields—each with its own rules, power relations, and forms of capital that are valued within that specific field. These fields are structured spaces with their own internal dynamics, where the value, distribution, and conversion of different forms of capital depend on the specific logics that govern them. However, these fields are also shaped by broader structural attributes, such as the economic system, political institutions, social norms, and class divisions, which influence how power and resources are distributed in society. These overarching frameworks set the parameters for how fields operate and determine which forms of capital are valued and how they can be effectively leveraged.

For example, Steinmetz (2008)demonstrates that the German colonial state before 1914 functioned as a network of overlapping fields, where ethnographic capital—expertise in managing the cultural dynamics of the colonized—legitimized authority and shaped strategies. Administrators used this capital to navigate and dominate intersecting fields, such as the political and administrative ones. These fields, however, were not isolated but embedded within broader structures, like the colonial state and global political and economic systems. In con-

5 With his focus on structures, Bourdieu would likely disagree with the use of the word agency in this article.

trast, the state of Myanmar has been dominated by a military field, shaped by the military's coercive capital. However, competing fields—formed by political movements, ethnic armed groups, and civil society organizations—have emerged outside of the Myanmar military state, intersecting and contesting influence in the broader political order.

In conflict zones like Myanmar, these fields are shaped by and embedded within the broader conflict environment, which acts as a macro-structure influencing the overall distribution of power and resources in society. In particular, the presence of multiple armed actors creates distinct yet frequently overlapping "spheres of control" (Bahiss et al. 2022), characterized by specific practices of control, including coercion, taxation, and the provision of services. Despite being dynamic and fluid, these spheres of control structure fields—such as the legal, economic, and education ones—at the local level. Each field operates under its own rules and power relations, with certain forms of capital—such as financial resources, social networks, or ethnic ties—holding different value, depending on the armed actor or actors in control. The attempts by armed actors to exercise control within these fields shape the conditions for civilian agency, influencing how different forms of capital can be mobilized and by whom. For instance, as this article will show, in AA-controlled justice fields, ethnic and social capital become crucial, favoring Rakhine identity and local connections.

The literature on civilian agency underscores how conflict dynamics shape the fields where civilians operate, with each field being influenced by the unique forms of control exerted by various armed actors. As Krause et al. (2023) note, civilian agency is closely tied to how these actors enforce their control. Armed actors regulate civilian life across multiple spheres—economic, social, and political—by providing governance (Mampilly 2011; Arjona 2016) and using practices like taxation, coercion, and service provision to establish control (Jackson and Weigand 2020; Bandula-Irwin et al. 2022).

Ultimately, in conflict zones, the overlapping and fluid layers of control determine the boundaries of civilian agency and influence what forms of engagement are effective. Efforts by armed actors to build local legitimacy not only enhance their control but also affect the distribution and value of capital, further shaping the fields of influence within these intersecting spheres of control (Brenner 2017; Weigand 2022). Therefore, understanding these structural dynamics is crucial for analyzing the nature and limits of civilian agency in conflict zones, reflecting broader constraints and opportunities.

Applying the Framework: Agency in Myanmar's Rakhine State

Applying this framework allows us to better understand civilian agency in Myanmar's northern and central Rakhine State by examining how the two main armed actors—the SAC and the AA—shape fields within the overlapping yet structuring spheres of control. While both actors exercise control over the population, their practices differ significantly, shaping the value and function of different forms of capital within each field. The paper demonstrates that four distinct types of capital—ethnic capital, social capital, economic capital, and coercive capital—are particularly crucial in determining the forms of agency civilians can exercise in this context.

Ethnic capital is a significant form of capital in Rakhine State, particularly within fields shaped by the AA. Ethnic capital,[6] or belonging to the "right" group, such as the majority Rakhine population, can facilitate more effective engagement with AA authorities. This form of capital aligns with the AA's emphasis on Rakhine community solidarity. However, while such ethnic capital may enhance agency when engaging with the AA, it often proves insufficient when dealing with the SAC, where ethnic belonging does not confer the same advantages. Meanwhile, those who lack the privilege of ethnic capital, such as the Rohingya population, often face significant challenges in engaging with either authority.[7]

Social capital, which encompasses relationships, friendships, and family ties to authorities, is also crucial for civilian agency, particularly within fields under AA influence. This form of capital reflects the importance of local networks and community ties, as highlighted by scholars like Ridden and Bliesemann de Guevara (2023) and Breslawski (2021). Social connections can provide civilians with the means to access resources, influence decisions, and maintain some degree of autonomy under AA control. However, in SAC-dominated fields, the value of social capital diminishes significantly. The pervasive fear and mistrust of the SAC mean that even strong social ties often fail to provide meaningful leverage, leaving civilians with limited agency.

Economic capital emerges as a critical form of capital in contexts where the SAC exercises control. The SAC's reliance on coercion, intimidation, and economic extrac-

6 See also the migration studies literature (e.g., Kim 2018).

7 Building on Weigand (2022), this article considers armed actors like the AA and the SAC to be authorities, which are defined as actors that exercise social control, understood as a relationship of command and obedience, structuring the lives of those who obey it. Hence, conversely, authority is not limited to armed actors.

tion makes financial resources essential for civilians seeking to assert any form of agency. Economic capital, particularly in the form of bribes, can sometimes be the only viable means of navigating control measures such as checkpoints and taxation, enabling civilians to secure necessary permissions or avoid punitive actions. For example, even those who lack the privilege of ethnic capital, such as the Rohingya minority, can successfully engage with the SAC and, to some extent, the AA if they have the economic means to pay. It illustrates that not all members of a community like the Rohingya with limited ethnic capital have the same level of limited agency. However, many people in Rakhine State also lack the economic capital needed to engage effectively with the SAC. As a result, they are often left with limited options: avoiding interactions, hiding from SAC forces, or adopting a passive, non-confrontational approach when engagement is unavoidable.

Coercive capital represents a distinct avenue for civilian agency, where some individuals choose to align themselves with armed groups like the AA (or even the SAC). By joining these groups, civilians acquire weapons, combat training, and a new form of capital that allows them to assert agency in more direct and confrontational ways. This transition provides them with the capability to resist SAC control actively and protect their communities, significantly altering their position within the fields of power in Rakhine State.

Despite these different forms of capital, many civilians in Rakhine State find themselves constrained by a lack of access to any relevant capital, especially when it comes to engaging with the SAC. This lack of capital leaves them with few options for asserting agency, often forcing them into a strategy of avoidance and caution. This reality underscores the uneven distribution of agency in conflict zones and highlights the critical role that different forms of capital play in shaping civilian strategies and opportunities for action.

Methodology

For this project, we conducted 102 interviews with people from Myanmar's northern and central Rakhine State in early 2023, consisting of twenty pilot interviews in February and eighty-two comprehensive interviews in the following months (March: 28, April: 28, and May: 26). The research team for the interviews consisted of seventeen male and eleven female researchers from different communities (religious and ethnic) in the northern townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung and the more central townships of Sittwe, Minbya, and Mrauk-U. The researchers participated in several online and offline workshops that covered ethics, security, and methods. The workshops paid attention to trauma- and violence-informed interview strategies to avoid re-traumatizing survivors of violence in general and gender-based violence, which was widespread during the genocide, in particular. In addition, the researchers shaped the data collection method for the project, ensuring the safety of the team and the participants.

All respondents were civilians, with a wide and diverse range of backgrounds, including regarding ethnicity, age, and profession. In the comprehensive interview phase, it included twenty-nine Rakhine, thirty-five Rohingya, five Chakma/Daingnet, four Khamee, one Maramagyi, one Mru/Mro, three Kamein/Kaman, one Thet, and three Chin. By age, thirty-five were 18–35 years old, forty-three were 35–55, and four were over 55. Geographically, thirty lived in AA-controlled areas, fourteen in SAC-controlled areas, and thirty-eight in areas of mixed control.

Though the research team was gender-balanced, interviewees were predominantly male (89 out of 102), reflecting the security situation and a socially conservative environment in many households. Due to the volatile context, the sensitive questions, and the risk of retraumatizing survivors of violence, which could put both researchers and participants at risk, we empowered all researchers to select interviewees based on trust relations. Even the female researchers ultimately mainly secured consent for participation in the project from male participants. This is a limitation that is important to consider, for instance, due to gendered political consciousness described by Hedström (2016) that has implications for questions relating to agency.

Conflict and Control in Myanmar's Rakhine State

Formed in 2009 by its current leadership in Kachin State, where the Kachin Independence Army provided sanctuary, the AA quickly emerged as the dominant armed group in Rakhine State. Since 2015 the AA has successfully been able to greatly expand its administration in Myanmar, reflecting broader structural shifts in the political and military landscape. The AA has used strategies of forging ceasefires in between periods of active fighting to expand their civil administration and then used periods of active conflict to expand and, more recently, monopolize military control.

During the period of political liberalization and a quasi-democratic political system in Myanmar from 2010 to 2021 a national peace process was initiated

where the military invited some armed groups to sign a nationwide ceasefire. However, the AA was refused admission to the process due to its young age, small organizational footprint, and not holding territory (Leider 2022). This provided the impetus for the AA to quietly begin infiltrating southern Chin State and, shortly afterward, adjacent northern parts of Rakhine State.

Around the same time, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) emerged in Rakhine State, claiming to fight for the Rohingya population. ARSA gained attention with attacks on military posts in 2016, escalating in 2017–2018, which provided the Myanmar military with a pretext for its large-scale violence against the Rohingya in 2018. ARSA's capacity and exact command structure remain unclear, and it lacks trust and legitimacy trust among many Rohingya (Weigand 2020). Both the Myanmar military and the AA label ARSA a "terrorist organization," though reports suggest that the SAC has armed ARSA to weaken the AA (Naing Lin 2023).

Other Rohingya groups, such as the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO) and the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), also operate in the region. At the time of our research, Bangladesh supported the armed revival of RSO and the creation of ARA to oust ARSA from the refugee camps in Bangladesh (IISS 2023; Naing Lin 2024). Initially, RSO had supported the AA; however, after clashes in 2024, RSO entered a ceasefire and began working more closely with the SAC in summer 2024, helping them recruit Rohingya in the camps (ICG 2024).

The AA launched its first attacks against outlying army posts in southern Chin State and northeast Rakhine State in April 2015. From Paletwa in southern Chin State the AA started to push southwards into central Rakhine State. In 2018, a particularly violent period began. During this time, the AA was able to disrupt the state administration system run by the General Administration Department (GAD). Village tract and ward administrators resigned en masse in central Rakhine after some were arrested and accused of collaboration with the AA (COAR 2022). They also faced pressure from the AA, which expected loyalty, as well as from Rakhine communities who were highly supportive of the AA.

The first bilateral ceasefire (November 2020–November 2021) allowed the AA to significantly expand its administration and increase civilian engagement with its governance in areas like taxation and justice, though arrests and abductions persisted. After a period of renewed conflict and further military gains by the AA, a second ceasefire (November 2022–November 2023) enabled the AA to further strengthen its governance systems.

Meanwhile, in the February 2021 military coup led by Min Aung Hlaing, the SAC replaced the elected government, prompting the rise of the People's Defence Forces (PDFs) across Myanmar. These groups, aligned with the opposition National Unity Government or operating independently, and often collaborating closely with the established armed groups (Centre on Armed Groups 2025), focused on fighting the SAC but had little presence in northern and central Rakhine State during the study period.

The AA has pursued a long-term strategy of leveraging ceasefires to expand and consolidate its administration (Lee and McCarthy 2023). Through the APA, the AA sought to monopolize authority while co-opting elements of state administrative systems. These governance systems often overlapped, making it difficult for civilians to distinguish between them.

At the time of our research, the APA generally allowed the state to deliver health and education services while exerting influence. For instance, SAC-funded schools in AA areas operated under the Rakhine flag and anthem, and state health workers served in AA-controlled areas (see also COAR 2022). This integration emphasized ethnic and cultural capital, reinforcing the AA's legitimacy despite competing governance. Staff funded by the SAC simultaneously paid AA taxes, enabling the AA to subsidize its administration by leveraging state resources. While separate from the SAC, the AA's judiciary and administration drew on SAC resources and its current or former personnel.

In November 2023, following data collection for this paper, the AA broke the ceasefire that it used to prepare for war and started a more aggressive offensive. By April 2024, the AA fully controlled six out of seventeen townships in Rakhine State, equating to over 50 percent of the state. By February 2025, the AA had taken most of Rakhine State, including fourteen out of its seventeen townships and Myanmar's entire border with Bangladesh, and began attacking Rakhine's capital, Sittwe (Irrawaddy 2025).

However, the AA has also contributed to the displacement of Rohingya communities. For instance, in May 2024, the AA was reported to have razed down at least 8,000 residential houses owned mostly by Rohingyas in downtown Buthidaung (Knowledge Hub Myanmar 2024). Meanwhile, in early 2024, the SAC started to abduct and forcefully recruit Rohingya men and boys from Rakhine State into its forces, sending them to the frontlines to fight the AA (HRW 2024). Similarly, Rohingya groups like ARSA, RSO, and the ARA are reported to recruit forcibly in the Rohingya refugee camps

in Bangladesh and, in some cases, send recruits to support the SAC (ICG 2024).

Conflict and Control in 2023

At the time of our research, parts of Rakhine State were controlled by the SAC, other parts were controlled by the AA, and many areas experienced overlapping fields or spheres of control. For example, a woman from Mrauk-U township explained that in her area, "The justice services are provided by AA, and education and health services are provided by the SAC."[8] In this context, people are part of different fields, influenced by different authorities, each with its own rules and expectations, which they must navigate daily.

While some people mainly experienced the practices of control exercised by the SAC or the AA, the many people who lived in areas of overlapping layers of control experienced practices of both. Our research illustrates that the SAC and the AA applied different practices of control, which in turn require different forms of capital for civilian agency. For example, the SAC focuses on intimidating civilian populations and often applies indiscriminate violence to expand their control. Meanwhile, the AA practices of control largely represented the interests of the Rakhine population. These contrasting practices create distinct fields, where different forms of capital—such as ethnic ties or economic resources—enable civilian engagement.

The two actors and their control practices were perceived differently across communities, with distinct patterns emerging. Rakhine communities, often referred to as "Arakanese Buddhist," had distinct views shaped by their ethnic identity. In contrast, "Arakanese Muslim" groups, including Rohingya and Kamen, shared perceptions that often diverged from the Rakhine. A third group, comprising other Theravada Buddhist ethnicities like Chakma, Khamee, Mru, and Marama Gyi, along with Christians like the Chin, had mixed views but generally leaned toward the Rakhine perspective. These differing perceptions reflect the concept of ethnic capital, where ethnicity influences the advantages or disadvantages faced when engaging with authorities.

SAC Control and Perception

The military in Myanmar—at the time of our research in 2023, following the coup, officially called the SAC, but previously more commonly known as the Tatmadaw—is characterized by an insular mentality. As Swan Ye Tun (2021)argues, "the Tatmadaw has always been a military organization at heart and its martial nature comes before any ideology" and is defined by "a general distrust of the civilian population." Ultimately, the SAC's focus is territorial control. Their main practices are grounded in military thinking, following the overarching objective of controlling the entire territory of Myanmar. This form of control has often resulted in lucrative business opportunities for the military leadership (see, e.g., Woods 2011). The SAC's approach is centered around fighting or buying off opposing groups while intimidating civilian populations through often indiscriminate violence (see, e.g., McCarthy and Farrelly 2020).

At the time of our interviews, the SAC combined coercive violence against civilians with extractive economic practices, such as demanding "fees" at checkpoints and within the bureaucracy in addition to more regular taxes. Such practices extended into the main areas of mixed control. However, in 2023, the SAC also continued to provide education and health services, including in some areas of mixed control.

In areas under full SAC control, such as Sittwe, the SAC served as the primary governing authority, with Sittwe functioning as the regional hub of the Rakhine State Administrative Council. The SAC maintained unimpeded routes to its central Myanmar cities while enforcing restrictive rules, including a 10 p.m. curfew. In addition to collecting taxes, the SAC also provided some education and health services. A Rohingya interviewee from Maungdaw described the tax system, where payments varied by activity: fishermen paid MMK 200,000 (USD 100) annually, building a house cost MMK 3 million (USD 1,500), and land or shop sales incurred a percentage-based tax. According to him, "People are punished if they do not pay the tax."[9]

In areas under full SAC control, people had to engage with the military, whether they wanted to or not. A Rakhine respondent described, "As the SAC is the government of the state we have to work in collaboration with them. For example, I have to go to the SAC's electric services office to pay the electricity bill, and to the water services offices for the water services."[10]

However, not all parts of the population were governed equally. In particular, large parts of the Rohingya population lived in camps, where services were often provided by NGOs instead. One interviewed Rohingya living in a camp described, "The NGOs and INGOs pro-

8 Interview, Rakhine woman from Mrauk-U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.

9 Interview, Rohingya village leader from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, May 2023.

10 Interview, Rakhine schoolteacher from Sittwe, Rakhine State, April 2023.

vide services in collaboration with the SAC government, including food rations, health, and education services."[11] Rules in the Rohingya camps were particularly strict. For example, according to several respondents, the Rohingya population was forbidden to meet in groups. One interviewed Rohingya stated, "The SAC controls everything about us. We have to show them the village administrator recommendation letter to pass their checkpoints. We have to get approval before getting married. They control every single thing."[12]

Most respondents, regardless of ethnicity, age, or geography, viewed the SAC as a threat. A Rakhine interviewee said, "The military wants to rule our state, so they do what they want with civilians."[13] A Rohingya respondent recalled, "During fighting, we stayed inside, fearing gunfire. We also avoided our farm because of the land mines that were placed there."[14] A Rakhine student added, "Sometimes the SAC arrested villagers and forced them to cook or clean."[15]

However, there were also some exceptions, including in the perceptions of minorities. For instance, a retired Khamee government official noted, "The security of the area is provided by the SAC government. Who is a threat for us is the AA."[16] Similarly, a Rohingya respondent explained, "The SAC is providing the security of the area. The armed groups are the threat."[17] And a Chakma woman who works as a food seller told us, "They [the SAC] are giving protection to the whole country, Myanmar. They . . . provide protection to the people."[18]

AA Control and Perception

In contrast to the SAC, the AA is a revolutionary organization with much closer ties to at least parts of the civilian population. The movement formally fights for an independent Arakan Nation and is led by a young, educated group of people (Hlaing 2023). However, while claiming to be an inclusive movement, the AA was a predominantly Buddhist movement at the time of our research that largely represented the interests of the Rakhine population. For example, while the AA emphasizes the idea of Arakanese/Rakhine unity across Rakhine, other ethnic groups are often either considered to be of secondary relevance or of no importance at all for this unity as the identity is centered around being from the ethnic group rather than being from that place. At the time of our research, the AA used violence in a more selective way while providing conflict resolution and in the areas that were fully or significantly controlled by the AA, the group often was the main provider of judicial services. The AA usually took a tax of around 3–5 percent on the value of a range of business activities, such as the running of a shop, including in areas of mixed control. Also, other activities, such as the construction of a new house, were frequently taxed by the AA. In addition, the AA charged levies per household (around thousand MMK per month) and on trade at checkpoints.

Perceptions of AA control varied starkly. Nearly all Rakhine interviewees, regardless of where they lived, saw the AA as a source of security against the SAC. One Rakhine respondent noted, "The AA is friendly to locals. We greet them and have casual conversations."[19] Many also praised the fairness of AA justice, with a Rakhine woman working as a teacher stating, "the AA enforces rules without discrimination based on race or religion."[20] Taxes were generally seen as flexible. A Rakhine farmer remarked, "The AA doesn't mind if you don't pay taxes. If the local people are in trouble they help them, even if they haven't paid their tax."[21] Another concluded, "The AA. . . serves the Rakhine people."[22]

In contrast, the Rohingya population viewed the AA with considerably more doubt. For instance, one Rohingya respondent working as a teacher argued that there is "discrimination based on race and religion, using power, taking fines, arbitrary arrests and limitation of movement."[23] Generally speaking, most of the Rohingya living under AA control viewed the group's justice system as corrupt and unfair. The sense of discrimination

11 Interview, Rohingya NGO worker from Sittwe, Rakhine State, April 2023.
12 Interview, Rohingya religious teacher from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
13 Interview, Rakhine shop owner from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
14 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Mrauk-U township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
15 Interview, Rakhine student from Sittwe, Rakhine State, March 2023.
16 Interview, Khamee retired government official from Sittwe township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
17 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Sittwe, Rakhine State, March 2023.
18 Interview, Chakma woodseller from Mrauk-U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
19 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
20 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
21 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
22 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
23 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Sittwe, Rakhine State, March 2023.

was further reflected in perceptions about the AA's tax. In contrast to the dominant view in the Rakhine population, Rohingya described the AA's tax as non-negotiable and strictly enforced. This view was shared by many respondents from other minority populations. For instance, a Chin farmer described, "If someone does not follow the AA's rules, they take action. Sometimes they take people into custody, beat them, fine them, or jail them."[24] Some, however few, respondents from minority populations even viewed the AA as a more severe threat compared to the SAC.

Checkpoints as a Key Practice of Control

Checkpoints and roadblocks play an important role for how all kinds of authorities, including state actors and armed groups, exercise control across conflict zones (e.g., Schouten et al. 2024). In Rakhine State, with its fluid and overlapping layers of control of the SAC and the AA, both conflict parties used checkpoints to secure areas, to levy taxes and bribes, and to control populations. Ultimately, they were a key point of interaction between the civilian population and both the SAC and the AA. For instance, one interviewee told us, "Both the AA and SAC have their checkpoints. I do not know what their purpose is exactly. I think they want to control all the civilians."[25] Meanwhile, a Rakhine woman from Mrauk-U reported, "The AA checkpoints are on the way to the mountains and forests. They check people when entering or leaving, when they go to cut trees or bamboo. The SAC checkpoints are mostly on the main roads. They check strangers and. . . check if they have connections with the AA. Sometimes the SAC is a little threatening."[26]

Generally, especially SAC checkpoints were viewed as threatening. For instance, a Rakhine schoolteacher from Buthidaung noted, "The SAC threatens the civilians. They insult and use force at the checkpoints."[27] Meanwhile, AA checkpoints were viewed in a considerably more positive light. The teacher told us, "The purpose of these checkpoints is to distinguish between good and bad people, because there are some people who want to destroy the unity of the AA. There are some betrayers, so the AA has the checkpoints. Checkpoints are not a threat to us."[28]

Meanwhile, most Rohingya respondents viewed navigating all checkpoints to be challenging, however, generally fearing SAC checkpoints more than the AA ones. One interviewee said, "It seems as if checkpoints existed especially to restrict the movement of the Rohingya. The checkpoint always checks just the Rohingyas a lot."[29] At SAC checkpoints, the interviewed Rohingyas stated that they needed to present a letter by their village administrator or a National Registration Card (NRC; see below). Similarly, according to the Rohingya interviewees, documents are also checked at AA checkpoints in some areas.[30]

In addition to checkpoints, more rigid and permanent SAC roadblocks pose an even more severe challenge to communities in certain geographies as the military uses them to limit food supplies in armed group control areas. One interviewee described, "People had difficulties with food when the road was blocked for one and half months. The health condition of old men and children was the worst."[31]

People's Practices and Capital

Considering how the SAC and the AA exercise control—which is in some ways similar, such as with regard to the frequent use of checkpoints, but differs in most other ways, for instance, in terms of ideology and the use of violence—civilians require different practices of engagement. As illustrated above, especially the SAC created challenges for the civilians, translating into challenges for engagement. However, also the AA was viewed as a threat by some, especially minorities, and engagement was accordingly not easy for everyone. Exploring how individuals and different types of communities engaged with the SAC and the AA certain patterns evolve, with distinct key practices.

For example, mirroring different experiences and resulting perceptions, the practices of engagement vary significantly by ethnicity. Among the Rohingya respondents, the limited possible engagement with armed actors was usually based on economic means, such as paying "protection" tax, paying bribes following an arrest or to lift

24 Interview, Chin farmer from Minbya, Rakhine State, April 2023.
25 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Mrauk U, Rakhine State, March 2023.
26 Interview, Rakhine housewife from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
27 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
28 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
29 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
30 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Minbya township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
31 Interview, Rakhine shop owner from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, March 2023.

some restrictions (i.e., inspection at checkpoints or quick issuance of travel permits). Having to pay their way out of trouble is a symptom of lacking other forms of relevant capital. Being considered "non-nationals" by discriminatory law, Rohingya usually are not issued an NRC and cannot travel beyond the borders of their makeshift Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps. Meanwhile, responses from the Arakanese Buddhist community often had significantly more scope for engagement.

Looking at the practices that different communities and people used to engage with the conflict parties illustrates what forms of capital matter in the context of Myanmar's Rakhine State. Crucially, many people lacked any relevant capital for engagement, especially vis-à-vis the SAC, and therefore tried to avoid them, hide from them, or "be friendly when interactions became necessary." What could be called ethnic capital, in the form of being Rakhine, was an important resource when engaging with the AA, and the lack of it was felt by minority populations. For example, the Rakhine population could pass checkpoints of both the AA and the SAC more easily than the minority Rohingya population, which often could not obtain ID cards because of their ethnicity as both armed actors were pursuing discriminatory structural policies on the freedom of the movement. Meanwhile, other minority ethnic groups with major Theravada Buddhist following (i.e., Chakma, Khamee, Mru, and Maramagyi) had significantly more ethnic capital. As the AA wanted to appeal to the idea of Arakanese unity across Rakhine, it tried to maintain or build trust among smaller Buddhist ethnic groups, portraying itself as the legitimate authority in the region.

However, ethnic capital was in itself not sufficient, especially when it came to engagement with the SAC. Social capital, in the form of direct ties with the authorities, such as friendships, or indirect ties, such as via village administrators, was often key for enabling direct engagement to directly negotiate concerns with the AA and, to some extent, the SAC. Most important, especially regarding engagement with the SAC, was economic capital. Whether people wanted to pass a checkpoint or obtain documents, having financial resources to pay bribes made a difference, and could, to some extent, even provide people without relevant ethnic and social capital with a limited amount of agency.

Avoidance

Most strikingly, many civilians tried to avoid any engagement with the armed actors. It shows that many people lacked any relevant capital for engagement. This was particularly pronounced with the SAC, whom almost all interviewees tried to avoid. Regarding the AA, the picture was more mixed and usually linked to ethnicity, with Rakhine people being positive about engagement and most minority groups trying to avoid it.

Crucially, engagement with one armed actor risked punishment by the other side. This was a particular challenge for the large areas in which both conflict parties had a degree of influence, with neither having established full territorial control. In this context, suspicion of engagement with the AA could result in punishment by the SAC and vice versa. One respondent argued, "It doesn't matter if it is the AA or the SAC. . . If we engage with a group, we can face threats and punishment from the other."[32] Meanwhile, a Rohingya respondent who worked as a farmer in Mrauk-U township pointed out that "Many Rohingya are arrested and accused of connections with the AA. One person whom they arrested was beaten and tortured inhumanely."[33] Some interviewees even described the risk of being killed. For instance, one respondent argued, "the SAC kills people with no reason. . .. We do not make connections with the armed group, mostly because we fear the SAC."[34]

With regard to the SAC, most people did not have any option for engagement. A Rakhine woman argued, "When we see the military checking people on the road, we would just go back to our village. They are not friendly and use harsh methods."[35] And a Chakma university student told us, "The unarmed civilians can do nothing. They can only hope for the armed group to fight for liberation. People can negotiate with AA as they are local people so they can understand the civilian perspective. . . But the SAC only makes orders and if we cannot follow them, there is no choice but to hide from them."[36] However, minorities in particular frequently also feared engagement with the AA. One member of the Mro community noted, "It is important for us to obey the orders of both AA and SAC. Because we fear both groups."[37]

Hiding and "Being Friendly"

A related widespread practice of (non-)engagement, which again is based on a lack of relevant capital, was

32 Interview, Rohingya teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
33 Interview, Rohingya from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
34 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
35 Interview, Rakhine day labourer from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
36 Interview, Chakma university student from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
37 Interview, Mro farmer from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, March 2023.

hiding. This practice was particularly used when passive avoidance (e.g., not using a road with a certain checkpoint) did not work or when the threat was moving toward civilians (e.g., forces coming to the village, shelling, or airstrikes). While some people also used this practice to avoid engagement with the AA, it was clearly associated with the SAC's tactics of raiding villages or indiscriminately shelling them.

For instance, a female Khamee interviewee pointed out, "We create security ourselves. If an attack happens in the area, we find shelter or a safe place immediately to hide."[38] A fisherman described a situation of hiding in more detail:

> When my family and I were sitting at home having a conversation, the military [suddenly] started shooting in the village. At the time my daughter-in-law was pregnant and we went down to the stream behind my house with fear. One of my family members was hit by a bullet next to our house and died. We were hiding in the river and my daughter-in-law, who was pregnant, got frozen after two hours in the cold water. She is at the hospital now.[39]

If avoidance failed, people often tried to adjust their behavior while interacting with an authority, especially the widely feared SAC, by complying with orders, "being friendly" or "being quiet," hoping that this would result in more friendly behavior by armed actors. A Rakhine grocer explained, "we stay friendly with the military and police, doing what they ask us to do."[40] And a Rakhine teacher noted, "We have to follow the SAC and need to do what they ask us to do. . . We have to stay quiet when they are checking us."[41]

Bribes

Often enough avoidance did not work, and "being friendly" was not sufficient when dealing with armed actors. Instead, engaging successfully—to be allowed to pass a checkpoint, to release someone from prison, or to avoid harm—required bribes, which in turn required economic capital. Accordingly, passing checkpoints in particular was risky as well as expensive. One respondent noted, "If we need security for ourselves or for our family, we need to give a bribe or something valuable to the AA or SAC. . . If someone gives something valuable to the AA or SAC, then they will protect them."[42]

In Rakhine State, Rohingyas were particularly likely to be forced into the payment of bribes during our research due to their vulnerable circumstances, lacking other relevant capital.[43] To be allowed to travel and safely pass checkpoints people require an NRC or a letter by the village administrator. Rohingyas, whom many in Myanmar treat as foreigners despite their proven presence for centuries, have long been excluded from citizenship and, accordingly, cannot get an NRC. Without valid travel documents, however, Rohingyas face abuse at SAC checkpoints and are frequently required to pay a bribe. A Rohingya interviewee who was part of his village committee explained, "There are BGP's [Border Guard Police] and military checkpoints in our area. They check documents and NRC cards at the checkpoints. They make a lot of threats, force us to pay money, and sometimes do not let us cross the checkpoints."[44] Similarly, another Rohingya interviewee stated about the SAC, "They always check the Rohingyas at the checkpoints. They ask for the village administrator recommendation letter—as a temporary travel allowance—or an NRC. Otherwise, they arrest people without reason."[45]

However, obtaining an NRC is difficult for Rohingyas and requires significant bribes. A Rohingya farmer interviewee explained his case:

> In July 2022, a relative went to the immigration office to get an NRC card. The immigration officer asked for MMK 1,500,000 (ca. USD 700) for it, saying that it would take three months to get the card. After three months, when he went to take the card, the officer asked for another MMK 1,500,000, providing several reasons. Only then he gave him the card, which he urgently needed… It is a kind of structural violence against the Rohingya civilians.[46]

The only other alternative for Rohingyas to safely pass SAC checkpoints is a letter by the village administrator. However, these also frequently require bribes. The interviewed farmer elaborated: "When I went to get the

38 Interview, Khamee housewife from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
39 Interview, Rakhine fisherman from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
40 Interview, Rakhine grocer from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
41 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
42 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Mrauk-U township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
43 Such exploitative practices are also seen in other conflict regions in Myanmar.
44 Interview, Rohingya member of village committee in Sittwe township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
45 Interview, Rohingya member of village committee in Maungdaw town, Rakhine State, March 2023.
46 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, March 2023.

village administrator's recommendation letter. . . I had to give him something valuable. . .. All Rohingyas face these difficulties."[47]

But the risks—and the need to bribe—were not only limited to encounters with armed actors at checkpoints. One Rohingya respondent describes, "rules are enforced by taking bribes from the people, sometimes torturing people and sentencing them to jail. When people are arrested, the SAC releases them by taking bribes."[48] At times, the SAC frequently raided villages, again posing a risk to the civilian population. The interviewee described such an incident in his village:

> The SAC came to our village and entered every house to check. They arrested and took away some people. They torture them brutally in custody, asking many questions regarding the armed group. Some people were released after huge amounts were paid as bribes. Those who couldn't pay were sentenced to 10 to 12 years in prison.[49]

A Rakhine respondent concluded, "They treat rich people and poor people differently. They take sides with the rich people."[50]

Meanwhile, bribes and the need for economic capital were less of a concern with the AA, at least for Rakhine people. A Rakhine teacher described, "In the case of any problem in the village, people mostly complain to the AA and the AA provides justice. The AA handles the cases without taking any bribe and money as fees."[51] However, a Rohingya interviewee described the opposite experience, concluding that "The AA justice services do not have justice. They discriminate and take bribes when they handle a crime."[52]

Friends and Social Networks

Another widespread practice to engage with the armed actors was linked to friends and social networks, enabling them to draw on social capital. People were more likely to engage with those armed actors, where they had friends or to which they were connected otherwise, for instance, through family or community networks. For example, a Rakhine day laborer explained, "The AA used to participate in the ceremonies in my village. They are friendly to the locals."[53] Conversely, people were also more likely to receive support from those actors, with whom they had friendly ties. A Rakhine man from Sittwe noted, "I get help from my friend in the AA."[54]

Such links also likely, at least partly, explain perceptions. A Rakhine woman described, "In the village, all the villagers are not the same. Some love the AA and some the SAC. There are Rakhine people in the military of the SAC and the AA."[55] Accordingly, for instance, a retired government official noted, "The security of the area is provided by the SAC government. Who is a threat for us is the AA."[56]

However, despite existing social networks, fears remained, especially when engaging with the SAC. A Chin interviewee explained, "I have contacts and interactions with both the SAC and the AA. I played football with AA members, and I helped SAC troops to clean the town. I feel safe to contact the AA, but I feel afraid to interact with the SAC."[57]

Negotiation

Negotiating with the conflict parties can play an important role in some conflict contexts (see Jackson 2021). However, in Rakhine State, negotiations were usually limited to just one conflict party, the AA, during our research and even then, it depended on available capital. All interviewees agreed that there was little or no scope for negotiation with the SAC. For example, a Rakhine businessman argued, "We get scared when we have to interact with SAC."[58] Similarly, a Rakhine farmer concluded, "We can never negotiate with the SAC."[59]

Conversely, negotiations were certainly easier with the AA, as long as people had the relevant ethnic and so-

47 Interview, Rohingya farmer from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
48 Interview, Rohingya fisherman from Maungdaw, Rakhine State, May 2023.
49 Interview, Rohingya fisherman from Maungdaw, Rakhine State, May 2023.
50 Interview, Rakhine schoolteacher from Sittwe, Rakhine State, April 2023.
51 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
52 Interview, Rohingya village administrator from Minbya township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
53 Interview, Rakhine day labourer from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
54 Interview, Rakhine man from Sittw, Rakhine State, May 2023.
55 Interview, Rakhine teacher from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
56 Interview, Khameen retired government official from Sittwe township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
57 Interview, Chin student from Minbya township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
58 Interview, Rakhine businessman from Minbya township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
59 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Minbya township, Rakhine State, March 2023.

cial capital. A Chakma university student in Buthidaung argued, "People can negotiate with the AA as they are local people."[60] Even the tax rates can be negotiated in some cases, which was brought up repeatedly by Rakhine respondents. For example, a Rakhine farmer noted, "If someone is facing difficulties in their family, he/she can negotiate with the AA by expressing their difficulties to avoid tax."[61]

However, Rohingyas usually could not negotiate with the AA, neither in terms of the tax rate nor otherwise, lacking the required ethnic capital that is required. Ultimately, some (however, a small minority) of interviewed Rohingyas even preferred engagement with the SAC. A Rohingya university student in Buthidaung argued, "When it comes to the AA and the SAC, the interaction with the SAC is better than with the AA because the AA kills and beats the Rohingya directly. But when the SAC arrests someone, they give an opportunity for trials in the court."[62]

Village Administrators

Ultimately, instead of negotiating directly, many people relied on village administrators to engage with the armed actors on their behalf. Most administrative affairs in Myanmar are managed by the GAD, which formally operates under the SAC but often maintains relationships with other entities, such as the AA. Ward and village tract administrators, appointed by township officials, oversee local matters, including tax collection, dispute mediation, issuance of recommendations for locals to travel outside their place of residence, and security tasks like reporting crimes or managing emergency plans during armed clashes.

Accordingly, village administrators played a particularly important role for communities to engage with and influence the practices of the conflict parties at the time of our research. Having access to a well-connected village administrator was often crucial for ordinary people. A Chakma respondent explained, "if they [the AA or SAC] ask us to do something we have to do it and definitely have to fulfil their wish. If it is too risky to do, we usually inform the village administrator."[63] Even in emergency situations, people often turned to the village administrators to engage with the conflict parties. Another Chakma interviewee described, "When the SAC or AA entered our village, we had to do whatever they asked. Some people ran away from the village to avoid them. Other people went to the village administrator's home and asked for help and safety."[64]

Hence, village administrators often worked hard to maintain social capital in the form of ties with the authorities, the two main conflict parties. As a Chin interviewee explained it, "The village administrators have to stay friendly with both the AA and the SAC."[65] However, this engagement often also required them to take on responsibilities from the authorities and to enforce their rules. One Rakhine interviewee argued that, in his community, "The rules are enforced by the village administrator of the SAC."[66] For example, village administrators were in some cases made responsible for collecting taxes, especially if they lack relevant ethnic capital. A Rohingya interviewee from a predominantly Rohingya village described that the "AA always forces the village elders to pay them tax from our people. . . The village administrators do not want to do it for AA, but they are forced to do it."[67] Ethnic capital also matters in others way. For instance, Rakhine respondents described receiving intelligence from village elders about upcoming fighting. The village elders of minority groups were often not privy to such information by the conflict parties.

Ultimately, the engagement with two conflict parties at the same time can be risky for the village administrators. A Rakhine farmer from Minbya noted, "Village elders always get threatened and they do not feel safe to interact with the SAC."[68] And a Rakhine grocer from Maungdaw concluded, "In the whole Rakhine State so many Rakhine leaders, village administrators and youths have been killed by the SAC, accused of supporting the AA."[69] It illustrates that even those civilians with considerable relevant capital, and resulting agency, are at constant risk.

60 Interview, Chakma university student from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
61 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Minbya township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
62 Interview, Rohingya student from Buthidaung township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
63 Interview, Chakma trader from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, April 2023.
64 Interview, Chakma woodseller from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
65 Interview, Chin bamboo merchant from Minbya township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
66 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Minbya township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
67 Interview, Rohingya NGO worker from Mrauk U township, Rakhine State, May 2023.
68 Interview, Rakhine farmer from Minbya township, Rakhine State, March 2023.
69 Interview, Rakhine grocer from Maungdaw township, Rakhine State, May 2023.

Conclusions

The paper has shown that different types of capital matter for agency in different conflict contexts. Depending on how armed actors, whether states or armed groups, exercise control, certain types of capital become more or less significant within the specific fields they create. These fields exist within broader spheres of control, which shape the structural framework for civilian agency. For example, in some fields, social capital enables agency through community networks and relationships, while engagement in other fields may require economic capital, particularly in the form of bribes. These fields are embedded within larger structures of power and conflict, influencing and influenced by not only local dynamics but also regional and international relations.

This dynamic becomes visible in the context of Myanmar's Rakhine State. As demonstrated, ethnic capital, social capital, and economic capital are particularly important in this environment for enabling civilian agency. The AA and the SAC shape distinct fields within their overlapping spheres of control, each imposing its own rules and practices that influence the value and function of different types of capital. While the control practices of the AA and the SAC are similar in some ways, there are also many distinct differences with significant implications for agency—and the type of capital that matters.

In fields dominated by the SAC, economic capital becomes crucial, especially since the SAC's practices prioritize financial extraction through bribes over social relations. Consequently, many people lack the relevant economic capital needed to engage effectively with the SAC. As a result, they often resort to avoiding interactions, hiding, or being "friendly" when they have no choice but to engage. This reflects a structural condition relevant for people who have to engage with the SAC not just in Rakhine State but across Myanmar, where economic capital becomes a critical resource for engagement, influencing the broader dynamics of power and governance.

In contrast, the Rakhine population, who maintain what could be described as ethnic capital, find it relatively easier to engage with the SAC, particularly compared to minorities such as the Rohingya. These groups often lack both ethnic and social capital and must rely on economic capital—if they possess it—to engage with the SAC and, to some extent, the AA.

In fields shaped by the AA, social capital is considerably more important than in the case of the SAC. People often rely on friendships, but again also less direct ties, such as the village administrators, to engage with the AA. Economic capital is less important, especially for the Rakhine population. While the AA taxes them, they appear to be considerably less stringent in terms of enforcement than they are vis-à-vis other groups of the population. Lacking the relevant social capital and ethnic capital, minority groups like the Rohingya can often only successfully engage with the AA if they have economic capital. This highlights how structural inequalities within different fields of control create barriers to agency, particularly for marginalized communities. However, it also shows that the level of agency can vary within marginalized communities, based on available economic capital.

While money helps, communities that lack connections to a conflict party—for instance, because of ethnicity or class—have a considerably reduced ability to influence their behavior. Even though there are ways for people to gain certain forms of capital, such as social and economic capital, ethnic capital cannot be gained (even though economic capital may help to get a different ID card). Hence, fair and responsible governance is required to ensure that agency is distributed more equally.

Understanding capital–structure interactions in Myanmar has broader implications for understanding agency in other conflict zones. For instance, the findings show that empowering people during armed conflict and providing civilians with agency is challenging for outside actors, as most forms of capital (apart from economic capital) cannot be easily shared or distributed. This has significance for the wider security, conflict, and peacebuilding literature as it underscores the need for policies that address structural inequalities, such as the discrimination of certain ethnicities or groups, and to shift "what capital matters."

Further research is required to gain a more comprehensive understanding of capital, agency, and fields within the context of armed conflict. In particular, we need more in-depth comparative studies, which bring the experience of people in different conflict contexts together. Much of the research continues to be limited to single case studies, with more comparative work potentially opening up a pathway for further generalization, enabling us to identify commonalities across contexts. Furthermore, the perspective of women remains underrepresented, including in this study, and needs to be foregrounded in future research.

However, the paper shows that Bourdieu's framework is useful for advancing our understanding of agency in the context of armed conflict, explaining what enables people to engage with conflict parties and shedding light on why some people can engage more successfully than others—whether it is about protecting themselves, accessing services, or gaining advantages. While the types of capital

that matter may vary from context to context and from authority to authority, analyzing capital, access to capital, and the defining structures helps us to understand what people need to successfully engage with armed actors and other authorities in the context of armed conflict.

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