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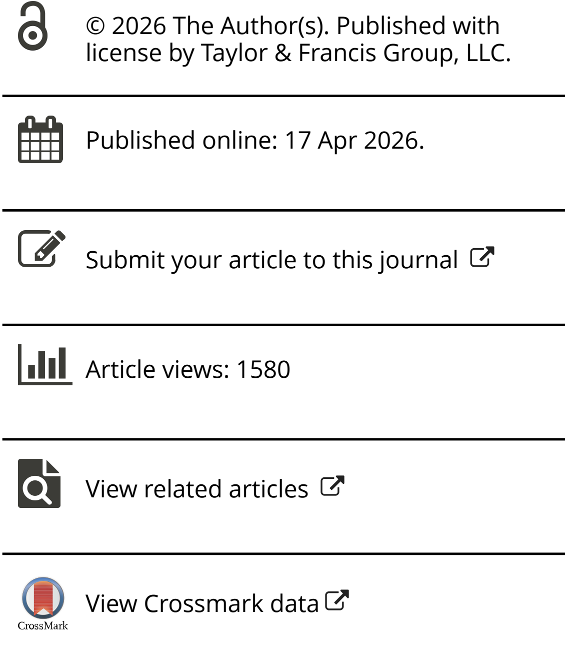

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Decolonising Civil War: Warscapes as Relational Conjunctures in Post-Coup Myanmar

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ABSTRACT
This article advances efforts to decolonise the study of civil war by conceptualising warscapes as relational conjunctures. While the warscapes literature emphasises how conflict reshapes local socio-political relations, a conjunctural approach highlights how warscapes emerge from dynamic interrelations between multi-scalar social processes, producing seeming contradictions within local landscapes of war. These intersections also reveal the lasting but uneven legacies of colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding on contemporary civil wars and their spatiality. Applying this framework to post-coup Myanmar, the article challenges two dominant portrayals of the conflict – as binary ('us against them') or irretrievably fragmented ('many against many') – for being state-centric and for obscuring colonial and postcolonial continuities. Instead, the article provides a conjunctural analysis of southeast Myanmar, which has incubated both democratic revolutionary politics and criminalised economies since the 2021 coup. It links these apparent contradictions to historic social processes that continue to generate tensions within Karen ethnonationalism.

Introduction

In 2024, fears of 'fragmentation' were rife in Western media coverage of Myanmar. A 'civil war of "many against many"', one English language headline proclaimed, is 'tearing [the] country up', quoting an anonymous source in Yangon (Ebbighausen 2024). According to Zung Ring (2024), a pseudonymous Burmese political analyst, Burmese media had latched onto this narrative of fragmentation too. Zung Ring argued that fragmentation narratives – contrary to the intentions of pro-democracy commentators – inadvertently shored up the Myanmar military's view of the country: that Myanmar was a country prone to disintegration and disunity, held together by its generals. Regardless, narratives of fragmentation represented a shift in media representations of Myanmar. In the first 2 years after the 2021 coup, as demonstrators took up arms to defend themselves against the junta's

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crackdowns, the media had often depicted the post-coup conflict in binary terms. 'In Myanmar, a new resistance rises', a *New York Times* headline read (Beech 2021), depicting 'the resistance' in the singular. At the time, battle lines in Myanmar appeared to have been drawn dichotomously – it was not 'many against many' but rather 'us against them'.

Both depictions reflect a tendency to measure Myanmar up to Western standards of liberal democratic statehood, rather than to understand the evolving influence of colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding on the country (Brenner 2024) – and, as I will argue, on the varied geography of armed conflict therein. The problem extends beyond Myanmar. The Eurocentric assumption that 'state, army, and society come in a territorially-bounded, sovereign package' pervades Western representations of war and conflict (Barkawi 2016, 206; see also Jones 2025). This article responds to calls to decolonise the study of war, issued by Barkawi and others, by proposing an approach to civil wars in the postcolonial world that takes the complex socio-spatial dynamics of such conflicts seriously, without lapsing into binary 'us against them' representations or narratives of endless disorder and fragmentation. Specifically, this article argues for conceiving of warscapes as relational conjunctures to redress a possible bias towards national dynamics in the study of civil wars, at the expense of their intersections with power relations at smaller and larger scales. Put differently, what appears in Myanmar as fragmentation is, in fact, the way in which (post)colonial statebuilding – in interaction with other contemporaneous social processes – produces localised landscapes of war.

Thus, this article builds on conjunctural approaches and the scholarship on warscapes, so as to challenge state-centric and Eurocentric conceptions of war. Human geographers have used conjunctural analysis to understand how the particularities of a site are produced by multi-scalar social relations (Hart 2006; Mezzadra 2020; Peck 2023; Woolston and Mitchell 2024). While uncompromisingly relational, conjunctural analysis attends to how localities are continually differentiated from one another. This article applies conjunctural analysis to warscapes – a term used mostly by ethnographers to show that state-centric framings of civil war gloss over the ways in which armed conflicts shape and are shaped by local social dynamics (Buscemi 2025; Korf, Engeler and Hagmann 2010; Lubkemann 2008; Thiranagama 2011). Approaching warscapes conjuncturally serves two purposes. First, it apprehends the overarching but geographically uneven ways in which the legacies of colonial empires and their influence on postcolonial statebuilding shape contemporary civil wars. Second, it allows scholars to grasp the subtleties of local social dynamics in a warscape, including their immanent contradictions. Conjunctural analysis sees seeming paradoxes as an irreducible feature of the 'cramped spaces' (Povinelli 2016, as cited in Simpson, Atleo, and Braun 2024, 3) of the colonial present. The analyst's task is to trace and thus

'interrupt the interconnected forces and relations that produce its cramped spaces in the first place', so that other possibilities may emerge (Simpson, Atleo, and Braun 2024, 4).

Moreover, following an emphasis in conjunctural analysis on using seemingly peripheral sites as vantage points for critiquing received wisdom (Akhter 2022), this article focuses on civil war in Myanmar – a site described as 'forgotten' in the Anglophone conflict studies literature (Brenner and Han 2021). In 2021, the Myanmar military seized power after roughly a decade of Western-backed democratisation. After being met by violent crackdowns, widespread anti-military demonstrations morphed into a civil war between the Myanmar military and heterogeneous opposition forces. However, the post-2021 civil war in Myanmar is not a total rupture. It is layered upon longstanding grievances towards military rule, as evident in armed groups in borderland areas that have resisted the ethnocentric military-state for generations (Chambers and Saw Ner Dhu Da 2024; Stokke and Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2024).

Post-2021, the Myanmar civil war continues to confound observers as its battle-lines escape easy categorisation. In the past 4 years, some armed groups have moved between anti-military and more neutral positions, while anti-military armed groups have complex relationships with the overarching democracy movement – known as the Spring Revolution – and vary in their aspirations for territorial control. An important complicating factor is geography. The ongoing conflict is often described on a countrywide scale: the current UN Special Envoy to Myanmar, Julie Bishop, has, for example, declared that Myanmar as a whole is on 'the path to self-destruction' (UN News 2025). This makes sense by some measures: in the 4 years since the coup, 96% of Myanmar's townships have been affected by armed violence (IISS 2026). Yet, the civil war varies geographically in salient ways (see, e.g., Loong 2022; Thawnghmung and Moo Moo Paw 2024), due to long and uneven trajectories of colonisation, statebuilding, and resistance. With state control receding, southeast Myanmar – to be discussed in greater detail – has become uniquely associated with two processes that appear to pull in opposite directions: first, the persistence of ethnonational and inter-ethnic movements fighting to overthrow the military-state; and second, the rise of scam compounds integrated into transnational flows of illicit capital. How can this apparent paradox be squared or understood? Conceptual tools are required for making sense of the complex spatiality of war in Myanmar without lapsing into reductionism. Specifically, conjunctural analysis shows that seemingly contradictory forms of authority in southeast Myanmar are interconnected and not accidental.

In this context, this article maps a relational geography of the ongoing war as constituted by distinct but interconnected warscapes; each of which are conjunctures formed and potentially unsettled by diverse forces that converge and contradict. Furthermore, it considers Myanmar as an 'open (and

demanding) epistemological question' (Peck 2023, 461); demonstrating how scholars of civil war in other contexts can adopt conjunctural analysis as a way to recognise both the singularity of local landscapes of war – that is, warscapes – as well as the relational processes that constitute them, especially in postcolonial contexts characterised by contestations over the state and its legitimacy. This also allows scholars of 'peripheral' civil wars to take up calls to decolonise the study of war – a call that has so far been applied primarily to conflicts of obvious geopolitical import to the West (Jones 2025, 11).

This article proceeds in six more sections. Section Two explains how this article contributes to decolonial approaches to war – a literature that sees contemporary wars as related to historic strategies for building and securing empire. Arguing for a multi-scalar approach to postcolonial statebuilding, Section Three discusses how after formal decolonisation, statebuilders often professed enmity towards erstwhile colonisers while acting in imperialistic ways themselves while navigating a shifting global context. Section Four then argues for conceptualising warscapes as relational conjunctures, drawing from conjunctural approaches advanced by Gillian Hart and others. This extends existing literature on warscapes, which in privileging local conflict dynamics, can side-line how local conflict dynamics are bound up with social processes at other scales. Subsequent sections illuminate this conceptual framework from the vantage point of Myanmar. Section Five critiques dominant ways of knowing the war in Myanmar from a conjunctural perspective, namely the 'many against many' and 'us against them' narratives explained earlier. Then, Section Six analyses southeast Myanmar from a conjunctural perspective. I trace the existence of predatory capitalism on one hand, and inter-ethnic and progressive solidarity movements on the other, to contradictory currents set in motion via colonisation and postcolonial statebuilding. Finally, the article concludes with reflections on decolonising the study of civil war writ large.

Before proceeding: this article does not claim to provide a thorough analysis of conflict in Myanmar, only to illustrate the value of conjunctural analysis. It relies on secondary sources while being informed by stints of qualitative research in southeast Myanmar since 2016, such as an ethnographic project on resistance to postcolonial statebuilding and a collaborative project on illicit economies. I have also sought to engage with diverse scholars of and from Myanmar who could be cast as 'area studies' and not 'conflict studies' scholars – a strategy that Brenner (2024) proposed to challenge scholars' reductionist portrayals of the post-2021 civil war.

Decolonising (Civil) War

By approaching wars using concepts and definitions derived from European histories, scholars have created an epistemological divide between

'real' wars, fought between the regular armed forces of states, and other armed conflicts, designated to derivative categories, like civil wars, small wars, and insurgencies (Barkawi 2016). Whereas interstate wars have been understood according to grand historical processes, such as imperial rivalries, scholars have often relegated civil wars to an inherent feature of so-called 'failed' or 'fragile' states (Krause 2024; Mundy 2015). Whether traced to ethnic tensions, resource mismanagement, or governmental failures, contemporary civil wars have been framed as 'constituted by a pre-existing lack: the lack of statehood, of modernity, progress and crucially, of history' (Manchanda 2020, 14). These framings have had problematic implications beyond academia. In the 1990s, the concept of failed states began to dominate Western foreign policy. This has persisted despite extensive criticisms that the concept has done more to enforce Western hegemony, long after the formal collapse of colonial empires, than to redress conflict (Sen 2022; Woodward 2017).

In response, postcolonial and decolonial historians have challenged the interstate/civil war binary by understanding colonialism as a driver of war. Overall, their argument has been that colonial conquests and occupations have produced armed confrontations across the world. Although the forms of these confrontations vary, the vast geographical reach of colonial empires renders moot the distinction between civil and interstate wars. Historians trace episodes of 'civil' unrest to processes of imperialism and their after-effects across vast spatial registers, rather than factors internal to postcolonial states – which in any case became spatial units only as a result of boundary-drawing during European colonialism or in its aftermath.

Regarding South and Southeast Asia, this conclusion comes from research on three historical periods.[1] First, scholars portray colonial conquests as themselves wars between 'the West' and 'the rest', foregrounding the violence of colonial takeovers: 'the colonial situation itself was identical to war' (Hull 2005, 332). They also highlight the formidable challenges that peasant revolts posed to imperial orders, showing that colonial rule was not pre-given nor stable (Barkawi 2016; Guha 1983; Harper 2021). Second, scholars read World War II as an inter-imperial struggle, which contributed to the civil wars that later beset many postcolonial states. Eurocentric accounts of history have positioned WWII as a turning point; arguing that international laws formed in response to WWII allowed a world of peacefully coexisting postcolonial nation-states to emerge (Barkawi 2018). By contrast, to postcolonial and decolonial scholars, WWII was neither fought between nation-states nor did it arrive at a peaceful resolution. The British empire, for example, recruited colonised people classified as 'martial races' to the war effort (Barkawi 2017). This brought inter-ethnic tensions, already worsened during colonialism, to a head. This was the case in Burma, which the British annexed over three Anglo-Burmese wars (1824–26, 1852–1853, and 1885). For most of WWII, the

Chin, Kachin, and Karen fought against the Bamar majority, who fought for the Japanese. On the ground, inter-imperial and inter-communal violence were intertwined.

Third, scholars challenge accounts of formal decolonisation that frame it as a peaceful transfer of power between colonial rulers and occupied people. Colonial rulers did not gift former colonies independence; rather, anticolonial movements achieved independence by strategically waging war against Western empires (Thomas 2021). This framing draws attention to multi-scalar aspects of anticolonial struggles that had hitherto been overlooked, such as the lobbying of foreign governments (Thomas 2021, 66; see also Davies 2020; Drohan 2017; Harper 2021; Johnson 2016). Here, we return to problematising the interstate/civil war binary: wars of decolonisation were not 'local', but rather waged against far-reaching colonial empires and embedded in transcontinental networks (Aung and Campbell 2024; Davies 2020; Goswami 2012; Manela and Streets-Salter 2023; Walter 2017).

What do these historical accounts have to do with contemporary civil wars in the postcolonial world? Essentially, they expand the spatial and temporal frames through which scholars understand their provenance. Decolonising the study of civil war entails understanding that 'domestic' factors are not sufficient for understanding their causes, because they presume an obvious definition of what is 'domestic' to postcolonial states. Relatedly, it also requires understanding conflicts not as events attributable to causes in the recent past, but the outcome of power relations that layer and shift over generations. Indeed, postcolonial states are not stable entities, but efforts to conjure a sense of shared destiny out of polities at once thrown together and divided by colonial empires. As such, postcolonial statebuilding is an uneven, violent, and contested process, in which the violent social relations forged during colonialism persist and morph (Baruah 2007; Callahan 2003; Chatterjee 1993; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Krishna 1994). Importantly, postcolonial statebuilding has persisted long after the formal end of colonial empires, intersecting with contemporaneous social processes to create variegated but interconnected geographies of war.

The Multi-Scalar Geographies of Postcolonial Statebuilding

Rather than conceiving of it as confined to the formal institutions of a newly independent state, postcolonial statebuilding is constituted by and unfolds across multiple scales, taking shape through militarisation and ideological domination in internal peripheries and within wider geopolitical currents that shape how new states imagine their place in the world. It is embedded in local, regional, and global dynamics. Furthermore, postcolonial statebuilding is resolutely *postcolonial* as actors seeking to project 'stateness' often construct themselves as a foil for foregone colonisers but reproduce

exclusionary and imperial logics in practice (e.g. Kanjwal 2023; Kratoska, Raben, and Nordholt 2005, 3–4; Manchanda and Turner 2024; Misra 2011, 9; Shah 2024).

This is clear in Myanmar, where postcolonial statebuilding produced 'the most durable incarnation of military rule in history' (Callahan 2002, 3). Burma/Myanmar[2] has undergone extended periods of junta rule (1958–1960, 1962–1988, 1988–1997, 1997–2011, 2021–present) and shorter periods of civilian rule, in which the military played a significant role in politics (1948–1958, 1960–1962, 2011–2021). The Burmese military traces its roots to the Burma Independence Army, raised by Japan in 1942 and driven by enmity towards colonial rule (Connelly and Loong 2024, 33). In steering Burma/Myanmar's transition from colony to nation-state after independence in 1948, the military weaponised its opposition to colonial rule as well as a shifting global context to consolidate power with disastrous consequences for marginal people and places. This manifested, for one, in military expansion. In response to wider geopolitical shifts between 1948 and 1962, not only did the Burmese military transform from a piecemeal force of 5,000 to standing army of 100,000, it also morphed from an institution of 'war fighters into state builders' (Callahan 2003, 173–4). In a region squeezed by the Cold War, the military professed non-alignment, its stance shaped by antipathy towards both British and Japanese imperialism. It was vexed by US-backed Chinese nationalist forces (Kuomintang), which began occupying the northeast in the early 1950s after being pushed out of China, and the possibility that the Kuomintang might provoke invasion by the People's Republic of China (ibid., 154–159). This global and regional context became a pretext for expanding the military's control over broad policy objectives, culminating in the 1958–1960 military 'caretaker government' and General Ne Win's definitive coup in 1962.

The military also consolidated the paranoid and ethnocentric ideology buttressing postcolonial statebuilding (Selth 2021; Tun Myint 2025; Ye Phone Kyaw 2020). As Saw Eh Htoo and Waters (2024) show, during his 26-year dictatorship, Ne Win imagined Burmanization – the enforced dominance of the Bamar-Buddhist military class – as his expression of anticolonialism adapted to the Cold War.[3] Disregarding evidence to the contrary, Ne Win asserted that Burma had been 'one race' before the British arrived and sought to restore Burma to its precolonial unity (ibid.,134). And inspired by psychological warfare strategies learned from other Cold War counterinsurgency campaigns, Ne Win hired historians and philosophers to consolidate and institutionalise Bamarization (ibid., 90–99). Burmanization remains a linchpin of Burmese military rule today. More than that, it is also an expression of postcolonial statebuilders' tendencies to construct exclusionary and imperialistic narratives to justify their rule, contradicting their professed anticolonialism (see also Aung and Campbell 2024, 12; Kanjwal 2023; Sioh 2010).

Still, postcolonial statebuilding is not a finished project; rather, it reinforces and transforms a dialectic, set in motion during British rule, between centre and margins (Loong 2026). Myanmar's margins are targets of immense state violence yet also incubate resistance to statebuilding – primarily through multigenerational ethnonational movements that resist military rule, authoritarianism, and Burmanization. These movements are often traced to spatial and ethnic inequalities produced during colonial rule.[4] Broadly, the British divided British Burma into Bamar-majority lowlands, where the colonial state dismantled previous political structures, and highlands, where forms of precolonial rule were accommodated (Callahan 2002; Smith 1999, 40–42; McCarthy 2023). Lowland Bamar people – who experienced the brunt of colonial repression – led the fiercest forms of anticolonial resistance. Colonial rule thus sowed the seeds for inter-ethnic antagonisms, culminating in communal violence after World War II (Bowser 2025; Callahan 2002; Smith 1999, 110–115), which itself engendered and hardened ethnic antagonisms (Ikeda 2025; Prasse-Freeman 2023; Saha 2022). After independence, postcolonial statebuilding fuelled domination and resistance along similar tracks. In its counterinsurgency campaigns, the military continued portraying minorities as colonial sympathisers and itself as the only institution capable of defending state sovereignty against these purportedly imperialistic incursions (Saw Eh Htoo and Waters 2024). In response, ethnonational movements formed and persisted, staying true to a broadly nationalistic framing while adapting to shifting local and global contexts.

I return to this point – the colonial and postcolonial emergence of ethnonationalism as a vector for resistance to statebuilding – later. For now, it is worth noting that in 1949, the Karen National Union took up arms – the first ethnonational group to do so. More than 20 others have rebelled against the military-state since, keeping most borderlands beyond the reach of the central state. These self-same groups have been key to the post-2021 civil war, training fighters, supplying arms, and governing revolutionary territories.

In sum, postcolonial statebuilding is a continual and evolving process characterised by the continuation of colonial logics into the post-independence era, despite its statebuilders' oft-professed anticolonialism. In Myanmar, postcolonial statebuilding has shaped armed conflicts across scales. On the one hand, armed violence is intertwined with global and regional power relations extending far beyond Myanmar's borders. On the other, it has produced highly localised conflict dynamics, shaped by the bipartite system of governance introduced during colonial rule and other forces of 'divide and rule', which will be excavated later. Returning to the line of critique advanced by postcolonial and decolonial historians, armed conflict in Myanmar was never 'domestic' but shaped by multi-scalar forces that have reverberated both in the consolidation of the postcolonial military-state at the

centre and varied forms of (ethnonational) resistance at Myanmar's margins. I argue that applied to the study of civil wars, conjunctural analysis allows us to untangle both the influence of wide-ranging processes on contemporary conflict dynamics as well as their localised manifestations, holding both in equal tension.

Warscapes as Relational Conjunctures

In pursuing a decolonial approach to civil war, this article deploys a conjunctural approach. Specifically, it conceptualises warscapes – a term used by anthropologists and geographers to refer to localised spaces of armed conflict – as relational conjunctures. I see warscapes as the outcome of a constellation of dynamic social relations that intersect across spaces and scales, which produce each warscape as distinct but internally contradictory. My use of 'localised' does not prescribe a specific type of space, but serves rather as a suggestion that scholars of civil war tune into units of analysis finer than the nation-state while reflexively questioning the boundaries of these units (e.g. Gonzalez-Vicente 2020; Mac Ginty 2015).

In geography, conjunctural analysis is often associated with Gillian Hart (Hart 2006, 2018). Far-reaching in scale, Hart's work attends to both specificities and interconnections between sites in her efforts to animate the 'limits and fragilities of spatially uneven capitalist development – limits and fragilities that cannot be read of a universal, abstract logic of capital . . . [but as] inextricably linked with situated material practices' (Hart 2002, 818). For example, Hart's recent work has focused on South Africa, India, and the US. Across these sites, she traces contemporary social divides to a series of global conjunctures: racialised imperial rule in the 19th century, the intensification of religious nationalisms worldwide in the interwar years, and the rise of Cold War capitalism thereafter (Hart 2023, 155–6). Hart seeks not only to see sites as manifestations of global processes but rather as places where the contradictions inherent in these processes come to a head in distinct ways, allowing for their potential unmaking and remaking. In so doing, Hart argues against a tendency among theorists to gloss over the distinctiveness of specific parts and the interconnections between them in favour of deducing an encompassing process. Her work attends to both parts and wholes, their mutual constitution but also the irreducible tensions between them.

Conjunctural analysis has surged in human geography in the past decade. Recent scholarship applies it most often to national economies and urban politics (e.g. Dixon et al. 2023; Peck 2023; Thompson et al 2025; Woolston and Mitchell 2024). Throughout, scholars have sought to clarify an approach that has been described as slippery and elusive, 'more of an art than a science' (Dixon et al. 2023, 1209). They have debated, for example, the extent to which conjunctural analysis should be systematised

and its distinctiveness from other critical geographical methodologies. This article is less concerned about excavating conjunctural analysis itself, than elucidating its relevance to ongoing debates about decolonising war, especially with regard to civil wars that are often *not* placed centre stage by dominant geopolitical actors. As Akhter (2022, 1445–6) puts it, conjunctural analysis is 'fertile' for thinking through 'the politics of the periphery at all scales' – not just sites or events with obvious global import. He and other scholars of postcolonial statebuilding emphasise that metropoles and colonies, cores and peripheries, are dialectically and mutually constituted (see also Aung Naing 2024; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Krishna 1994; Rajaram 2015).

Therefore, this article takes on three tasks by applying conjunctural analysis to ethnographers' concept of the warscape. First, I add to scholarship that analyses global peripheries through a conjunctural lens, Myanmar being one of many conflicts at the fringes of Western scholarship and media coverage (Brenner and Han 2021). Second, I 'downscale' conjunctural analysis, showing its applicability to analysing local landscapes of war – a finer scale than the globe or the nation-state. And third, I contribute to a broader conversation about the utility of conjunctural analysis in examining the legacies of empire, including the ambivalences these legacies can produce. Resistance to colonialism's legacies takes place on empire's tricky terrain, resulting in actors grappling with the 'always already compromised "now" of the colonial present' in tangled, tricky ways (Simpson, Atleo, and Braun 2024, 17).

United by a desire to understand war from the perspectives of those who live through it, ethnographers conceptualised the warscape. The term 'warscape' was inaugurated by Nordstrom (1997), who riffed on Appadurai's use of '–scapes' to grasp the interconnected but fragmented spaces produced by globalisation. For Nordstrom and others, warscapes were a critique of methodological statism: they saw that by taking, for example, the 'Myanmar civil war' as a unit of analysis, scholars risked 'mistaking the national stage across which political and military struggle is waged for the sociocultural stages upon which other struggles – gendered, generational, and otherwise – are constituted and conducted' (Lubkemann 2008, 27). Their argument has been that experiences of war are traversed by emergent categories of social difference that vary in each locality and become visible only when scholars downsize their scales of analysis (e.g. Hromadžić 2022; Utas 2005; Wouters 2018). The goal is ethnographic investigation that 'neither normalises nor romanticises war', but rather recognises 'the way in which war is lived by those with no available exits' (Khayyat 2022, 7). For Khayyat (2022, 14) and others drawing on their own experiences in wartime, this is a decolonial move: recognising war's ordinariness positions it as part of the 'normal' workings of (post)colonial capitalism and the nation-state (see also Han 2021; Maunaguru 2019; Thiranagama 2011).

The warscape concept has been further developed by geographers who show how local landscapes of war are produced at the intersection of multiple 'governable orders', each a social figuration of power, norms and rules (Buscemi 2025; Korf, Engeler, and Hagmann 2010). Their analysis portrays warscapes as 'differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories coexist' (Korf, Engeler, and Hagmann 2010, 386). Focusing on eastern Sri Lanka (1999–2003), Korf, Engeler and Hagmann identified four coexisting governable orders: the first three were imposed by the state, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and security forces respectively; the fourth referred to norms of caste, religion, and class (2010, 393). These orders shifted, expanding and retracting according to the outcomes of battle, but also the time of day, producing localised wartime experiences. Geographers advance ethnographers' contributions by drawing out the ways in which warscapes are produced by multiple power relations that, while wide-ranging, morph and intersect to produce local particularities. I argue that conceptualising warscapes as relational conjunctures pushes this literature further in two ways that contribute to the overall task of charting a decolonial approach to civil wars.

First, I expand the spatial and temporal scales at which warscapes are analysed, drawing attention to how sweeping processes of colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding intersect with other social processes to produce varied and localised experiences of civil war. I follow conjunctural analysis' drive to 'historicize through the contested present', showing its constitution by 'multiple spatialities' and 'tangled temporalities' (Dixon et al. 2023, 1209). This answers calls to decolonise war by rejecting the state-centrism implied in studies of civil war in two moves: on one hand, positioning contemporary conflicts within the transnational field of colonialism and postcolonial imperialisms; and on the other hand, disentangling conflict dynamics within localities not defined by the boundaries of the nation-state.

Second, conjunctural analysis highlights tensions and contradictions within sites, produced by frictions between the disparate social processes that converge on them (Hart 2018). My approach therefore draws attention to warscapes as sites not only of convergence but also of contradiction – including contradictions internal to movements challenging the legacies of colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding. My aim is not to discredit resistance movements, but rather to understand the challenges that they navigate in pursuing decolonial futures in an already compromised colonial present (Simpson, Atleo, and Braun 2024). Myanmar's Spring Revolution occurs on historical terrain shaped already by colonialism and its antecedents; social processes that have seeped into everyday social relations and 'fragmented' them, long before 'fragmentation' was deemed an element of the post-2021 civil war. Importantly, this approach sees site-specific contradictions as inevitable parts of the colonial-capitalist 'now'. Furthermore, in line with conjunctural

analysis, contradictions within each warscape hold immanent possibilities for unmaking and change, which can spiral out to shift wider-scale conflict dynamics. It is from within these contradictions that continual struggles against the colonial present evolve and persist.

Narratives of Civil War in Post-Coup Myanmar

This section briefly critiques two narratives about the post-2021 conflict in Myanmar – what I introduced as the 'us versus them' and 'many against many' narratives. This shows the need for a conjunctural approach to warscapes in Myanmar and in other postcolonial civil wars subject to similarly reductionist narrativising. I argue that both state-centric narratives disavow how contemporary civil wars are linked to broader historical and political processes, reflecting a general tendency towards the 'de-internationalization' of understandings of civil wars (Mundy 2015). In this, Myanmar is unexceptional: since the Cold War, the causation of civil wars has been 'hypothesized in ways that limited or excluded the role of outside forces *a priori*' (Mundy 2015, 11; see also Andrä 2022; Duffield 2007; Goodhand 2002; Manchanda 2020).

Early on 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military arrested president Win Myint and state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, hours before Myanmar's new parliament was to open. Three months before, the National League for Democracy (NLD) had won their second election. The coup concluded a decade of so-called 'democratization'. This period had been characterised by hope in Myanmar's urban centres, where people enacted unprecedented, if limited, freedoms of expression and association.[5] Yet it was met with ambivalence in Myanmar's peripheries (Bertrand, A Pelletier, and Thawnghmung 2023; Faxon 2023; Kyed 2022; Wittekind 2018). People there, often ethnic minorities, navigated an uncertain and eventually deadlocked peace process, as well as increasingly prevalent land seizures (Mark 2023; Naing 2024). There was intense counterinsurgency violence for groups that refused the peace table, and for Rohingya, a genocide that drove 700,000 into Bangladesh (Connelly and Loong 2024, 13–19). In 2021, resistance to the coup appeared to unite people in their desire for democratic rule, tentatively creating relations of solidarity across old divides between centre and periphery (Loong 2021). In days, hundreds of thousands were protesting as part of the Spring Revolution. Protesters continued even when the junta fired on them and soon took up arms in self-defence. In forming new armed groups or joining older ethnonational groups, erstwhile demonstrators battled the military on various fronts while persisting with other, non-violent strategies of resistance (see Htet Lynn Oo 2024; Stokke and Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2024).

The junta's crackdowns thus evolved into a civil war between the Myanmar military and various opposition forces – some professing to be part of the Spring Revolution, others fighting the military independently.[6]

The ongoing conflict is complex on several fronts. First, *spatially*: although the war now affects most of the country (see IISS 2026), its geography is dynamic. Broadly, in borderlands, the fight against the military is led by ethnonational fronts established pre-coup to challenge Burmanization.[7] In central areas, the fight is led by People's Defence Forces (PDFs) formed by Bamar leaders after the 2021 coup. These groups have varied and changing relationships with one another (Brenner 2025; Vrieze 2023). Second, *temporally*: the plethora of actors fighting the military begs the question of when 'the war' began. Many ethnonational fronts are decades-old, while Bamar-led PDFs formed after the coup. Hence it is oft said that while conflict has been a feature of Myanmar's ethnic minority borderlands for generations, those in Myanmar's central, Bamar-Buddhist 'heartland' have not experienced widespread armed violence for up to five decades. But even this sharp distinction belies the military's long-term mistreatment of peasants in central Myanmar, creating a 'tinderbox' that ignited after the coup (Callahan 2022; see also Thawnghmung 2003). Third, regarding *actors*, whereas Myanmar's ethnonational fronts are generally well established, the question of how many PDFs are fighting the military is difficult to answer, with one report admitting the 'near impossibility of tracking the excessive number of groups' (Berezini 2025, 51). Overall, the picture is of a civil war that is both complex and dynamic; continually eluding the analyst's grasp.

Difficulties in grappling with this complexity are reflected in divergent narratives of the civil war produced by media outlets and think-tanks, which have tended towards two tracks: 'us versus them' and 'many against many'. The first offers a binary view of the war: a unified resistance coalition, comprising EAOs and PDFs, fighting the military regime. Dominant in the first 2 years after the coup, this track is exemplified by a report published by the Special Advisory Council – Myanmar (SAC-M), founded by three former UN officials. Controversial but widely circulated, the 2022 report proposed that the junta's control of territory was receding, and that conversely, 'resistance forces and organisations [were] now the *de facto* authorities in the majority of the territory of Myanmar' (SAC-M 2022, 16). Second, since 2024, analysts have increasingly adopted a 'many against many' view, emphasising fragmentation within the resistance. In this view, resistance forces, which are consolidating control in the country's peripheries, are seeking to establish autonomous statelets, rather than contributing to a new Myanmar writ large. In these portrayals, resistance forces may not be actively clashing with one another, but they are nevertheless mistrustful of one another and wary of unification. An International Crisis Group (2024) report, for example, asks the international community to consider 'growing fragmentation' in Myanmar (see also Pedersen 2024).

One way to understand this divergence is to see both narratives as two sides of the same postcolonial coin; manifestations of how colonialism and post-colonial statebuilding shape geographies of power in contradictory ways. These processes produce both centripetal forces of solidarity against the military-state, as well as centrifugal forces that create divides within the resistance. Indeed, both 'us versus them' and 'many against many' narratives take the postcolonial state for granted. The former understates the extent to which differences between resistance forces were shaped by divide-and-rule policies pursued first by the British, then by the postcolonial military-state. Both actors have pursued both unification *and* division. Conversely, the 'many against many' track emphasises frictions between resistance groups without contextualising them historically. 'Fragmentation' implies a whole that was later broken up into parts; a misreading of the dialectical relationship between the centre and its margins that has characterised Myanmar since colonisation (Loong 2026). Although the centre has long and often forcefully sought to pacify the margins, people there have long resisted this process, all the while navigating the centre's efforts to divide these forces of opposition. What presents as fragmentation is in fact relationally produced differentiation.

This leads us to the need to understand the Myanmar civil war using analytical units other than the nation-state, such as the warscape. Because the spatiality and temporality of war varies across Myanmar, state-centric analyses lead to an impasse: those pointing towards coordinated resistance forces in one area are criticised for ignoring division elsewhere; conversely, those pointing towards division are criticised for ignoring forces of unity. My point is that it is *both-and* and that approaching warscapes as relational conjunctures clarifies this dynamic.

A Conjunctural Analysis of Southeast Myanmar

To illustrate a conjunctural approach to warscapes, I analyse southeast Myanmar, near the Thai border. I focus on areas shaped by the multigenerational Karen ethnonational movement, while contextualising this movement – and its role in local conflict dynamics – within the intersections between colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding and other multi-scalar social processes. As mentioned, this approach attends to: (1) how local landscapes of war are constituted by multiple spatialities and temporalities; (2) how the tension between these convergent processes produce both contradictions – but also immanent possibilities for solidarity.

Two seemingly paradoxical features of southeast Myanmar together distinguish this warscape from other parts of the country. First, there is a remarkable convergence between ethnic, democratic, and revolutionary politics. Myanmar's oldest ethnonational group, the Karen National Union (KNU), is also a leader in the Spring Revolution. The organisation has sheltered

democracy activists, trained them as fighters, and built administrative systems positioned as building blocks for a future civilian-led state. These actions continue a historical trajectory in which the KNU has incubated numerous forms of inter-ethnic solidarity against the military-state (Loong 2021). Second, southeast Myanmar has hosted transnational criminal networks profiteering from cyber scam compounds since the coup, infamous for extreme forms of coercion inflicted on workers, both trafficked from afar and local to the area. Scam centres, which have flourished in areas controlled by other armed groups, especially the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF), have been internationally decried as a 'cancer' for their seemingly unstoppable spread across the borderland since 2021 (Al Jazeera 2025). They have also been decried by revolutionary actors in Myanmar.

Hence, seemingly contradictory forms of rule coexist in areas of southeast Myanmar where junta rule has been unsettled. The KNU controls significant territories (Institute for Strategy and Policy 2025). These areas are subject to brutal counterinsurgency violence, especially aerial attacks, by the junta. However, the Karen BGF and other armed groups associated with illicit economies have built up islands of control mostly spared state violence. The coexistence of these divergent forms of rule poses an apparent paradox. How can forms of predatory capitalism, exemplified by the scam centres, exist adjacent to areas incubating democratic and progressive politics? A conjunctural approach sees these tensions as resulting from frictions between colonial and postcolonial social processes, which have resulted in immanent tensions within Karen ethnonational movement. What appear as opposites are historically interconnected.

Ethnonationalism and Inter-Ethnic Solidarity

Ethnonationalism and the democratic revolution – both associated with southeast Myanmar today – were not pre-given, but the outcome of historical processes set in motion during colonisation. The British colonised Burma over three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824–26, 1852–53, 1885), with most of the territory to the southeast annexed by the second. The southeast was administered as the easternmost flank of British India, bordered by Persia to the west and Siam to the east, until 1937. Thereafter, Burma became a separate colony up to independence in 1948 (Dalrymple 2025). Colonisation thus subsumed Burma under British efforts to build empire; a frame significant to this story for three reasons.

First, British Burma was primarily an 'administrative appendage to India' and not a priority in imperial policy (Callahan 2002, 514). The forms of colonial rule it experienced were not adapted to the local context. Instead, Burma was governed from India and according to administrative norms developed there, 'determined and defined by the logic of racialised colonial-

capitalism' (Noor 2016, 185; Aung and Campbell 2024; Saha 2022). In practice, this meant that racialised notions of ethnicity were imposed on society, such as in censuses that grouped separate but interrelated linguistic groups in the southeast as 'Karen-Karenni' and later as 'Karen' (Cheesman 2002, 303; Ferguson 2015). These ethnic categorisations shaped the colonial administration (Callahan 2003, 35). By 1920, Karen, Kachin, and Chin ethnic groups were preferentially recruited the armed forces; Bamar effectively banned (Callahan 2003). Soon, these forces were putting down Bamar-led anticolonial uprisings at least once a year (Callahan 2003, 30).

Second, anticolonial uprisings gained traction from the 1920s onwards. In this period leading up to Burmese independence in 1948, as the British began to concede that formal decolonisation would be inevitable, ethnic categorisations transformed and hardened into inter-ethnic antagonisms. According to Bowser (2025), this was because the British sought to contain revolutionary sentiments emerging across the populace by redirecting them along ethnonationalist lines, resulting in the lasting potency of ethnonational movements across the lands it once sought to pacify. The British preferred a decolonised world fragmented in a way that obstructed cross-class and cross-ethnic solidarities over the emergence of a more cosmopolitan and inclusive anticolonial revolution, so as to maintain dominance in the world economy even after former colonies achieved independence (see also Dalrymple 2025; Ikeda 2025). Ethnonational sentiment – which has both been weaponised by the Burmese military-state against minorities, and adopted as an organising principle of resistance against the military – was not pre-given but emerged in the context of empire and racial capitalism. It left lasting legacies on the postcolonial Burmese state, which emerged out of a xenophobic anticolonial movement centred around defending Bamar-Buddhist identity from foreign interference (Bowser 2025; Saha 2022).

Third, the border between British India and Siam – today's Thai-Myanmar border – was delineated during colonial times. Before colonisation, Siam and Burma had been arch-rivals; the forests and mountains between them inhabited by people not fully incorporated into monarchic orders on either side (Gravers 2007; Winichakul 1994). Post-independence, the delineated border – while largely porous in practice (Banki 2025) – was consequential for the persistence of Karen ethnonationalism and its convergence with Burmese democracy movements. After taking up arms in 1949, the KNU established strongholds in the Thai-Burma borderland, in a territory it called Kawthoolei. During the Cold War, from 1962 to 1988, while Burma was isolated under Ne Win's dictatorship, taxes from the illicit cross-border trade buttressed the KNU's efforts to put an 'alternative vision of Karen society' into practice (Smith 1999, 283–4). It helped that because Thailand was US-aligned and saw Thailand as a buffer between itself and Ne Win's Burma, it tolerated the KNU's presence and left the border 'virtually unguarded' (299). Moreover,

from 1988, when pro-democracy activists escaped to KNU areas after crack-downs on mass demonstrations, these areas facilitated alliances between Bamar pro-democracy exiles, ethnonationalist leaders, and other opposition groups. For example, the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) formed in November 1988 (407). These alliances attracted foreign activists and sympathisers, who transformed Manerplaw into Burma's second centre of politics after Rangoon (442), shaping Burmese politics long after 1995, when the fall of the KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw forced opposition movements into exile in Thailand (Olivius and Hedström 2025). Scholars have called the borderland 'a dynamic space where oppositional politics flourished' (Olivius and Hedström 2025, 330) – referring to how KNU-areas became hubs for inter-ethnic solidarity.

Still, these alliances have been not been perfectly harmonious – and in understanding these points of friction, their *inter-ethnic* nature has been key (see Smith 1999, 443–4). As I have shown, challenges to the Burmese military-state emerged from a colonial society deeply militarised and divided along ethnic lines. This has created a quandary for the KNU: while reaching outward from southeast Myanmar to build alliances and adapting to a changing global context, it has also sought to stay true to the ethnonationalist lens through which its struggle against the military state was first refracted. Such tensions have surfaced throughout the KNU's history. For instance, Smith (1999, 444) documented the emergence of 'resentment' between the KNU and other DAB members, as Bamar exiles received more international attention than their Karen hosts. Since the 2021 coup, although the KNU has been at the forefront of the Spring Revolution, scholars attest to scepticism within the organisation towards cooperation with Bamar revolutionaries, borne out of negative experiences with Bamar democracy leaders in the past (e.g. Brenner 2025, 6; Medail and Saw Chit Thet Tun 2024; Vrieze 2023).[8]

I argue that these points of friction reflect that KNU and the Burmese military-state both emerged out of colonial experiences, resulting in a postcolonial state deeply militarised and divided along ethnic lines. It is possible to acknowledge *both-and*: that the KNU seeks countrywide solidarity in overthrowing military rule and that it strives to onto ethnonationalist goals while doing so, even if these goals might come into competition.[9] My task is not to reconcile these contradictions but to understand how they have come to be and how they manifest in a particular warscape.

Predatory Capitalism, Scam Centres, and the 'Fragmentation' Of Revolution

The long history of colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding, and their attendant internal contradictions, also sheds light on the meteoric rise of scam centres in southeast Myanmar. From this perspective, opposition to military rule is not fragmenting – a trajectory that assumes a prior unity –

but is rather facing internal challenges set in motion before Burma/Myanmar was considered an independent polity.

The Karen ethnonational movement has endured several splinters in its seven-decade history, giving rise to various groups breaking away from the KNU, including the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF).10 Today, Karen BGF is infamous for profiteering from the scam centre boom. Since 2017, and especially since the 2021 coup, Chinese criminal capital has created more than 20 scam compounds in BGF-controlled areas – spaces akin to gated cities within which tens of thousands of workers, often trafficked, perpetrate online scams, generating more than US$15 billion annually (United States Institute of Peace 2024). The BGF has accumulated substantial wealth from this criminalised economy, such as by leasing land to Chinese mafias (author et al. under review). I argue that these events developed at the intersections between postcolonial statebuilding and other multi-scalar social processes, such as mutations in global capitalism and fluctuating efforts to manage (or not) the Thai-Myanmar border. In other words, the predatory capitalism exemplified by the BGF is the obverse of many of the social processes documented earlier, which have afforded the KNU a central position in Myanmar's struggle for democracy. There are two sides of the same (post)colonial coin, coexistent and irreconcilable, so long as postcolonial statebuilding persists.

The Karen BGF is the product of divisions within the Karen ethnonational movement: in 1994, 3,000 KNU soldiers formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA); in 2009, the DKBA became the Karen BGF when it assented to becoming a Myanmar military-controlled militia. This cleavage belies various long-term social processes that have resulted both in the rise of Karen ethnonationalism and tensions within, resulting in the BGF's leader, Saw Chit Thu, breaking away from the larger movement. Indeed, the Karen ethnonational movement has never been monolithic: the KNU's leaders have debated – and at times been divided over – the organisation's political ideology, as well as its stance towards the central Burmese government and the international community (Brenner 2025; Garbagni and Walton 2019; Smith 1999, 150–172). In a way, this is unsurprising: Karen are heterogeneous, comprising multiple languages and religions (Chambers 2024; Cho 2011; Ikeda 2025; Thawnghmung 2012). However, the dominance of Christian Karen in the KNU over mainly Buddhist rank-and-file – key to the 1994 split – can be traced to British colonisation.

Religion had been a dividing line within the population designated as Karen since the 19th century, when Christian Karen benefitted from missionary education and colonial job opportunities less accessible to Buddhist and animist Karen. This caused Christian Karen to dominate the ethnonational elite; their education and social capital putting them at 'considerable social, political, and cultural distance' from the rest of the predominantly rural Karen

population (Fujimura 2022; Gravers 2007, 242). Yet, these factors also afforded them the ability to organise a successful ethnonational movement at a historical conjuncture when struggles for autonomy in the British empire were being articulated along ethnonational lines. The BGF's formation is explained in more detail elsewhere with due attention to the KNU's internal politics (Brenner 2018; Watanabe 2025). My point is that these internal power struggles, and the role of religion therein, ran along tracks laid long ago.

Multi-scalar transformations in political economy are also integral to the Karen BGF's rise and its associations with predatory capitalism. Besides religious divides, the BGF's origins can also be traced to geopolitical and geo-economic shifts in the 1990s. Economic liberalisation in Myanmar and post-Cold War realignments caused the Thai government, eager to tap into natural resources, to seek friendlier relations with the Burmese junta. Resultantly, the illicit cross-border trade became far less lucrative for the KNU. This forced a wedge between KNU leaders who prioritised business interests and those who subsumed them under ethnonational goals – another factor in the afore-mentioned split (Brenner 2019). Since then, mutations in global capitalism have intersected with these earlier developments to transform southeast Myanmar into 'the latest frontier of predatory capitalism', exemplified by the scam centres in BGF-controlled areas (Franceschini, Li, and Bo 2023, 595). Pinkaew Laungaramsri (2025) has traced scam centres to the movement of Chinese flexible capital (following Camba 2020): a type of capital that, in seeking to overcome China's overaccumulation crisis, has sought to elude the Chinese state's constraints in novel ways. Her approach positions the scam centres as an outcome of social processes that interweave spatially and temporally. Spatially, southeast Myanmar's scam centres are but one instantiation of a transnational criminalised economy that has grown across southeast Asia because of convergent interests between flexible Chinese capital and local non-state power-holders – in this case, the BGF.[11] Temporally, Laungaramsri (2025, 2) sees the scam centres as part of Myanmar's colonial and postcolonial history: once at the fringes of the British empire, the area 'remains an anarchist terrain and non-state space, but its inhabitants have shifted' from ethnonational movements and embattled minorities to Chinese syndicates and trafficked workers.

Finally, the postcolonial military-state has itself facilitated predatory capitalism in seeking to bring areas peripheral to empire under its control through intermediaries such as the Karen BGF. Today, BGF-controlled scam centres have been spared the counterinsurgency violence that has beset most of Myanmar since the coup, in part because of an evolving pact between the BGF and the Myanmar military. In 2009, in exchange for formally coming under the military's chain of command, the BGF was allowed to run criminalised businesses with impunity. Although Saw Chit Thu renounced his overt alignment with the military in 2024, renaming his group the Karen National Army, analysts suspect that he did so

primarily to appease Karen foot soldiers who did not want to fight Karen armed groups aligned with pro-democracy movement (Saw Say Gay and Fen 2024). Little changed in practice, as the BGF had vacillated towards the military from the outset (Watanabe 2025). Set in the context of southeast Myanmar's colonial and post-colonial history, one might say that the military-state has struggled to transform the border line, inherited from the British empire, into a zone of *de facto* state control. Resultantly, the military-state has employed the BGF as a power broker in efforts to control the frontier, delegating its putative monopoly over violence to the organisation, while affording it opportunities to act with relative autonomy, especially in the realm of capital accumulation (ibid.). Thus predatory capitalism in BGF areas has resulted, too, from the military-state's fraught efforts to enforce the colonial border-line, which here converge with its interests in weakening and so containing the Karen ethnonational movement.

While scam centres have mushroomed across southeast Myanmar since the coup, they are largely confined to areas controlled by the BGF and a few smaller Karen armed groups – which is to say that KNU-controlled areas have mostly been exempt.[12] The question is how such spaces, associated with predatory capitalism on one hand and democratic revolution on the other, exist in close proximity. I argue that this does not testify to the 'fragmentation' of revolutionary spaces in Myanmar, which presumes that the Spring Revolution was a unitary whole to begin with, but rather to how centrifugal forces unleashed during colonisation have overlapped with other social processes. Colonisation and postcolonial statebuilding resulted in a militarised and ethnicised society, providing the context within which various ethnonational and inter-ethnic movements have emerged to challenge the military-state. Simultaneously, colonisation and postcolonial statebuilding have resulted in immanent tensions within efforts at solidarity, along religious lines and for political economic reasons. I say this not to discredit the Karen ethnonational movement or the Spring Revolution, but to position their inherently imperfect efforts to challenge the military-state as *already an achievement* considering the existence of counter-revolutionary currents set in motion long ago.

Discussion and Conclusion: Myanmar and the World

Analyses of the post-2021 civil war in Myanmar have often taken one of two state-centric paths: what I called 'us versus them' and 'many versus many' narratives of civil war. These narratives reflect overarching tendencies towards 'de-internationalization and endogenization' in the production of Western knowledge about civil wars (Mundy 2015, 11); tendencies that obscure the spatially and temporally extensive processes that relegate armed violence to areas often coextensive with peripheries of the formerly colonised world (Duffield 2007). Collectively, scholars calling for decolonising the study of war ask us to treat insurgencies as significant forces in world politics, while attending to colonial legacies in contemporary wars and the ways in armed

violence shapes everyday social and political life (e.g. Al-Bulushi 2025; Barkawi 2016; Jones 2025; Khayyat 2022; Sen 2022). They propose a multi-scalar approach to conflicts that rejects epistemological statism.

To this conversation, I conceptualise warscapes as relational conjunctures, hoping to offer a decolonial approach to wars considered 'civil' or internal to contemporary nation-states. The idea of warscapes, first conceptualised by ethnographers, foregrounds the need for research on war to be guided by spatial categories that resonate with those who experience it. From this perspective, civil wars are constituted by multiple, overlapping, and interrelated local landscapes of war. Conjunctural approaches, popularised in human geography in the past decade, offer a means of understanding warscapes as formed at the intersections between social processes that span spatial and temporal scales. These approaches also train our attention on the immanent contradictions that play out in the lives of warscape inhabitants, seeking not to reconcile these but to understand how such contradictions are produced in the first place. In so doing, I have sought to contribute to how conjunctural analysis applies to understandings of peripheries at various scales (Akhter 2022): not only is Myanmar is marginalised in global politics, southeast Myanmar has been regularly subject to the colonial and postcolonial states' efforts to extend control over their peripheries (Aung Naing 2024; Loong 2021). And to the warscapes literature (e.g. Korf, Engeler, and Hagmann 2010; Lubkemann 2008), I propose highlighting the presence of tensions and contradictions within each site, and then seeking to understand them as produced by converging social processes that interweave across space and time. This allows us to apprehend how colonialism and postcolonial state-building overlap with other social processes to produce contemporary conflicts that manifest in highly localised ways.

I illustrated this approach by showing how tensions internal to the struggle for Karen ethnonationalism have shaped the production of space throughout southeast Myanmar, producing a seemingly Janus-faced warscape. Since the 2021 coup, spaces beyond junta control in southeast Myanmar have sustained both the democratic revolution and illicit capital accumulation. Situating these developments within a longer time horizon positions them both as outcomes of the intersections between (post)colonial statebuilding and multi-scalar social processes. In Burma, British colonisation caused postcolonial statebuilding as well as resistance to the military-state to be articulated along ethnonational lines. As the Karen ethnonational movement strove for an anti-military and pro-democracy stance, it had to manage an inherent tension between aspirations to build solidarity across ethnic lines and aspirations to unify the inherently heterogeneous ethnic group in question. This tension morphed and was at times heightened because the global context shifted throughout the movement's multigenerational trajectory. In the past seven decades, the Karen

ethnonational movement has endured and been transformed by Cold War geopolitics, then friendlier relations between the Thai and Burmese governments, and recently, the flight of Chinese criminal capital into Southeast Asia – all this alongside lengthy cycles of Burmese junta rule, enforced by an ethnocentric military intent on pacifying the country's peripheries. My intent was never to argue that Karen ethnonationalism was somehow impure or artificial, but rather to contextualise the movement and its institutionalised forms, such as the KNU, as forms of resistance to domination that occur in a colonial present already and unavoidably littered with imperial debris.

Besides aiming at multi-scalar explanation, conjunctural analysis also provides a lens for reflecting how tensions produced at specific sites 'hold open the possibility for something different to emerge' (Hart 2010, 136). An analysis of warscapes therefore contributes to a wider conversation that considers Myanmar's Spring Revolution as an event of world-historical importance, 'a particular moment of a more universal struggle' of subaltern groups to determine the conditions for one's own existence (Thame 2025, 172). It is not only that warscapes are constituted by multi-scalar forces but that slippages and contradictions within each site can have implications that reverberate and spiral out across scales. In this, conflict dynamics in southeast Myanmar also interact with social relations in-the-making in other warscapes – an aspect that this article has not explored. But other scholars provide us with leads. The photos and voices of four women farmers from across Myanmar featured in Hedström et al. (2025) illustrate how rural women across Myanmar hold and enact hope for the Spring Revolution alongside their efforts to navigate the everyday and intensely localised violence of conflict, which has done damage to themselves, their communities, and the lands they inhabit.

Finally, this article is part of a global conversation about decolonising scholarly approaches to war. Contemporary conflicts across continents, each with their own genealogy and stakes, appear to be collectively reshaping the world system (Hardt and Mezzadra 2024). I write as the lines of international complicity sustaining the war in Gaza become ever clearer (El-Shewy et al. 2025), with the modest hope that geographical tools, especially conjunctural analysis, can play a part in understanding how colonial empires shape a world in which violence is knitted into the ordinary circulations of capital while also producing endlessly differentiated local landscapes of war, for colonialism and postcolonial statebuilding unleash forces of domination that pull in different directions – centripetal and centrifugal. Creating a space for *both-and* – local-global, interconnection-differentiation, unity-division – carves out a way for appreciating the immense difficulties of holding fast to struggles for peace on the compromised terrain of empire, including the contradictions embodied within us (Koopman 2008).

Notes

1. The violence of colonial empires implicates numerous continents. For the sake of accuracy, this review of the literature focuses on South and Southeast Asia, to the neglect for example, of settler colonial dynamics or the role of the triangular slave trade elsewhere, where colonisation can be periodised differently.
2. The military changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar in 1989, intending to drop colonial-era terminology.
3. Burmanization existed before 1962. Cho (2023), for example, documents how British colonisation was preceded by Mon and Bamar dominance over people who are today ascribed the label Karen. However, I emphasise British colonisation in conversation with the literature on decolonising war and because British rule irrevocably shaped the centre-margin dialectic in Burma/Myanmar (e.g. Bowser 2025). I also focus on Ne Win because Burmanization became state ideology, implemented in full force, only in during his dictatorship (Saw Eh Htoo and Waters 2024, 182).
4. Spatial and ethnic categories did not map neatly onto one another. For example, Karen-inhabited areas remained divided between the Frontier Areas and Burma Proper (Smith 1999, 50–52). This weakened the Karen cause significantly, for example leading to their presence at the Panglong Conference only as observers (Walton 2008, 901–2).
5. NLD rule had been preceded by a semi-democratic government, led by the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).
6. A key indicator of this is whether or not groups are allied with the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow government formed after the coup.
7. Related terminologies include 'ethnic armed organisation' and 'ethnic resistance organisation', or EAO and ERO respectively. I use 'ethnonational organisations' throughout to prefigure an argument made later that ethnonationalism in contemporary Myanmar can be traced to colonial efforts at containing dissent.
8. The KNU is publicly allied with the NUG but has declined to join the NUG cabinet. One KNU official described the organisation's relationship with the NUG as a 'partnership with mutual respect' that emerged out of internal disagreements within the KNU (quoted in Vrieze 2023, 102).
9. Furthermore, the dominant 'inter-ethnic' framing of solidarity within the Spring Revolution has had exclusionary impacts. Groups not counted as one of Myanmar's 'national races' (*taingyintha*) are often excluded in debates about power-sharing along ethnic lines (Aung Ko Ko et al. 2024).
10. The Karen ethnonational movement has endured multiple splits. Some of these splits have also had to do with Cold War geopolitics, when the KNU struggled to reconcile a deep split along ideological lines, resulting not only from ideological polarisation on a global scale but also the ways in which other opposition groups in Myanmar positioned themselves within this field (Smith 1999, 150–172). On another occasion, when the DKBA transformed into the Karen BGF in 2009, one DKBA brigade refused (see Brenner 2018, 87, 97).
11. The Chinese criminal groups involved in scam centres along the Thai-Myanmar border have also been connected to criminalised economies elsewhere in Southeast Asia, especially Cambodia and the Philippines, as well as the China-Myanmar border (Franceschini, Li, and Bo 2023; Peng 2024).
12. The KNU's involvement in the scam centres is subject to some debate. More information on armed groups' varying involvements in the scam centres is available in author et al. (under review).

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