



# Connecting the Federal Democracy Charter with the “Way of Rakhita”

A Theoretical Analysis of the State of Relations between the ULA and NUG-led  
Movements

**Center for Arakan Studies**

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## Abbreviations

<b>AA</b>	Arakan Army
<b>APG</b>	Arakan People's Government
<b>CRPH</b>	Committee Representing People's Hluttaw
<b>CNF</b>	Chin National Front
<b>FDC</b>	Federal Democracy Charter
<b>FPNCC</b>	Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee
<b>KIO</b>	Kachin Independence Organization
<b>KNU</b>	Karen National Unity
<b>MNDAA</b>	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Alliance
<b>NA</b>	Northern Alliance
<b>NUG</b>	National Unity Government
<b>NUCC</b>	National Unity Consultative Council
<b>NLD</b>	National League for Democracy
<b>3BTA</b>	Three Brotherhood Alliance
<b>TNLA</b>	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
<b>ULA</b>	United League of Arakan
<b>UNFC</b>	United Nationalities Federal Council
<b>WOR</b>	The Way of Rakhita

## **Executive Summery**

- The relations between the ULA and NUG-led movements against the military regime have been an intense question to be explored in the post-coup Myanmar politics in 2021. Even if both movements have applied the violent armed struggle to achieve their objectives, the formal ideology of ULA is nationalism whereas that of the NUG is liberal democracy.
- While the NUG has announced the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC) as the policy declaration of their movement especially regarding the question of ethnic states and national minorities, the ULA leadership has deployed the philosophy of the 'Way of Rakhita' as their fundamental political doctrine.
- It is observed that compared to other ethnic armed organizations like the KNU, KIO and CNF, the ULA has almost no formal platforms that connect its relations with the NUG. Due to this point, it could be regarded that the relations between the NUG and ULA are still highly fragile and uneven from one time to another.
- The current state of relations between the NUG and ULA movements stem from not just personal nor organizational spheres but from structural and philosophical roots that the two movements view toward each other or the current politics in the country. While the ULA leadership and its philosophy are more leaning toward political realism, the NUG's policy and approaches toward the current political struggle are mostly guided by liberal thinking.

## Part-I: Introduction

### A. Background

The 'Federal Democracy Charter' (FDC) is a policy document that covers two parts released by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH).<sup>1</sup> The FDC has two segments that were separately released on March 31 and April 21, 2021, respectively<sup>2</sup>. Among the two parts of the Charter, and the first is about the proclamation for the establishment of the 'Federal Democratic Union' while the second one corresponds to the practice of interim constitutional arrangement by the interim government and administration during the fight against the military dictatorship, namely the State Administration Council (SAC) constituted by the Myanmar military after the military coup on February 1, 2021, in the country. The charter is aimed at the dissolution of the existing 2008 constitution drafted by the junta military and includes a list of core principles and a road map towards the establishment of a civilian-led Federal Democratic Union and Federal Army<sup>3</sup>.

In Articles (52) and (53) of Chapter (8) in Part-2 of the FDC, the clauses have mentioned the establishment of the administrative, legislative and judiciary mechanisms in line with the principle of self-determination and coordination with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)<sup>4</sup>, especially for the ethnic states in the country. The NUCC was established on March 8, 2021, by the anti-coup forces under the FDC and include the CRPH, NUG, Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), ethnic political parties, civil society organizations and civil-disobedient movement groups<sup>5</sup>. Then, the NUCC founded the National Unity Government (NUG) on April 26, 2021, and the members of the NUG were appointed by the CRPH, the legislative body of the government<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, the NUG as the executive branch of the government is theoretically responsible for the successful implementation of the FDC.

More importantly, there are a number of points mentioned regarding the rights of the non-Bamar minority ethnic groups in Part-1 of the FDC. For instance, both sections I and II of Chapter (4) have described the principles of "equality and self-determination" as one of the key values and the first clause of Section II has stated that; "The constituting states of the union and people in those states are the original sources of sovereignty".

In addition, this section has also delineated other important principles such as 'political equality of all Union members', 'the right to state constitution', 'power sharing, revenue sharing, fiscal federalism', and the 'issue of security arrangements' in the country<sup>7</sup>. On another side, the 'Way of Rakhita' (WOR) is a political and philosophical doctrine based on nationalism, and it is installed by the leadership of the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA). The ULA, established in 2016, is the political wing of the AA which was founded on April 10, 2009. Unlike the FDC, the "Way of

<sup>1</sup> The CRPH is reported to form on February 5, 2021, through an online emergency parliamentary meeting among the elect-Member of Parliament (MP) from the National League for Democracy (NLD). A few days later, two ethnic political parties; Ta'ang National Party (TNP) and Kayah State Democratic Party (KSDP) joined the CRPH on February 10, 2021 (CRPH n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> CRPH. 2021a. "Announcement of the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC), Part-One (ဖက်ဒရယ်ဒီမိုကရေစီပဋိညာဉ် အစိတ်အပိုင်း (၁)

ထုတ်ပြန်ကြေညာခြင်း)." ပြည်ထောင်စုသမ္မတမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်. <https://crphmyanmar.org/legislation/fdc-part-1/> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>3</sup> CRPH. 2021c. "Declaration of Federal Democracy Charter (Part-1)." ပြည်ထောင်စုသမ္မတမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်.

<https://crphmyanmar.org/legislation/fdc-part-1/> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> See here on the website: <http://nucc-federal.org/>

<sup>5</sup> Shwe Yee Oo. 2023. "Union Spirit' Key to Winning Myanmar's War." Asia Times. <http://asiatimes.com/2023/02/union-spirit-key-to-winning-myanmars-war/> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Moe Thuzar, and Htet Myet Min Tun. 2022. "Myanmar's National Unity Government: A Radical Arrangement to Counteract the Coup." ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-8-myanmars-national-unity-government-a-radical-arrangement-to-counteract-the-coup-by-moe-thuzar-and-htet-myet-min-tun/> (April 6, 2023).

<sup>7</sup> CRPH. 2021c. "Declaration of Federal Democracy Charter (Part-1)." ပြည်ထောင်စုသမ္မတမြန်မာနိုင်ငံတော်.

<https://crphmyanmar.org/legislation/fdc-part-1/> (May 24, 2023).

Rakhita' (WOR)' philosophy is not a policy document which can be found in a broader and written platform.<sup>8</sup>

The first ever recorded word on the 'Way of Rakhita' was reported during the speech of the AA leader, General Twan Mrat Naing, on April 10, 2014, on its 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary. He said: "Comrades, as the position of Arakanese at this time, is highly fragile and dangerous, we can be easily fallen into the enemy's trap. Thus, it is critical to fight to stand united under virtuous and systematic leadership and clear strategy. To solve the current problem and future challenges being faced by our people, the 'Way of Rakhita' followed by the whole people should be formulated and implemented<sup>9</sup>."

In line with a high-profile source, the "Way of Rakhita' (WOR) philosophy was born during the commencement of the 'Arakan National Conference' on April 28, 2014, held in Kyaukphyu town<sup>10</sup>. The conference was reported as the largest gathering of all Rakhine ethnic people in 68 years and more importantly, the Vice-Commander of the Arakan Army and his team also attended the event for five days<sup>11</sup>. After this conference, the statement released by the committee called for the creation of the 'Arakan National Defence Army'<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the WOR was not concretely defined in the public domain apart from some pieces in the speeches and interviews. Then, in a video titled "Arakan Army: The 'Way of Rakhita' (WOR) 2018" released by the Tribal Action Group in January 2018, the interviews with the Chief and Vice-Chief of the AA along with its armed members were released<sup>13</sup>. In that video, the coins and other historic landmarks of the dynastic Arakan Kingdom were displayed, and the Chief of the AA said: "Arakan Kingdom was very wealthy, and we are very proud of our ancestral heritage. And it is history. Under the Burmese rule, we became very poor, and we lost everything that we had. We lost the rights of the indigenous people."

Moreover, in a speech by the ULA/AA Chief during the armed conflicts in Rakhine state in late 2019, he explained that the "Way of Rakhita' (WOR) is the way by which the people of Arakan effort to achieve self-determination and build an independent and dignified Arakan society on this earth<sup>14</sup>. In one of his latest interviews with the BBC Burmese on February 2, 2024, the ULA Chief said that at first, we started to mobilize the WOR in line with the Arakan Dream inspired by the Arakanese people but later, more pragmatically, we came to understand that we need to consider the situations in other parts of the country for the liberation of all ethnic groups from the military dictatorship<sup>15</sup>.

There are more concrete clarifications, he added. In this video, the AA Chief also mentioned the destination of the 'Arakan Dream', the goal which is to be achieved by the 'Way of Rakhita' (WOR). Therefore, the Way of Rakhita is a means rather than an aim or objective or an end. The WOR is to achieve the objective of the 'Arakan Dream' per se.

From the author's perspective, the WOR philosophy is centred on four key principles such as 1) nationalism (more about territorial nationalism<sup>16</sup> rather than ethnonationalism<sup>17</sup>, 2) militarism

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the conceptualization of the WOR will be elaborated in later parts.

<sup>9</sup> 5th Anniversary of Arakan Army. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWhjW9245Ks> (April 10, 2024).

<sup>10</sup> RFA Discussion. 2022. "အာရက္ခပြည်တည်ထောင်ရေး တကယ်ဖြစ်လာမှာလား." Radio Free Asia. <https://www.rfa.org/burmese/talk-show/will-the-establishment-of-rakhine-state-happen-rfa-talk-03292022103341.html> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Myay, Chan. 2014. "Arakan National Conference Gets Underway in Kyaukphyu." *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/arakan-national-conference-gets-underway-kyaukphyu.html> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Lawi Weng Specia. 2014. "Arakan Conference Calls for Creation of "Arakan Army."" <http://www.salem-news.com/articles/may032014/arakan-army-lw.php> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Arakan Army: The Way of Rakhita 2018. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zQGZ8VE1PY> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> The Way of Rakhita. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkT0JwrnFZg> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> BBC Burmese. 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dIX8mcQzVQ> (March 29, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Territorial nationalism describes a form of nationalism based on the belief that all inhabitants of a particular territory should share a common national identity, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, religious, cultural and other differences. Depending on the political or administrative status of a particular territory, territorial nationalism can be manifested on two basic levels, as territorial nationalism of distinctive sovereign states, or territorial nationalism of distinctive sub-sovereign regions (*regional nationalism*). (Kymlicka and Straehle 1999)

<sup>17</sup> Ethnic nationalism, also known as ethnonationalism, is a form of nationalism wherein the nation and nationality are defined in terms of ethnicity, with emphasis on an ethnocentric (and in some cases an ethnocentric) approach to various political issues related to national affirmation of a particular ethnic group. (A. D. Smith 1981)

(meaning that the key to Arakan liberation is mainly through violent military struggle rather than the electoral means), 3) historical re-evaluation (taking lessons from the past wrongdoings of the previous generations), and 4) pragmatism (focusing more sensible and realistic ways and situations rather than normative concepts and values).

In the elaboration of these four characteristics, firstly, the nationalism promoted by the ULA leadership goes beyond the narrowly defined 'Rakhine ethnonationalism' and it is evident in how they tried to handle the 'Rohingya issue' and redefine the definition of the WOR in an interview with BBC in February 2024<sup>18</sup>. Concerning the Rohingya question, the promotion of social cohesion, the inclusion of Rohingya administrators and treating and rescuing the Rohingya community members in the cases of COVID-19 and Mocha Cyclone under its administration are the three parameters enough to conclude that their doctrines go beyond the conventional Rakhine tradition<sup>19</sup>. Then, redefining the WOR as 'the liberation of all ethnic groups' also supports this claim. Moreover, at its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary on April 10, 2024, the group has reportedly changed the name into a more inclusive term, "Arakkha Tattaw" (အာရက္ခတပ်တော်) from its 'second' original name.<sup>20</sup> Linguistically, the term 'Arakkha' typically refers to a land or territory rather than a group of ethnic or religious people, and thus, changing the spelling name of the AA also reflects a broader perspective in the philosophy of WOR.

Second, it means that the WOR believes the key to the national liberation of the Arakanese is through armed struggle. This argument is supported by several speeches and interviews with the ULA chief. For example, in one of his speeches in April 2014, he said that the collapse of Arakan Sovereignty is not attributed to the fall of the Arakanese cultural department, nor the breakdown of the Arakanese healthcare department. But the downfall of our great Arakan country is because of the failure of the Arakkha Tatmadaw<sup>21</sup>. This perception mentioned the point that building a strong military is comparatively more critical than any other task. The bigger the military, the more confidence they have in achieving their objectives.

As the third characteristic, the WOR asks for taking lessons from the wrongdoings of the past generations meaning reevaluation of the national history. The ULA leader once said that the NLD after 1988 promised federalism and they pledged this to the ethnic people, but after they came to power, they did not keep the promise. So, we have learned the lessons, and we are not naive anymore<sup>22</sup>. Apart from that, there are also some other pieces of evidence of how he pointed out that the Rakhine leaders in the anti-colonial struggles and parliamentary period collaborated with the Burmese leaders but failed to achieve their objectives<sup>23</sup>.

Finally, being the ideology of the armed group, the WOR praises the concept of 'pragmatism' more than 'idealism' or 'normativism' or 'dogmatism', for instance. As pragmatism calls for more focus and prioritizing on dealing with a more sensible reality, it can be proved in many speeches and interviews of the ULA chief. In his latest speech on the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AA, a part of the speech read that it is necessary to build a future in which all ethnic groups in Arakan live in peace, mutual respect, and development. While recognizing the reality of toleration in line with human rights, it is

<sup>18</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. 2021. "Arakan Army Seeks to Build 'Inclusive' Administration in Rakhine State." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/arakan-army-rebels-seek-inclusive-administration-in-rakhine-state/> (August 18, 2023).

<sup>19</sup> However, it is not to claim that the relations of the ULA with the Rohingya community especially in the refugee camps in Bangladesh are smooth or there is no tension between the ULA and the Rohingya community within the Rakhine state.

<sup>20</sup> The second original name of the group was "Rakhaine Tattaw" (ရက္ခိုင်တပ်တော်) started to use on April 10, 2019. But, when the group was originally founded in 2019, it was named 'Rakhaine Tatmadaw' (ရက္ခိုင်တပ်မတော်).

<sup>21</sup> 5th Anniversary of Arakan Army. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWhJW9245Ks> (April 10, 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Mendelson, Allerga, and Alastair McCreedy. 2021. "We Are Not Naive Anymore": Myanmar EAOs Skeptical about Federal Army." *Southeast Asia Globe*. <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/myanmar-federal-army/> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with CCN. 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrVUW\\_MeF-I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrVUW_MeF-I) (March 27, 2024).



also critical to accept the truth sincerely.<sup>24</sup> In several other speeches and interviews conducted by the ULA chief, observers can also find how the group adopted the concept of pragmatism.

## B. Theoretical Framework

The current research study has four key parts: firstly, briefly addressing the history of cooperation between the ethnic Bamar-led central opposition force and ethnic Rakhine-led armed movement, second, highlighting the significance of the NUG and ULA-led movements in the current fights against the military regime, the third, tracing the current state of relations among the two actors and finally, in the fourth part, approaching and analysing the relations based on the theoretical perspectives. However, the study will touch deeper into the third and fourth components as the key research areas. Thus, for the third constituent, the 'descriptive analysis' will be mainly used to understand the process of relations developed or evolved between the two leaderships and political movements. Generally, this method is used to understand a situation or phenomenon for the questions of 'what', 'where', 'when' and 'how'<sup>25</sup>. In this part, the study will try to address how the relations between the two leaderships have developed.

Then, for the fourth portion in attempting to describe and analyze the development of the current relations between the two political movements and leaderships, the study will apply two key political theories in the sphere of international relations such as political realism and political liberalism. There are also several branches of these two theories such as human nature realism, defensive realism and offensive realism in realist thinking and human nature liberalism, liberal institutionalism and economic interdependence in liberal thinking, the discussion is only going to focus on one particular explanation that covers key concepts of these two theories. That particular source is the discussion by Professor Eric Hines from the University of Montana<sup>26</sup> on these two theories.

According to the discussion, first, political realism argues three interrelated key assumptions such as anarchy<sup>27</sup>, self-help<sup>28</sup> and power<sup>29</sup> in the international system<sup>30</sup>. However, the actions of a particular state to increase self-help and power in the anarchical system also cause permanent security dilemmas for other states because increasing the power of a state always means relatively losing the power of another state. Thus, there are two situations, hegemony<sup>31</sup> and balance of power<sup>32</sup> under which any state needs to consider managing the question of the security dilemma. There are still disagreements among the realists on how a state should behave under these two particular conditions. According to realistic thinking, there are four options that a state can choose that includes 1) balancing (the state can work to maintain the balance of power), 2) buck-passing (the state can let another state pay the costs of balancing), 3) bandwagoning (states can join with the most powerful states to avoid the costs of balancing them, and 4) hiding (states can try to stay so small and hope that powerful states hopefully ignore or forget them).

Secondly, political liberalism proposed three key ideas such as centralized and legitimate institutions, reciprocity, and interdependence<sup>33</sup>. According to liberal thinking, centralized and legitimate institutions can overcome the problem of anarchy while reciprocity means state behaves

<sup>24</sup> See source: <https://t.me/aainfodesk/829>.

<sup>25</sup> McCombes, Shona. 2019. "Descriptive Research | Definition, Types, Methods & Examples." Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/descriptive-research/> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> <https://medium.com/@polisciadjunct>

<sup>27</sup> Anarchy means a system operating in the absence of any central government. It does not imply chaos but the absence of central authority.

<sup>28</sup> Self-help means that the states (a political entity) cannot assume others will help them survive and they must rely on self-help in the international system.

<sup>29</sup> Self-help requires states (political entities) to have more power - the means available to secure their interests - relative to others.

<sup>30</sup> Realism. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoqvax-b6JM> (March 29, 2024).

<sup>31</sup> Hegemony means that there is one power polar in the system in terms of power distribution.

<sup>32</sup> Balance of power means that there is more than one power in the system in terms of power distribution.

<sup>33</sup> Liberalism. 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MC-a09cNuAs> (March 29, 2024).

toward each other based on each's actions. Then, more frequent, and intense interactions lead to the mutual dependence of actors meaning interdependence. Therefore, according to the liberal view, overcoming the conflict requires creating international institutions to manage and increase interdependence and international regimes that include laws, and regulations can coordinate expectations and behaviours of states. Thus, these institutions allow persuading collective goods, including collective security. Collective security means creating common security institutions and platforms such as alliances and security umbrellas that can increase the collective power against any possible external threat. Additionally, liberal thinking also proposes that there are other concepts such as modernisation, civil society and human security beyond the states that can make impacts on the power relations in the system.

Now the discussion will turn to the issue of how these two political theories are applicable to the analysis of the state of relations between the NUG and ULA-led movements. There are three specific reasons why this is the case. First, under the current politics of Myanmar, there is an obvious lack of 'central or centralized authority' and institutions, a phenomenon something akin to the state of anarchy in the sphere of international relations. Therefore, each armed political entity needs to consider how to behave in a competitive power struggle against each other. Secondly, the ULA, unlike many other EAOs, has unique political and military objectives such as the call for a 'confederation model' and rejuvenation of the independent and sovereign Arakan Kingdom of Mrauk-U. This political motivation and destination signify how the ULA leadership can autonomously and independently think when it comes to its relations with both NUG and SAC. Finally, even if several sources (mentioned in the literature review) have attempted to analyse and understand the causalities of the current state of relations between the two movements, none of them was able to reach a theoretical and comprehensive conclusion. Thus, the application of these two dominant political theories is comparatively more appropriate in order to understand the deeper roots of the relations between the NUG and ULA-led movements.

### C. Literature Review

Regarding the existing literature on the state of relations between the NUG and ULA movements, it can be differentiated based on the timeline. During the first year of the coup, 2021, there are two significant pieces touched on this issue. On June 10, 2021, Kyaw Lynn argued that the present unilateral ceasefires are informal; AA soldiers are participating in fighting against the junta with EAO allies in other parts of the country; and, at the same time, ULA leaders have refrained from participating in the National Unity Government (NUG), formed by NLD MPs-elect and other anti-SAC actors to challenge the legitimacy of the SAC<sup>34</sup>.

On July 22, 2021, Elliott Bynum wrote that after the coup, the military government moved the ULA/AA from its list of "terrorist" groups and dropped charges against some individuals arrested in connection with the AA. In turn, the ULA has released some military and police officers, and no armed clashes have broken out between the two-armed parties since the coup. And, the ULA has rejected overtures from the NU for discussions<sup>35</sup>. Then, during the second year of the coup, 2022, more analytical pieces appeared on the various platforms. In February 2022, in a commentary on the TNI, Kyaw Lynn (2022) pointed out that there are some important clauses in the FDC (Part-1) adopted by the NUG and it is also very important and recognizable progress but still falls short of the 'Confederation Model' installed by the ULA leadership<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Kyaw Lynn. 2021. "The Arakan Army, Myanmar Military Coup and Politics of Arakan." <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-arakan-army-myanmar-military-coup-and-politics-of-arakan> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>35</sup> Bynum, Elliott. 2021. "Myanmar's Spring Revolution." ACLED. <https://acleddata.com/2021/07/22/myanmars-spring-revolution/> (March 29, 2024).

<sup>36</sup> Kyaw Lynn. 2022b. *The Nature of Parallel Governance and Its Impact on Arakan Politics*. Transnational Institute (TNI). <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-nature-of-parallel-governance-and-its-impact-on-arakan-politics>.

On May 22, in a commentary published on the 'Frontier Myanmar', Kyaw Hsan Hlaing argued that the ULA leadership has used the tactics of playing with both sides between the SAC and NUG but needs to choose between the two sides whether they would collaborate with the NUG and other allied armed groups for confederacy or stay away from the current armed conflict while strengthening its administration<sup>37</sup>.

Then, on July 22, 2022, researcher Aung Tun argued that it appears that the AA still distrusts both the Tatmadaw and the NLD. The military buildup in the state is evidence of its mistrust of the former. In the case of the latter, the problem goes back to the earlier days of 'bitter' politics<sup>38</sup>. However, in an analysis posted on the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) on July 26, 2022, Shona Loong (2022) said that there are at least two obstacles to closer cooperation between the two leaderships. These include whether the ULA leadership and constituents can get better of the mistrust toward the former NLD leaders in the NUG or whether the NUG can accommodate the demands of the ULA<sup>39</sup>. Then, during the third year of the coup, on April 21 2023, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing (2023) again argued that the relations of the ULA with the NUG leadership can be considered as one of the layers that the ULA is backing the nationwide anti-military regime movement among other sectors such as supporting and training the People's Defense Force (PDFs) and collaborating with other EROs<sup>40</sup>.

A Myanmar researcher, Morgan Michaels from the IISS on August 7, 2023, wrote that the relations of the ULA (being a member of the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultation Committee- FPNCC<sup>41</sup>) with the NUG movement could be impacted (hampered) by China's intervention against the NUG seems to have closer relations with the Western nations<sup>42</sup>. As the latest analysis on this issue, a political commentator known as Zung Ring mentioned on September 6 that the Rohingya policy of the NUG could surely be a reason why the ULA has no interest in forming a political alliance with the NUG because doing so would imply the ULA is also supportive of the policy, which is widely rejected by the Rakhine community<sup>43</sup>. Among these existing pieces of literature and analysis, it can be found that the perspectives are hardly comprehensive on the development of the relations between the two movements. Although various segments of these analytical pieces are necessary but insufficient to understand the overall picture of the relations. More importantly, the opinions are mostly based on normative assumptions rather than pragmatic reasons why both NUG and ULA as the agencies chose to do or not to do a particular set of things in their struggle against the dictatorship.

#### D. Problem Statement

Myanmar military (also known as Tatmadaw) staged a military coup on account of the disputed electoral fraud issue and overthrew the incumbent NLD-led government on February 1, 2021. The CRPH was formed by the elected MPs in the 2020 election on February 5, 2021. Then, the

<sup>37</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. 2022. "Can the Arakan Army Achieve Its Confederacy Dream?" *Frontier Myanmar*.

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/can-the-arakan-army-achieve-its-confederacy-dream/> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>38</sup> Aung Tun. 2022. "'The Arakan Dream in Post-Coup Myanmar' by Aung Tun." 2022(71). <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2022-71-the-arakan-dream-in-post-coup-myanmar-by-aung-tun/> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>39</sup> Shona Loong. 2022. "Rakhine: A Precarious Ceasefire Hangs in the Balance." *IISS Myanmar Conflict Map*. <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/rakhine>, <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/rakhine> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>40</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. 2023. "Understanding the Arakan Army • Stimson Center." *Stimson Center*. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/understanding-the-arakan-army/> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> The FPNCC was established on April 19, 2017, by ethnic armed organisations such as the Arakan Army (AA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Shan State Progress Party/Shan State Army (SSPP/SSA), the National Democratic Alliance Army (NDAA) and the United Wa State Army (UWSA).

<sup>42</sup> Michaels, Morgan. 2023. "What China's Growing Involvement Means for Myanmar's Conflict." *IISS Myanmar Conflict Map*. <https://myanmar.iiss.org/analysis/chinas-growing-involvement> (August 11, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Ring, Zung. 2023. "Myanmar NUG's Rohingya Policy: A Political Gamble That Has Yet to Pay Off." *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/myanmar-nugs-rohingya-policy-a-political-gamble-that-has-yet-to-pay-off.html> (September 11, 2023).

release of two segments of the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC) was announced separately on March 31 and April 21, along with the dissolution of the 2008 constitution on April 1, 2021. In line with the road map, the CRPH appointed the National Unity Government (NUG) on April 16. Theoretically, the NUG has the responsibility to implement the FDC, which includes the core principles and road map for building a civilian-led Federal Democratic Union and Federal Army in addition to the formation of the NUCC as a consultative platform for the CRPH, and other stakeholders including the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

Although the NUCC is aimed at the inclusion of all anti-military forces in the country, the United League of Arakan (ULA), with its armed wing, the Arakan Army (AA), formed in April 2009, is still not a part of the consultative body nor the NUG. The Chief of the ULA/AA has proclaimed to march along with the “Way of Rakhita’ (WOR)’ philosophy and has also stated its political goal as a ‘confederation model’<sup>44</sup>. Beyond these ideological stands and variations, both the spring revolution currently led by the NUG and the armed movement of the ULA in Arakan have a common enemy, the junta military, for common tasks like fighting against the junta military and common interests like the abolishment of the military dictatorship and more power concentration at the ethnic state level. Yet, the two forces have a low level of collaboration in the military and political spheres. Therefore, the problem statement for the current research study is how the relations between these two actors along with their policies have developed into the current situation and why.

## **Part- II: Research Design**

### **A. Method and Methodology**

As the aim of the research is to explore ideas, understand the experience and gain detailed insights for a specific context, the study will use only qualitative methodology for collecting and analyzing non-numerical data such as text, video, audio, etc. It will provide the study to understand the concepts, opinions, or experiences of the research participants. In terms of research methods for data collection, secondary resources from various departments and scholarly platforms will be applied. Document analysis is used as a part of data collection for research so that the examination of written and visual materials such as research reports, journal articles, news articles, commentaries, photos, and videos can be examined. The study has analyzed the content of these materials to achieve the preferences and ideas of the individuals and organizations who released these materials.

### **B. Research Objectives**

- 1) To explore the significance of the NUG and ULA-led movements in Myanmar politics
- 2) To trace the context of the current state of relations between the two movements.
- 3) To analyze the development of the relations based on the theoretical perspectives

### **C. Research Questions**

- 1) Why are the NUG and ULA-led movements crucial in Myanmar politics?
- 2) What are the background factors and forces that shape the current state of relations between the two movements?
- 3) How can the development of the current relations be analyzed from the theoretical perspectives?

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with CCN. 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRVUW\\_MeF-I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRVUW_MeF-I) (March 27, 2024).

## Part- III: Analysis

### A. Brief Historical Recall

The question of a story about the relations or cooperation between a Rakhine ethnic revolutionary force and other opposition groups in the country is decently tricky but not unconventional in the recent history of Myanmar politics. Historically, various Rakhine ethnic nationalistic groups of different versions are also well-reported as having strong cooperation with the Bamar-dominated political forces at the national level in the activities of anti-British and Japanese rules in the colonial era<sup>45</sup>. Besides, there was a high degree of Rakhine ethnic political participation in the prominent anti-government communist groups known as ‘Communist Party of Burma (CPB)’ led by Thakin Than Tun and ‘Burma Communist Party’ by Thakin Soe in the post-independence periods. And, in the very first national resistance front known as the People’s Democratic Front (PDF) established in 1949, the Arakan People’s Liberation Party (APLP) was involved as a key actor along with other main communist forces<sup>46</sup>.

Apart from the communist movements, the first generation of ethno-nationalism-based Rakhine revolutionary forces such as the Arakan Liberation Party/ Arakan Liberation Army (ALP/ALA)<sup>47</sup> that emerged in the years of the 1970s had also records of joining various opposition coalition forces in other parts of the country. In 1975, when the prominent leader of the Karen National Union (KNU), General Mya, formed the Federal National Democratic Front (FNDF), later changed into the ‘National Democratic Front’, the ALP was said to be one of the principal founding members. In recent memories, after the 2010 political opening, both the Arakan National Council/Arakan Army (ANC/AA)<sup>48</sup> and United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), were also members of the grand grouping of ethnic armed groups known as the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) founded in February 2011. Later in 2015, the ULA/AA withdrew its membership along with other groups<sup>49</sup>.

In December 2016, moreover, the ULA/AA became a member of the Northern Alliance (NA), normally known as the military coalition, together with the KIA, MNDAA and TNLA<sup>50</sup>. In April 2017, a larger grouping of the political and diplomatic alliance known as the Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC) in which the ULA/AA is also a member along with other groups such as the UWSA, NDAA, SSPP, KIA, MNDAA and TNLA<sup>51</sup>. At a later date, the ULA/AA appeared more active on the fighting and media landscape under the name of the ‘Three Brotherhood Alliance’ founded in June 2019 along with MNDAA and TNLA, especially in the Northern Shan State<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, Martin. 2019. “Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar’s Western Frontier.” <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Smith, Martin. 2019. “Arakan (Rakhine State): A Land in Conflict on Myanmar’s Western Frontier.” <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/arakan-rakhine-state-a-land-in-conflict-on-myanmars-western-frontier> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>47</sup> ALP was founded on April 9, 1967, and its armed wing, ALA, signed a bilateral ceasefire with the government in 2012 and became a signatory member of NCA in October 2015.

<sup>48</sup> ANC was established in 2004 and became the political wing of the Arakan Army operated in 2010. The armed group is mainly based in Karen state, and is also known by another name, ‘Arakan State Army’.

<sup>49</sup> Saw Yan Naing. 2017. “The UNFC: From High Hopes to an Uncertain Future.” <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/the-unfc-from-high-hopes-to-an-uncertain-future.html> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>50</sup> Kyaw Ye Lynn. 2016. “Curfew Imposed after Clashes near Myanmar-China Border.” <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/curfew-imposed-after-clashes-near-myanmar-china-border/689281> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>51</sup> ACLED. 2018. “Analysis of the FPNCC/Northern Alliance and Myanmar Conflict Dynamics - Myanmar.” ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/analysis-fpnccnorthern-alliance-and-myanmar-conflict-dynamics> (March 27, 2024).

<sup>52</sup> Rising, David. 2023. “Myanmar’s Military Is Losing Ground against Coordinated Nationwide Attacks, Buoying Opposition Hopes.” AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/myanmar-offensive-brotherhood-alliance-militia-8e9381ba35dd07620ae20772486a5ecd> (March 27, 2024).

Thus, this alliance-forming pattern of the Rakhine armed group with other political forces in the country also showed that there was a very rare moment of alliance or partnership establishment with the armed opposition movement led by the Bamar ethnic group. Therefore, connecting the current ULA/AA movement with the newly emerged NUG-led armed revolution in Myanmar politics is relatively a new phenomenon.

## B. The Significance of the NUG and ULA-led Movements

Being a national unity government formed by the collection of the various political and social fronts after the military coup in February 2021, the NUG could be seen as an umbrella organization claiming the legality and legitimacy of the state's government on behalf of Myanmar in the international sphere. Due to this effort, the NUG enjoyed relatively limited recognition from international entities such as France, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN)<sup>53,54</sup>. More importantly, it is also the NUG that was seen as the only alternative to the SAC by many parts of the international community.

Besides, in terms of administrative capacity, the NUG is generally regarded as the federal government by some ethnic states such as Chin, Karenni and Karen states where the ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) managed the local administration in line with the FDC in addition to its directly ruled townships in the regions of Sagaing, Magway and Tinnintharyi through the people's administration organizations<sup>55</sup>. On the military front, the Defense Ministry of the NUG is also considered to enjoy direct or indirect command and control power over several hundred People's Defence Forces (PDFs)<sup>56</sup> in the central lowland areas. As of late 2022, an analytical source mentioned that there were around 65,000 forces in the PDFs<sup>57</sup>. As of January 31, 2024, among 35 towns lost by the junta, the NUG and its allied forces have controlled at least 12 towns, especially in the Sagaing region, Chin and Karenni states<sup>58</sup>.

On another front, the ULA is the political wing of the Arakan Army that has trained more than 30,000 troops and is the strongest armed and political organization in Rakhine state at the western front of Myanmar. The group also has widespread alliance formation with other well-equipped groups such as the TNLA and MNDAA in the northern part of Shan state. It has close relations with the strongest non-state armed actor in Myanmar, namely the UWSP through the formation of the FPNCC. After the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, the role of the ULA/AA becomes more prominent in attacking against the SAC in many parts of Myanmar. Apart from Rakhine state, the AA troops are reportedly actively involved in the armed fighting against the SAC in areas such as northern Shan State, Kachin State, and Sagaing region<sup>59</sup>. The group has also supported military training and equipment to more than 10 newly emerged armed groups all across the country such as Sagaing and

<sup>53</sup> Scoop News. 2021. "French Senate Recognises Myanmar National Unity Government." <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO2110/S00065/french-senate-recognises-myanmar-national-unity-government.htm> (March 6, 2024).

<sup>54</sup> The Irrawaddy. 2021. "European Parliament Throws Support Behind Myanmar's Shadow Government." *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/european-parliament-throws-support-behind-myanmars-shadow-government.html> (March 6, 2024).

<sup>55</sup> Zin Mar Win. 2022. "NUG formed People's Administration Organization in 36 townships in Sagaing and Magway (စစ်ကိုင်းနဲ့ မကွေး ဥရဒ် မြို့နယ်မှာ NUG ရဲ့ ပြည်သူ့အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဖွဲ့စည်းထား)." *Radio Free Asia*. [https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program\\_2/nug-forms-civilian-administrations-with-cdm-employees-04242022130058.html](https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/nug-forms-civilian-administrations-with-cdm-employees-04242022130058.html) (March 28, 2024).

<sup>56</sup> PDF is a collective term for the three types of armed groups such as PDFs, Local Defense Forces (LDFs) and People's Defense Teams (PaKaPha/PDTs).

<sup>57</sup> Ye Myo Hein. 2022. "Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar." *United States Institute of Peace*. <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar> (March 6, 2024).

<sup>58</sup> Reuters. 2024. "3 Years after Coup, Myanmar Junta Chief under Unprecedented Pressure." *Bangkok Post*. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/world/2733995/3-years-after-coup-myanmar-junta-chief-under-unprecedented-pressure> (March 7, 2024).

<sup>59</sup> The Irrawaddy. 2023. "Myanmar Ethnic Alliance Says 'Operation 1027' Has Spread to Sagaing." *The Irrawaddy*. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-ethnic-alliance-says-operation-1027-has-spread-to-sagaing.html> (March 7, 2024).

Magway regions, and Chin states<sup>60</sup>. The ULA/AA resumed its armed fighting against the SAC in Rakhine state on November 13, 2024, and as of June 2024, the group has captured at least 10 big towns such as Paletwa, Kyauktaw, Minbya, Mrauk-U, Pauktaw, Myebone, Ponnagyun, Rathedaung, Rambree, Buthidaung and several other small towns on the Arakan military front.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, in understanding the nature of cooperation and collaboration between the NUG and non-ethnic Bamar armed organizations, it is critical to deeply analyze the state of relations between the NUG and ULA-led movements as a unique case study. The current research will treat the relations between the two actors from various perspectives.

### C. Describing the Current State of Relations

In this part, the study will address the underlying factors regarding the relations between the ULA and NUG-led movements as follows.

#### 1. Assessing the ULA-NUG Interactions

Given the intensive armed conflicts with the Myanmar military during the rule of the National NLD from 2018-2020 and its collaborated stance with the military against the AA, it can be assumed that the ULA leadership was not actively opposed to the military coup that happened on February 1, 2021. Instead, the ULA leaders watched and closely monitored the new developments released by the political crisis without publicly condemning the coup. On the other hand, the ULA/AA has been in a de facto ceasefire with the Myanmar military in Rakhine State since November 2020. One month after the coup on March 23 when at least 261 protesters were killed, the spokesperson of the ULA said that it is a great sadness that innocent people are being shot and killed all over Myanmar and the actions of Myanmar military and police are unacceptable<sup>62</sup>. The next day on March 24, it was followed by the announcement of the 77 Civil Society Organizations from Rakhine State, which condemned the military coup and its subsequent atrocities<sup>63</sup>. At that time, neither the FDC nor the NUG was released and constituted. In April 2021, just two months after the military coup, in an interview report by the Southeast Asia Globe, diverse and different opinions regarding the formation of the united federal army against the junta military were conducted.

In this report, the ULA/AA Chief said, "I could not see the AA joining a federal army but would be more possible to form or strengthen a coalition among ethnic militaries, similar to the existing 'Northern Alliance'"<sup>64</sup>. In the same report, the NUG Minister of International Cooperation said that principally, there should be only one institution (armed force) and the NUG or the ethnic armed organization including the AA alone cannot win the fight against the junta military. Thus, all groups should be united, he added. Four months later in August 2021, in an interview with the ULA Chief, he reflected on several current affairs related to the politics of Rakhine State and Myanmar. He stated that the ULA/AA have decided not to be involved in the NUG-led movement based on their policy,

<sup>60</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. 2023. "Understanding the Arakan Army • Stimson Center." Stimson Center. <https://www.stimson.org/2023/understanding-the-arakan-army/> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>61</sup> Burma News International (BNI). 2024. "AA Now Controls 10 Townships in Rakhine." <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/aa-now-controls-10-townships-rakhine> (June 30, 2024).

<sup>62</sup> Reuters. 2021. "Rebel Militia in Myanmar's Rakhine State Joins Other Minorities in Condemning Junta." Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-rakhine-idUSKBN2BF1H5> (August 1, 2023).

<sup>63</sup> The Irrawaddy. 2021. "European Parliament Throws Support Behind Myanmar's Shadow Government." The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/european-parliament-throws-support-behind-myanmars-shadow-government.html> (March 6, 2024).

<sup>64</sup> Mendelson, Allerga, and Alastair Mccready. 2021. "'We Are Not Naive Anymore': Myanmar EAOs Skeptical about Federal Army." Southeast Asia Globe. <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/myanmar-federal-army/> (May 25, 2023).

doctrine and national interests but does not regard the NUG as the enemy<sup>65</sup>. He added that the decision of the ULA concerning the NUG was based on the root, stance, and future goal of the NUG while continuing to maintain the strategic autonomy of the ULA. When asked about the possible victory of the NUG-led anti-military dictatorship struggle, he said it is only 40 per cent.

However, after four months of this interview, a new turning point in the relations between the NUG and ULA leadership came out in January 2022. In an RFA news on January 11, it is mentioned that the leaders of the two movements had a meeting online and discussed the questions of current political affairs including the political ambition and rights of Rakhine ethnic people, the abolition of the military dictatorship, and ways to collaborate in the future. The news presenter added that this meeting was the second time<sup>66</sup>. In the same news, a former Rakhine MP also remarked that the current ceasefire with the junta is quite fragile and can lead to war at any time therefore, the ULA leadership would rather find more ways to collaborate with the NUG for better political destination<sup>67</sup>.

In March 2022, consequently, the NUG offered another informal talk with the ULA leadership and the letter highlighted that the NUG is in a serious mood to collaborate with the ethnic armed organizations in order to fight against the military dictatorship and establish the federal democratic union<sup>68</sup>. Then, another meeting between the two leaderships took place in mid-May and discussed the issues of further collaboration<sup>69</sup>. The discussion was confirmed and remarked by the spokesperson of the ULA as 'the exchange of opinions'<sup>70</sup>. The degree of mutual understanding in the relations between the two leaderships was also mentioned in an interview with the NUG's Minister of Defense. When his opinion was asked about the ceasefire introduction between the ULA and SAC in Rakhine State in November 2022, he responded that the NUG has a good understanding towards the ULA/AA and that the temporary ceasefire is different from the formal bilateral one.

Quite interestingly, a clearer demonstration of the relations between the NUG and ULA could be observed in one case when Cyclone Mocha was about to strike on the coast of Arakan in mid-May 2023. The NUG Minister of Humanitarian Assistance said on May 13 that in Rakhine state, there are ethnic armed groups like the ULA/AA and Rakhine CSOs and as for them, they were going to cooperate with all these actors in post-disaster rescue activities<sup>71</sup>. After that, the news related to the ULA-NUG relations no longer appeared on the media platforms. But some still remark there is a deeper understanding between the two leaderships concerning the current national politics. The following figure shows a short timeline regarding the development of the relations:

<sup>65</sup> Tun, Chit Min. 2021. "ရခိုင်အရေးနဲ့ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရေးအပေါ် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်ထွန်းမြတ်နိုင် ဘာပြောလဲ။" Channel News Independent (CNI).

[https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=966450160605059](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=966450160605059) (August 1, 2023).

<sup>66</sup> RFA. 2022. "NUG အစိုးရနဲ့ AA ရက်ချိတ်တပ်တော်တို့ ဆွေးနွေး။" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuMYyUw5ah0> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>67</sup> RFA Burmese. 2022. "Myanmar's Shadow Government Holds Talks with Powerful Arakan Army." Radio Free Asia.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/talks-05162022175552.html> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>68</sup> MPM. 2022. "NUG Offers the ULA/AA to Hold Informal Talks." Myanmar Peace Monitor. <https://mmpeacemonitor.org/310401/nug-offers-the-ula-aa-to-hold-informal-talks/> (May 24, 2023).

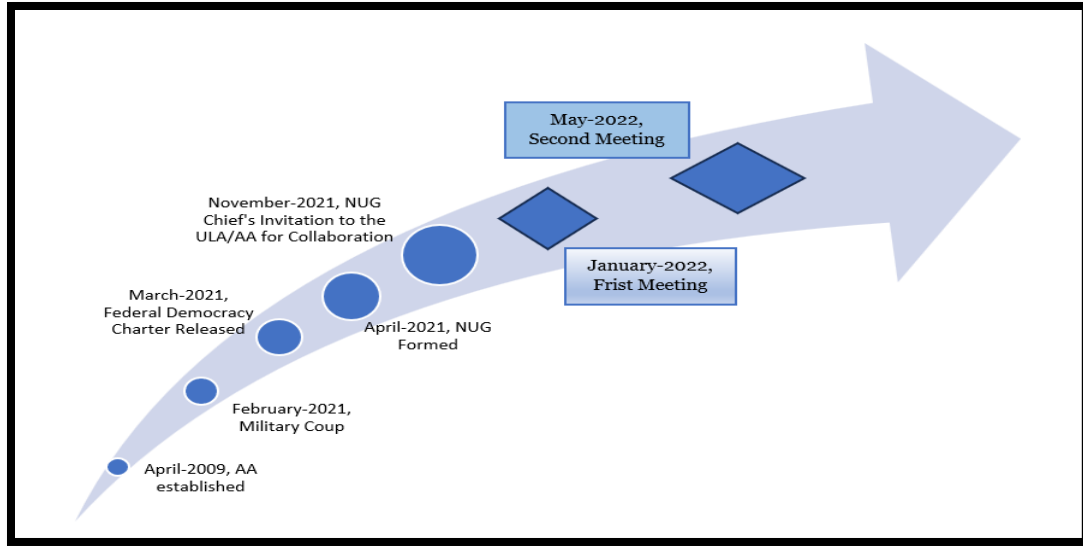
<sup>69</sup> BBC. 2022. "NUG နဲ့ AA တို့ ပထမဆုံးအကြိမ် ဆွေးနွေးခဲ့ကြ။" BBC News မြန်မာ. <https://www.bbc.com/burmese/podcasts/p02pc9lh/p0c730xp> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>70</sup> RFA Burmese. 2022. "Myanmar's Shadow Government Holds Talks with Powerful Arakan Army." Radio Free Asia.

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/talks-05162022175552.html> (May 24, 2023).

<sup>71</sup> RFA Burmese. 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06VJlnUhvzw>.





However, even if there is some progress to be noted in the relations between the two leaderships, the state of formal relations between the NUG and ULA is still relatively weak compared to other EROs such as the KNU, KNPP, CNF, KIO, etc.<sup>72</sup> The common platform or institution of cooperation or collaboration in military, political and diplomatic terms between the two movements is also out of sight and it means that the relations can also be backward at any time. To further realize the situation, please see the following figures:

**NUG and Its Collaborated Forces:**

Name	Members	Members
CRPH	Elected Candidates from NLD, Ta'ang National Party (TNP)	Kachin State People's Party (KSPP), Kayah State Democratic Party (KySDP)
NUCC <sup>73</sup>	<p>Armed Groups</p> <p>Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)</p> <p>Elected MPs CRPH, Members of Parliament Union</p> <p>Political Party Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS)</p>	<p>Ethnic-Based Forces</p> <p>Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC), Pa-O National Federal Council (PNFC), Mon State Federal Council (MSFC), Ta'ang Political Consultative Committee (TPCC), Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC)</p> <p>Spring Revolution Forces</p>

<sup>72</sup> KNU, KNPP, and CNF are members of the NUCC while the KIO and CNF has membered in the C3C together with NUG.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.nucc-federal.org/members>

C3C <sup>74</sup>	National Unity Government (NUG), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Chin National Front (CNF),	Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP), All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF)
K3C <sup>75</sup>	National Unity Government (NUG), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO),	Karen National Union (KNU), Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP)
J2C	National Unity Government (NUG), Karen National Union (KNU)	

#### ULA and Its Collaborated Forces:

Name	Members
Northern Alliance (NA)	Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA)
Three Brotherhood Alliance (TBA)	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA)
FPNCC	United Wa State Party (UWSP), Peace and Solidarity Committee (PSC) (NDAA), Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), Shan State Progressive Party (SSPP), Myanmar National Truth and Justice Party (MNTJP) Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), United League of Arakan (ULA)

The above two tables have reminded observers that the ULA has a very minimal platform with the NUG to serve as the space for policy and political negotiations. There are only two ERO platforms such as the KNU which is a member of the NUCC, and the ULA has some military presence in Brigade-5 of the KNU and the KIO which is a member of the C3C as well as a member of the NA and FPNCC in which the ULA is also a member. The key question, therefore, is why the ULA/AA is ending up as a distant partner of the NUG whereas other stronger EROs are in a higher degree of cooperation and interactions with the NUG. This is also a question necessary to be answered by analyzing complex and dynamic realities of the hidden factors of the country's politics.

#### D. Approaching the Relations through the Theoretical Perspectives

In this part, in accessing the background and current state of relations between the two political movements; ULA and NUG, the two key political theories such as political realism and political liberalism will be deployed in order to enrich the analysis from various perspectives. Although these two political theories are mainly used in the sphere of international relations in explaining the relations among the 'states', the study regards that applying these two theoretical lenses is also useful in trying to understand the relations among the different political actors or powers in the current political dynamics of Myanmar. That means since these theories are mainly used to assess and analyze the political cooperation, competition, and conflicts among the different political actors, the ULA and NUG as the organized political actors with their unique political

<sup>74</sup> [https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar\(Joint Command and Coordination\)](https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar(Joint Command and Coordination))

<sup>75</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/rating-the-progress-of-myanmars-resistance-movement/#:~:text=Led%20by%20members%20of%20the%20ousted%20National%20League,National%20Progressive%20Party%2C%20and%20the%20Chin%20National%20Front.>

interests, identities, and ideologies also have complex and dynamic relations like the ‘states’ in the sphere of the international politics.

The relations between the ULA and NUG leadership are relatively new. Although the armed movement led by the ULA/AA has been taking place since 2011-armed conflicts in Kachin State and 2015 Kokang armed clashes in Northern Shan State and more intensively in Rakhine State from 2018-2020 onward, the NUG as a political organization only come out in April 2021 after February 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Today, the political relations between the two leaderships can be regarded as relatively weak compared to some other ethnic armed groups. Until now, after more than two years of the military coup, the relations between the two parties are not strong enough in order to challenge the hegemony and legitimacy of the SAC and there are also many justifications and observations on why this is not happening from various perspectives. In this study, the study will analyze and explain the phenomenon based on two key theoretical perspectives, namely political realism, and political liberalism. The study has also assumed that the political doctrine of the ULA leadership is more realism-leaned while that of the NUG leaders is more liberalism-leaned, and it can be tested and operationalized out in the following parts.

### 1. ULA Leadership and Realist Thinking

In line with realistic thinking, there are several factors that can explain why the relations between the ULA and NUG leaderships have ended up in the current state. While many people in the ethnic Bamar community and their democratic leadership often consider the role of minority ethnic political actors (in the process against the military dictatorship) as ‘an act of choosing between right and wrong’ or ‘between good and evil’, this is not primarily true for the ULA leadership who see the two political blocks as the ‘two sides of the same coin’ in regardless of values and principles. This political perspective can be found in an interview by the ULA Chief just one week of the NUG formation. He said; “Our enemy, once united against us, has now broken up and is fighting each other and they both want us to be on their sides.”

Being the leaders of the armed movement with higher political destinations such as ‘confederation’ and often ‘independence’, the ULA leadership seems not to accept any form of external political domination, especially from the central Bamar political authority: military regime (SAC) or democracy leadership (NUG). In essence, they might see the state of politics in the country as ‘anarchy’ (which does not mean chaos) and thus, ‘self-help’ or ‘self-reliance’, in their views, is the key to the survival of their movements or the realization of their political goal. Therefore, increasing their power relative to both the SAC and NUG block by the use of all available means is very fundamental to them. This kind of thinking is also very well-founded in the ‘philosophy of the Way of Rakhita’<sup>76</sup>.

Moreover, political realism also states that increasing the power of one particular political actor could be interpreted as a threat to another political actor. Thus, all of the SAC, ULA and NUG leadership can also be trapped in a state of ‘security dilemma’. As a result, it would lead to power competition among the various military and political actors. Under the current climate of Myanmar politics, the ULA Chief on August 2021 has openly stated that they do not consider the NUG as the enemy<sup>77</sup>. This change in perception in August 2021 was confirmed by the first meeting between the NUG and ULA leadership in January 2022 and the subsequent decline of the peace invitation by the

<sup>76</sup> CNI. 2021. “Interview with the ULA/AA Chief.” [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=589304988753389](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=589304988753389) (August 10, 2023).

<sup>77</sup> Tun, Chit Min. 2021. “ရခိုင်အရေးနဲ့ မြန်မာ့နိုင်ငံရေးအပေါ် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်ထွန်းမြတ်နိုင် ဘာပြောလဲ.” Channel News Independent (CNI). [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN\\_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=966450160605059](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C&mibextid=2Rb1fB&v=966450160605059) (August 1, 2023).

SAC in February 2022<sup>78</sup>. In addition, in May, the ULA had another meeting with the NUG and they again declined the peace invitation of the SAC<sup>79</sup>.

However, there is still a long way to go in the relations between the NUG and ULA leaderships compared to other ethnic armed groups. Under the current military and political situation of Myanmar, neither SAC nor NUG can be regarded as the only hegemonic power in the system. Thus, in terms of the balance of power politics, it could be regarded as the 'multi-power world' in which the NUG is one of the polarities. But, for the ULA leadership, the SAC is the immediate threat compared to the NUG because the former militarily and administratively rule Rakhine state and is in direct military confrontation with them. In this case, the ULA leadership have four clear options to choose as mentioned in the theoretical discussion. These options are 1) balancing, 2) buck-passing, 3) bandwagoning and 4) hiding.

The ULA leadership can think that the last two choices of bandwagoning and hiding cannot bring their high military and political objectives, the first two strategies of balancing and buck-passing come into the table. In this case, the NUG is a strategic asset. For the balancing act, it is practical to cooperate more with the NUG in the act of balance against the SAC, which is also the key challenger in Rakhine State and its alliance territories. Then, for the second act of buck-passing, the ULA cannot still rely on the NUG as it is relatively weak in strength compared to the SAC and has no political recognition of its confederation status from the NUG. In this case, the NUG recognizes the political demand of the ULA and has greater military strength than the SAC, the ULA can buck pass the SAC toward the NUG. These are the best options for the ULA leadership.

But there are still two unwelcome (bad) scenarios for the ULA leadership that they still need to prepare for the question of the 'security dilemma'. The first scenario is the unilateral victory of the NUG block over the SAC while threatening the domination of the ULA and interfering in what they think as domestic affairs of Rakhine State ranging from the Rohingya crisis, Paletwa question and border issues to the resource and power-sharing arrangement. Under the second and worse scenario, since the NUG has still positioned the former NLD leaders such as Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and U Win Myint as theirs and has no strong clarification of the NLD ethnic policy, there is still a possibility that the NUG decided to enter into the political negotiation with the junta and build a common force against the ULA under a particular circumstance.

In order to prepare for this kind of bad scenario for the ULA leadership, there are two key strategic tools such as 'hegemony' and 'balance of power' to which they can deploy. As the first strategy is less pragmatic given the external factors and the amount of material and non-material resources they have possessed, it is the second tool that they have decided to apply.

To materialize this strategy, in addition to the already existing strong political and military alliances such as the NA, TBA and FPNCC, the ULA leadership has also decided to nurture and support the newly emerged armed resistance groups such as the Bamar People's Liberation Army (BPLA), Student Armed Force (SAF), People's Revolutionary Alliance (Magway), Karenni National Defense Force (KNDF), Asho Chin Defense Force, Mara Defense Force and Chin Defense Force (Mindat), etc (Kyaw Hsan Hlaing 2023). Among the new armed resistance groups sponsored by the ULA, there are two key characteristics such as 1) being neighbouring to Rakhine State and 2) having adopted a diverse political vision from the NUG. Some have even assumed that these groups have more possibility to support the ULA's political ambition for Rakhine State compared to the NUG per se<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>78</sup> Hkat Mar. 2022. "ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေးဆွေးနွေးဖို့ စစ်ကောင်စီ ဖိတ်ခေါ်ချက် မယုံရဘူးလို့ ပြင်ပလေ့လာသူတွေသုံးသပ်." *Radio Free Asia*.

[https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program\\_2/views-on-military-junta-peace-process-02082022165637.html](https://www.rfa.org/burmese/program_2/views-on-military-junta-peace-process-02082022165637.html) (August 10, 2023).

<sup>79</sup> Kyaw Lynn. 2022a. "The Dynamics of Arakan Politics and the Possibility of Another War." <https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-dynamics-of-arakan-politics-and-the-possibility-of-another-war> (August 10, 2023).

<sup>80</sup> Kyaw Hsan Hlaing. "How the Arakan Army Has Capitalized on Myanmar's Coup." *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/how-the-arakan-army-has-capitalized-on-myanmars-coup/> (March 28, 2024).

Strategically, in line with the realistic thinking, for the ULA leadership, a scenario in which the NUG is in competition and conflict with the SAC is a better option compared to the one in which either the SAC or the NUG prevails as the only hegemonic central power. Under this scenario, the ULA can freely choose a side which one to balance more while building its strength and domination in Rakhine State to persuade its national interests. At the movement, the policy of the ULA toward the NUG is more understandable from the perspective of the balance of power rather than buck-passing, band wagoning, and hiding based on the sense of political realism.

## 2. NUG and its Liberal Policy

While the theory of political realism reveals the way of thinking by the ULA leadership from the perspectives of power and interest, the liberal political theory also surprisingly manifests the idea that NUG leadership has demonstrated mainly in the FDC and several interviews. In line with the liberal doctrine, the NUG leadership seems to believe that distrust and misperception including the state of anarchy can be overcome by the construction of more common and legitimate political institutions binding the behaviours of each other. These institutions should be mechanisms and structures that can channel political order and cooperation governing collective behaviour. For the NUG leadership, therefore, both parts of the FDC and institutions like the NUG, CRPH, NUCC and others can perform the task of guaranteeing political rights that the ULA leadership may demand. For instance, in the 'Preamble' of the FDC's Part-1, it is mentioned that we believe that the eradication of military dictatorship can only be achieved if all elements collaborating in the movement against the military coup are organized into a single force under the collective leadership of all revolutionary stakeholders.

After elevating this step, according to liberal philosophy, there will be a state of 'reciprocity' between the two leaderships and movements, in which the collection of the two movements is larger than the sum of the individual parts. The prominent instances could be the financial contribution of the NUG toward the ULA movement while the latter provides a more active military and material contribution toward the 'Spring Revolution'. The example could also be found in the case of the Mocha strike in Rakhine State where the NUG claimed to set up USD 1 million for the cyclone victims and to collaborate with the ULA in Rakhine State<sup>81</sup>.

Moreover, the NUG leadership also believe that a more frequent and intense interaction between the two organizations could lead to a point of 'interdependence.' For instance, in a letter in March 2022 by the NUG's Head of Alliance Relations Committee, Daw Zin Mar Aung expressed: "The NUG has decided to eradicate the dictatorship in collaboration with the Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations and political partner organizations by building mutual trust and more friendly and solidarized relations." There is also a necessity of creating inter-organizational institutions between the NUG and ULA leadership in line with the liberal theory. This will also help the coordination of the expectations and behaviours of each party. But this can be a very difficult step between the two movements as there is still no common platform militarily, politically, diplomatically, etc. In some instances, the KIA is in collaboration with the K3C while the KNU is in J2C even if both of these groups do not directly participate in the NUG. While the realism leaned-ULA leadership could choose either hegemony or balance of power in order to solve the problem of the 'security dilemma', the NUG in line with the liberal theory persuade the way of 'collective security'. It is also well-addressed in Article (5) of Section II in Part-1 of the FDC. The article says, "All federal security and defence forces shall be under the command of the democratically elected civilian government. The principle of human security shall be practised."

This issue of security arrangement will be one of the main problems in improving meaningful relations between the two movements in the present and future. In other words, it is also the

<sup>81</sup> Mizzima. 2023. "NUG Establishes \$1 Million Cyclone Mocha Emergency Fund for Victims." *Mizzima Myanmar News and Insight*. <https://www.mizzima.com/article/nug-establishes-1-million-cyclone-mocha-emergency-fund-victims> (August 10, 2023).

question of the formation of the federal army in Myanmar politics. Dr. Sa Sa, Minister of International Cooperation from the NUG in April 2021, for example, said,

“In principle, it has to be one institution. We all understand that we cannot win alone. AA can never win alone, the Karens will never win alone. They know that I know that, only together we will win<sup>82</sup>.” He also highlighted some ideas regarding the mechanism and structure of the federal army that it is an easy task to integrate the existing ethnic armed organizations if each group from a particular state can become a part of the federal army in their own state and delegate joint chiefs of staff to the centre (Naypyidaw) to command under the chief of staff. This is also the best way to do it, he added. In the same article, the ULA Chief answered that the idea is good, but in reality, substantiating this concept is not that easy or practical.

On an earlier date in January 2019, the ULA Chief stated that they prefer [a confederation of states] like Wa State, which has a larger share of power in line with the Constitution and foreign, market and defence affairs should be jointly managed with the central authority<sup>83</sup>. Conceptually, a group like the ULA, a member of the FPNCC led by the UWSP has a desire not just for political and economic self-determination but also for the unique security-military arrangement for their respective territories. It was also mentioned in the federal proposal handled by the FPNCC in Naypyidaw in 2018<sup>84</sup>. There could be three key reasons why the FPNCC leadership prefers to take this path. The first reason comes from the normative perception that in their thoughts, despite accepting the ‘one chain of command’ or ‘one country, one army’, following the command of a democratically elected government also means following orders by the Bamar-led government. It could also be interpreted as the hegemony and domination of the Bamar majority over their security affairs. This, in turn, is also related to the second and more historical ground.

From their perspectives, if all the armed forces were to be put under the centralized and hierarchical military command led by ethnic Bamar commanders, there is still no guarantee that the military might not attempt to stage a military coup for various reasons. At that time, it will be too late for the minority ethnic people to build another cohesive armed group to protect their territories against the military dictatorship. The political complexity under the late years of the parliamentary period presented this problem in which democratically elected Prime Minister U Nu transferred power to General Ne Win and things went on bad for many ethnic minority people during the caretaker government (1958-60) and finally, a military coup had emerged in March 1962.

Thirdly, it is about the pragmatic claim. As the organization and formation of various ethnic armed groups already have their very specific and unique motivations, structures, loyalty, missions, and visions, it is such as huge and heavy ambition to bring all armed soldiers of the different ethnic armed groups into a one and uniform institution. More importantly, even if the ambition is strong enough, there is still a very long and risky process along the way of doing it.

Apart from all these two key reasons, however, it is still questionable to what extent the ULA leadership is confident in creating the ‘collective security’ arena with the NUG-led security arrangement. Firstly, the NUG itself does not still possess an adequately strong command and control mechanism among the PDF and LDF forces. Second, the ULA leadership might still calculate the ratio between the security gain achieved from the collaboration with the NUG and the security loss that happened due to the SAC’s temper for collaborating with the NUG. All of these scenarios point out a situation in which the ULA relations with the NUG are more likely to improve as much as the NUG’s military power comes to increase especially relative to the SAC and political recognition of the ULA’s political demand.

<sup>82</sup> Mendelson, Allerga, and Alastair Mccready. 2021. “‘We Are Not Naive Anymore’: Myanmar EAOs Skeptical about Federal Army.” *Southeast Asia Globe*. <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/myanmar-federal-army/> (May 25, 2023).

<sup>83</sup> Irrawaddy. 2019. “Confederation the Only Option for Arakanese People, AA Chief Says.” <https://data.unhcr.org/fr/news/21826> (February 3, 2025).

<sup>84</sup> ACLED. 2018. “Analysis of the FPNCC/Northern Alliance and Myanmar Conflict Dynamics - Myanmar.” *ReliefWeb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/analysis-fpnccnorthern-alliance-and-myanmar-conflict-dynamics> (March 27, 2024).

## **Part-IV: Conclusion**

In the conclusion part, the study will summarize and analyze the key findings of the report. From a historical perspective, it can be found that there was very little precedence and historical experience when it came to the collaboration between the Rakhine armed forces and pro-democracy and federal ethnic Bamar-led opposition movements. Therefore, it poses two key challenges: firstly, not having historical memories to take lessons from the past and secondly not being able to build a sufficient level of trust between the two movements, contributing from the ULA's grievances toward the NLD government leaders who still hold de jure positions in the NUG.

In assessing the historical records of the NUG-ULA interactions after the 2021 military coup, there are three critical factors to be noted. First, the relations are highly informal and rhetorical. The two leaderships have considered each other as a part of their mainstream movement, but not essential. There are also very few institutional platforms or normative principles that the two movements have upheld and agreed on. Second, the ULA leadership has perceived the NUG as one of the actors, not the only legitimate actor, and thought separately about their policy toward NUG and other newly emerged ethnic Bamar-led political forces. Thirdly, the NUG has also prepared to lose the ULA's trust given its comparative and strategic interests in the cases of Rohingya policy and federal democracy construction.

Above all of these, however, the research uncovers that a deeper degree of deviation between the two movements ultimately comes not from personal and organizational levels, but from the structural and philosophical roots. The ULA leadership preferred realist thinking meaning they have essentially perceived the current political crisis as a clash between the two bigger central blocks. Moreover, their strategy is mainly 'self-helped' which is well-reflected in the WOR philosophy. On the other hand, the NUG leadership thought that interdependency and collaboration were the keys to achieving the objectives described in the FDC. While the NUG leadership has perceived that institutional collaboration, reciprocity and collective principles can bring effective political results against the SAC, the ULA leadership has considered the 'power' and 'interests' as the core issues in fighting against the SAC government.

Besides, although the ULA has not designated the NUG as their key enemy, it does not still mean that they consider the NUG as a strong alliance or perpetual friend. It also means that NUG is not seen as the enemy because the group can be applied in the power-balancing act against the SAC government. Thus, the NUG is still in the matrix of security dilemma for the ULA leadership, and there are two unwelcoming scenarios such as the NUG quickly defeating the SAC and becoming a hegemonic power over the ULA and secondly, the NUG in reconciliation and cooperation with the SAC can still turn against the ULA over many critical issues in Rakhine state. The NUG's liberal policy of building a common or collective security architecture is still seen as a distant dream by the ULA. Moreover, there will also be calculations between the security gains and losses in the event of collaborating with the NUG for the ULA movement. Open and deliberative security collaboration with the NUG could easily invite greater and more aggressive responses from the SAC and it is critical for the security calculation.

Finally, based on the structural perspective, two arguments could be staged. First, the relations between the NUG and ULA movements could be ultimately determined by the relative military power between the NUG and SAC. Second, as far as the power gap between the NUG and SAC decreases, there is a higher possibility of seeing closer relations between the NUG and ULA. But it also needs to do with the political alignment between the two movements.