

Assessing the role of ethnic armed organizations in local governance of post-conflict Myanmar: A case study of New Mon State Party

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Abstract

Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar have historically functioned as both military and governance roles, particularly in regions with minimal state control or its absence. In this study, the role of EAOs is analyzed in local governance, specifically in areas of service delivery and administration through a case study of New Mon State Party (NMSP). Using a qualitative case study approach, the study employed semi-structured interviews with local residents from three townships of Mon state which was further complemented by the analysis of secondary resources for data triangulation. Findings revealed that NMSP provides essential governance services in education, healthcare and local administration matters, reflecting some of decentralization principles. In addition, the study also highlights significant governance issues such as limitations in resources and formal legitimacy, taxation problems and corruption, and service inconsistencies. Through the lens of rebel governance and decentralization theories, the analysis informs that EAO-led governance presents an alternative governance framework in a contested manner in current federalization debates of Myanmar. Even though findings indicate that EAOs contributes significantly towards local governance, there remains complications in their legitimacy and sustainability, which raises critical questions about their integration into decentralized governance in post-conflict Myanmar.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and significance of the problem

Historically, a third-tier local government was absent in Myanmar, leading to disparities in development nationwide, especially in remote and rural ethnic regions. Successive Myanmar governments provided local governance services through centrally controlled organizations. In 1993, the central government formed Development

Administration Organizations (DAOs) under the Development Committees Law to provide local governance services (UNDP Myanmar, 2015). However, the centralized control resulted in DAOs' lack of adequate knowledge of local contexts, leading to ineffective service delivery and unresponsive governance (Arnold et al., 2015). Consequently, this did not address local issues effectively nor fulfil diverse needs in ethnic regions (Nixon et al., 2013).

Therefore, non-state actors interfered in offering alternative necessary services to local communities. Community-based organizations played an important role in provision of local services and solving grassroots problems, providing opportunities related to education, jobs and vocational training (Martin, 2021). At the same time, EAOs also stepped in by providing necessary support towards their own ethnic communities tailored to their needs (Center for Operational Analysis and Research, 2023), besides their primary resistance movements. They established their local governance mechanisms to provide local services in their respective ethnic areas. EAOs in Arakan, Mon, Karen and Kachin formed their localized institutions related to education and healthcare to provide localized services based on ethnic cultures, in parallel to state institutions (South, 2022).

Following the 2021 coup, discussions on federalism in Myanmar have intensified. Debates around decentralization, federalism and local governance for the future of Myanmar have persisted. There, the topic of local governance gained prominence such that the question of how local governance should be formed to effectively resolve local issues in post-coup Myanmar is raised. Since the country has such diverse ethnic groups of different cultures and languages, relevant knowledge is essential into incorporating policy-making processes of local governance in the post-conflict. Here, it is important to analyze non-state actors in local governance within the country including state institutions, community-based organizations and EAOs to understand grassroots complexities.

For that reason, this study examines the role of EAOs in local governance through a case study of the New Mon State Party (NMSP). It unlocks more understanding of how EAOs may have effectively performed its local governance func-

tions while exploring their challenges, and how this could contribute to broader implications for the development of local governance mechanisms in post-conflict Myanmar.

1.2 Research objectives

This research aims to

- Understand the governance structure and practices of NMSP
- Critically analyze the governance role of NMSP, assessing both its functions and challenges
- Evaluate broader implications of EAO-led governance for post-conflict Myanmar's federalization

1.3 Research questions

- This research focuses on addressing two critical questions:
 - To what extent does NMSP function as local governance actors, and what challenges does it face?
 - What are the broader implications of EAO-led governance for post-conflict Myanmar's federalization?

1.4 Definition of key terms

Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are defined in Myanmar's context as non-state armed organizations, representing specific ethnic groups and engaging in armed resistance against the central government (Jagger, 2018; Harrison & Kyed, 2019).

Local governance can be comprehended in Myanmar's context as the exercise of authorities for areas of development, public services and socio-economic matters by either state or non-state actors (Kyed & Engberg-Pedersen, 2008).

Post-conflict in this study refers to the period of the end of current civil war between revolutionary forces and the military in Myanmar since 2021-military coup, and the beginning of building a federalized Myanmar.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of local governance in Myanmar

Tracing back to three constitutional periods, local governance structures evolved in Myanmar under different types of regimes. From early post-independence to semi-democracy later, the country encountered different shifts in governance structures and evolution of powers, orchestrating significant changes in local governance at grassroots levels.

The first 1947 Constitution of Myanmar was enacted to eradicate post-colonial social divisions, and to promote justice, equality and liberty for all citizens (Furnivall, 1949). The constitution made a significant attempt to form a decentralized governance system which permitted local administrative autonomy at the presence of a strong central government (Coffey, 2022). These governance models tried to facilitate local service delivery from all angles of hierarchy, market and network modes (Swe & Lim, 2019). The constitution attempted to incorporate liberal principles in governance, but this led to instrumental conflicts among ethnic groups. Later, the military seized power amidst these discussions in 1962 and disrupted all these decentralized endeavors from ethnic groups (Crouch, 2019).

The 1962 military coup led to centralization under the new 1974 constitution. Local governance was much more limited under the centralized governance and the military-led government. Accordingly, the military regime controlled from the center through its appointed ministers in the state and local areas. Crouch (2019) argued that this led to the absence of local government and instead, national ministries and DAOs addressed local issues by terms of central policies rather than acting as fulfilling local needs. Lacking legislative and executive powers, these ministries and DAOs heavily relied on the support of the military government such as policies, staff, funding and infrastructure (Ninh & Kosuta, 2016). These

centralized features resulted in the lack of local autonomy and responsive service delivery at grassroots levels, leading to poor local governance under centralized institutions (Swe & Lim, 2019).

Furthermore, the 2008 constitutional period marked a transition towards a more democratic era because state and regional governments gained a certain amount of autonomy in their regions, highlighting some decentralization efforts (Crouch, 2019; Ninh & Kosuta, 2016). However, these governments were heavily dependent on national ministries, controlled by the central government for approval and funding for local matters. The approval was mandatory to be obtained from the central government for any state and local development activities (Ninh & Kosuta, 2016). The constitution is still rooted in centralization with 25% of parliamentary seats reserved for the military officers without any election, undermining these decentralization features (Crouch, 2019).

Nonetheless, the 2008 constitution paved the way for escalating discussions around federalism, decentralization and local governance in the periods of U Thein Sein government in 2011-2015, and National League of Democracy government in 2016-2020 (Bunte, Kollner & Roewer, 2019). Under the U Thein Sein's government, EAOs gained certain space for governance discussions through a series of political reforms and peace negotiations such as National Ceasefire Agreements (Aung, 2016). These efforts allowed EAOs to participate in dual territorial control, resulting in opportunities for them to establish local governance mechanisms in their territories (Stokke et al., 2022). Despite this progress, peace talks were challenging such that armed clashes continued with EAOs. Later years, political communities, parties and EAOs gained more momentum in approaching a bottom-up approach to federalism (South, 2022), wanting for more autonomy and decentralized governance in ethnic areas. These changes conveyed the acknowledgement of

importance of good local governance across ethnic regions to balance development, equality and self-determination.

2.2 Historical involvement of EAOs in local governance

Historically, EAOs have long addressed local needs and resolved issues in their ethnic regions, particularly in regions where the central government has been less supportive. Over time, many EAOs have expanded their activities beyond their resistance, and addressed local issues in their controlled areas through their local governance structures.

EAOs such as Karen National Union (KNU) in 1947 and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in 1961, initially focused on their resistance movements towards the military, and humanitarian assistance for conflict-affected areas (Loong, 2022; Williams, 2017). But later they formed their own local governance services in education, healthcare and local administration in villages and remote regions to fill governance service gaps left by the central government (Jolliffe, 2015). Moreover, the United League of Arakan (ULA) emerged as an Arakan ethnic revolutionary organization in 2009, with its goals of self-determination, federation and self-rule. Over the years, armed conflicts between AA and the military fluctuated, and nowadays in the post-coup, their battles have become widespread across the state. Despite their resistance, ULA also emphasized local governance and addressed local challenges through its Arakan People's Authority (APA) unit (Jolliffe, 2014; Center for Operational Analysis and Research, 2023).

Jolliffe (2014) added that several EAOs in Karen, Kachin, Arakan, Chin, Karenni, Shan and Mon mitigated local and ethnic challenges in their respective ethnic regions through their small-scale to large-scale functions. They positioned themselves as key governance actors at grassroots levels, particularly when central institutions

failed to address local issues. They even institutionalized their governance structures and service provisions such as education and health committees, and village administration units, in parallel to central government's policies (Jolliffe, 2015; Joshi et al., 2024). These factors show that EAOs in Myanmar did not just act as resistance organizations but also may have functioned as de facto local governments in their controlled areas. Moreover, their participation in the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) process made EAOs' governance contributions easier. As a result of NCA, their peace dialogue with the central government allowed them to formalize and expand their governance activities in their controlled territories to a certain extent, providing more accessible and responsive services to local communities (Arraiza & Davies, 2020). One other reason was because EAOs allowed community participation in decision making for local matters, resource management and development activities (Crumpton et al., 2023). This highlighted EAOs' practices in decentralized governance models at grassroots levels, that drove their models to be responsive and effective to address community issues. Despite these successes, the fluctuations of the NCA progress affected these successes and so did the 2021 military coup.

Moreover, several concerns persisted about EAO's legitimacy, accountability and inclusivity in their localized governance mechanisms (Crumpton et al., 2023). These concerns have raised questions about their representation of local communities and other ethnic minorities in their territories (Joshi et al., 2024). Besides this, there are significant variations in the quality and accessibility of EAO-led services, especially in education and healthcare across different areas (Jolliffe, 2015). These conditions underscore the importance of examining EAO-led governance and its effectiveness, and its broader implications for local governance of post-conflict Myanmar.

2.3 Non-state actors and impacts of their governance

Across the world, non-state actors often take on governance roles because of political marginalization, conflict dynamics and weak state institutions. The failure of the central government to provide security, justice and essential services led to a power vacuum in conflict or post-conflict environments which is often addressed by these non-state groups, similarly in Myanmar. In fact, they expanded beyond their resistance to governance services which often helped them achieve legitimacy and community support either through service delivery or coercion.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah, a Shi'a Islamist militant and political group, developed its governance mechanisms. It provided security, social services, healthcare and education, especially in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley which were largely ignored by the Lebanese government (Gleis & Berti, 2012). Its governance was commended for its efficiency and reliability through its institutions such as the Jihad al-Binaa and Imdad Committee, providing public services and infrastructure to local communities. However, Hezbollah is widely criticized for its sectarian division and suppression of political opposition groups (Saab & Ranstorp, 2007). Moreover, it is also denounced for its military activities in regional conflicts in Syria and Israel (Norton, 2007).

Another non-state organization is Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from the Bangsamoro region of the Philippines. MILF focused on its local governance in resolving local conflicts, security challenges and economic projects in its controlled region, besides provision of basic services in these areas in the absence of the central government (Breslawski, 2022). It established Sharia courts and Bangsamoro Development Agency under the Sharia Law to contribute to local communities' living conditions and economic opportunities (Tuminez, 2007). Even so, its governance faced several criticisms regarding its transparency, inclusivity and bureaucratic

efficiencies because political structures were highly influenced by former MILF commanders (Breslawski, 2022). Later in 2019, MILF transitioned into a formal political unit as a Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Similarly in Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) also formed local governance functions in rural areas for years, especially where state influence is absent or weak. It established its own public courts and taxation, offering security, taxation and justice to local communities (Provost, 2018). Despite FARC's success in stability and land reforms, its governance was often coercive and participated in illicit businesses such as drug trafficking and extortion. It was also widely criticized for its human rights abuses and criminal economic activities (Schultze-Kraft et al., 2016). Even though FARC signed the 2016 peace agreement, the following events such as criminal control in its former territories were condemned as its governance failures.

These three governance models have multiple differences - FARC lacked bureaucratic institutions but acted as a shadow government and provided revolutionary justice and taxation; MILF operated its governance traditionally and through Islamic ways, facilitating conflict resolution and providing essential public services in its territories; and Hezbollah functioned as a parallel government through its well-established institutions and offered extensive services. Despite their respective success in governance settings, they are criticized for their lack of bureaucratic inefficiencies, criminal activities, coercive actions and limited effectiveness. However, these actors also filled governance voids to a certain extent, providing localized services and decentralized institutions.

2.4 Theoretical frameworks

This study is built on two key theoretical frameworks such as decentralization and rebel governance to analyze the role of EAOs in local governance. These theories help to understand

how alternative local governance structures emerge in areas ignored by the central government. By applying these theories, the study critically assesses the extent to which EAOs function as local governance actors, and challenges they face to understand their broader implications for local governance in post-conflict Myanmar.

Decentralization theory, originated by Oates (1972), refers to the transfer of authorities, responsibilities and financial decision-making powers from the central government to state or local governments to reduce centralized control. This can lead to the formation of more responsive and context-specific local governance structures to fulfil diverse needs (Rodden, 2004; Schneider, 2003). In Myanmar, the central government failed to provide responsive local governance over the years under its centralized control, especially in ethnic regions where their institutions were absent or weak (Grindle, 2007). In these areas, EAOs acted as alternative governance actors and filled these gaps through localized service delivery. However, several questions are raised about the effectiveness and inclusiveness of these EAO-led governance. Decentralization theory is applied in this study to examine whether EAO-led governance effectively addresses local needs with its own challenges.

However, decentralization theory may not entirely explain governance structures of EAOs where rebel governance theory supplements the analysis. Rebel governance theory states that insurgent groups establish their governance functions in the regions under little control of state institutions, challenging the traditional perspective of state actors being the only government (Florea & Malejacq, 2023). Spadaro (2022) also argued that the theory examines the way rebel groups administer local affairs in conflict areas and provide governance services to local communities. In Myanmar's context, EAOs despite initially emerging as armed resistance organizations later formed their governance systems and supported

local services to ethnic communities in education, healthcare and justice matters, filling governance gaps left by the central government. By applying rebel governance theory, it will explore how EAOs in Myanmar established their governance structures and offered governance services in their territories.

2.5 Gaps in existing literature

Since most studies focus on the study of EAOs' military and political aspects, and ceasefire agreements, the study on their local governance contributions is under-explored. Since EAOs stepped in to provide local services in their territories and ethnic regions, a good understanding of their governance effectiveness and challenges has become essential for comprehension of Myanmar's broader local governance and decentralization debates. This study addresses this gap through a comprehensive case study of NMSP by evaluating its service and administration mechanisms, to comprehend the extent of EAO-led governance resolving local issues and its implications for broader discussion on local governance in post-conflict Myanmar.

3. Research methodology

This study used a qualitative case-study approach with emphasis on depth over breadth to examine the role of the EAOs in local governance. A case-study research design was selected for a thorough investigation into complex structures of local governance in practical environments (Ibrahim & Victoria, 2022; Khan, 2022). Given the distinctive political and socio-cultural distinctiveness of EAOs, this approach complemented an in-depth, context-sensitive analysis of NMSP's local governance mechanisms. While case studies do not typically lead to statistical generalizations, it provided rich and transferable insights to the study (Ibrahim & Victoria, 2022).

The study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method.

This method allowed a comprehensive and structured examination of participant perspectives. Interviews were undertaken via Zoom between October 7-11, 2024, prioritizing and ensuring participants' safety and confidentiality, given Myanmar's political sensitivity.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches was conducted to ensure that participants were recruited through trusted networks, ensuring their direct knowledge and exposure to NMSP's governance mechanisms. Three townships such as Mudon, Ye and Thanbyuzayat, were selected because of their geographically diverse locations. Three participants were interviewed from each township, totaling nine interviewees. The nine-participant sample size was justified depending on the principle of data saturation, where no new theme emerged from additional interviews (Young & Casey, 2018; Sharma et al., 2024). By the ninth interview, strong thematic convergence was displayed by responses, indicating that additional interviews would have brought only diminishing returns rather than new insights.

With the recognition of the risk of selection bias, diversification of participant backgrounds was ensured, and participants were recruited depending on the following conditions:

- Aged 18 or above and permanent residents of their respective townships
- Native Mon language speakers, ensuring cultural and linguistic insights into NMSP's governance
- Completed at least Grade 9 education, ensuring informed responses
- Minimum one year of community work experience at grassroots levels in their townships
- No affiliation with NMPS to minimize potential bias

Participants came from diverse backgrounds such as teaching, healthcare sector, village administration, and local ethnic organizations. This multi-sector representation provided a

comprehensive understanding of NMSP governance beyond only one occupational lens.

Thematic analysis was implemented to identify patterns and trends in responses, extracting key themes related to governance effectiveness, challenges and implications for federalization. To enhance the reliability of findings, secondary sources were used to cross-check themes from the findings including policy reports, government documents and previous studies. The triangulation approach was carried out to foster the credibility of findings by ensuring consistency across multiple data sources.

Given political sensitivity in Myanmar, participant confidentiality was strictly ensured for safety reasons. The study's purpose, risks and voluntary nature were verbally explained to gain informed consent before the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and they were informed that they had the right to withdraw any data collected from their interviews at any stage without consequences. No video or audio recording was undertaken, and participants were informed of written notes for research paper writing purposes only.

3. 1 Limitations of the study

Despite nuanced and valuable insights from the research, the study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size of nine-participant interviews provided depth over breadth and employed theoretical sampling to make sure of production of rich and detailed narratives with transferable perspectives (Young & Casey, 2018; Sharma et al., 2024). Even so, the sample size may not contribute statistically to generalizability to all EAOs in Myanmar and further research on a wide range of EAOs should be undertaken to enhance comparative analysis. Moreover, remote interviews through zoom application were conducted to ensure participants' safety, given security concerns. But this may have restricted the capacity to understand subtle expressions.

As a mitigation, cross-checking with secondary data sources such as reports, and previous studies was performed for findings' validity. Nonetheless, methodological rigor, triangulation method and purpose sampling strategy in this study strengthened relevance and applicability of findings to ongoing policy debates on local governance in Myanmar.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Understanding NMSP's local governance

The New Mon State Party (NMSP) was established in 1958 by revolutionary Mon ethnic leaders for freedom, self-determination and human rights, acting as the political wing of Mon National Liberation Army (Mon, 2014). Since then, its headquarters have been in Ye township and provided local governance services towards ethnic Mon communities across Mon state and some areas in Karen state and Tanintharyi region, especially in aspects of education, health and local administration duties. NMSP's governance functions have evolved as a response to state ignorance in ethnic regions, aligning with decentralization and rebel governance theories.

NMSP's most effective local governance sector is educational support. NMSP opened Mon national schools in 1972 and Mon national college in 1984 to provide quality education services tailored to Mon ethnic language and needs. Since then, Mon families preferred sending their children to these schools because they offered educational services in ethnic Mon languages unlike mainstream public schools. So, their children could maintain their own languages and practice them at schools and classrooms (Participant 1, Participant 2 and Participant 3, personal communication, October 7, 2024). This expressed the alignment with decentralization theory (Oates, 1972) that NMSP's schools fulfill localized needs, addressing gaps left by state institutions and with rebel governance theory (Florea & Malejacq, 2023) that NMSP, like Hezbollah and MILF, strengthens its governance

influence by establishing parallel educational institutions.

Respondents from Thanbyuzayat claimed that the post-coup saw the increasing number of students joining NMSP's schools because public schools were short of teachers due to the Civil Disobedience Movement, and students protested by discontinuing their education. So NMSP's schools were another option to afford quality education at affordable costs. Therefore, not just students but also teachers increased at NMSP's schools to fulfil increasing demands of student size (Participant 4, Participant 5 and Participant 6, personal communication, October 9, 2024). This underscores the readiness of NMSP's local educational programs at the time of emergency for Mon ethnic communities. In the post-coup, NMSP quickly adapted and expanded its capacity by making education accessible for all new students through community-based decision making. Consequently, these ethnic Mon children continued receiving uninterrupted education at the time of critical crisis. These findings proved the alignment with benefits of decentralization and rebel governance theories on conditions that at time of crisis local Mon communities had alternative governance service to pursue their interests, particularly in education of NMSP.

Mudon respondents shared that there was no public school in NMSP-controlled areas but only Mon national schools and Mon national college, so it was convenient for Mon families to send their children to pursue NMSP's education (Participant 7, Participant 8 and Participant 9, personal communication, October 11, 2024). Thanbyuzayat and Ye respondents also implied that Mon national schools offered unavailable subjects such as Music, Technology, Computer and Development at public schools because their children felt happier learning at schools (Participant 7, Participant 8 and Participant 9, personal communication, October 11, 2024). This oversight

revealed that NMSP's education is more culture-friendly in terms of easy access and quality curriculums, consistent with rebel governance theory that non-state actors such as EAOs fill governance gaps in conflict settings.

Healthcare services are another NMSP's local service. Participants 3 and 4 claimed that the provision of healthcare services was the second outstanding. NMSP built hospitals and healthcare clinics with trained doctors, nurses and healthcare staff primarily in its controlled zones, delivering basic healthcare services. The Mon National Health Committee trained and approved healthcare professionals for quality health services from emergency care to preventive care. Additionally, they were Mon language speakers and provided more accessible services because some villages in Ye and Thanbyuzayat cannot speak mainstream Burmese, and speak only Mon language (Participant 3, personal communication, October 7, 2024; Participant 4, personal communication, October 9, 2024). This suggests NMSP's effective healthcare support through Mon language as a medium of communication. This finding resonated with Oates' decentralization theory (1972) that local communities require localized health services in more culturally accessible ways as Mon ethnic villages gain the access to language-friendly services from NMSP. Moreover, this can be seen also as another application of rebel governance theory where like FARC and Hezbollah, NMSP attempts to achieve local loyalty and trust through provision of basic welfare services. Furthermore, Participant 8 and Participant 9 declared that their villages usually receive regular visits from NMSP's healthcare staff. Also, during the Covid-19 pandemic, NMSP provided free vaccines to remote local villages with no access to any support from the central government (Participant 8 and Participant 9, personal communication, October 11, 2024). These experiences underlined the importance of localized resolutions in a local governance system, closely aligned with decentralization theory.

Besides education and healthcare, NMSP established its mechanisms for local administration matters. Participants 2 and 3 from Ye township, and Participants 4 and 5 from Thanbyuzayat township, raised that NMSP already institutionalized local courts, justice systems, laws and orders in its controlled areas. There, lawyers, judges, village heads, and NMSP representatives operated in local administration matters ranging from farming and agriculture to local businesses. Local cases such as robbery, murders, and ethnic and family disputes were handled by local courts. Participants highlighted fairness and cultural understanding as key reasons for their preferences on NMSP courts (Participant 2 and Participant 3, personal communication, October 7, 2024; Participant 4 and Participant 5, personal communication, October 9, 2024). These findings showed theoretical applications in rebel governance such that NMSP like Hezbollah, MILF and FARC act as alternative justice providers in its contested territories.

Despite its governance success, NMSP has several structural and operational issues in its governance. Participant 3 mentioned that some remote villages in Ye and Thanbyuzayat, besides not receiving any support from NMSP, often experienced forced taxation (Participant 3, personal communication, October 7, 2024). Moreover, Participant 6 and Participant 8 also extended the discourse that some NMSP staff were corrupted and accepted bribery related to the approval of local businesses and trade matters. Even some villages under NMSP control did not receive regular healthcare services despite regular taxation (Participant 6, personal communication, October 9, 2024; Participant 8, personal communication, October 11, 2024). Moreover, Participant 8 and Participant 6 remarked that the number of Mon speakers are decreasing nowadays, and urban Mon ethnic communities were not close to NMSP's local governance functions, and NMSP found it challenging to promoting its influence on urban areas (Participant 8, personal communication, October 11, 2024; Participant 6, personal communication,

October 9, 2024). These findings indicated that similar to FARC's taxation in Colombia, NMSP gains its funding from informal taxation which raises concerns about coercion. Moreover, like MILF in the Philippines, sustaining governance at the lack of external funding sources is a major challenge to NMSP's governance mechanism as well.

Furthermore, the numbers and frequency of healthcare services remained a critical challenge though NMSP's healthcare provision seemed effective because of limited accessibility. Besides this, the number of educated and qualified individuals for health, education and local administration offices proved a critical need to increase to meet growing demands. Moreover, since many youths were relocating to nearby border areas in Thailand in search for work opportunities and better life conditions, some NMSP-controlled villages have only elderly people and children left (personal communication, October 7, 2024; October 9, 2024; October 11, 2024). These findings highlighted significant issues related to NMSP's governance efficiency, and sustainability and accountability issues as discussed in governance experiences of Hezbollah, MILF and FARC.

4.2 Role of NMSP as local governance actors, and governance effectiveness and challenges

Findings indicate that NMSP functions as local governance actors in regions where state institutions lack control over, exhibiting traits of alternative governance providers. NMSP has developed parallel governance functions in education, healthcare and local administration, operating independently of the central institutions. The establishment and success of Mon national schools since 1972 demonstrates the extent to which EAOs fill governance gaps left by the state in educational needs for local communities, providing ethnic-centered education and reflecting local cultural and linguistic identities. The increase of student enrollment in NMSP's schools

in the post-2021 coup further reinforces the fact that the expansion of EAO governance structures can be seen in times of state instability. This aligns with the rebel governance theory, which suggests that power consolidation is obtained by non-state actors through addressing local governance needs in conflict or post-conflict societies (Florea & Malejacq, 2023). Likewise, EAOs such as NMSP assume state functions during crises by providing localized healthcare services, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic which further legitimizes their governance role at local levels.

While decentralization theory argues that local governance functions are more responsive to community needs (Oates, 1972), the findings also expressed several issues and limitations in EAO-led governance. One major challenge is that as EAOs do not have electoral legitimacy, this raises many concerns about whether they are representative of all ethnic majorities and minorities in their territories, like MILF's governance in the Bangsamoro region of the Philippines. Therefore, NMSP may serve the interests of Mon ethnic communities but not that of other non-Mon ethnic groups such as Pa-Oh and Karen living within the state. Moreover, there are quality limitations on NMSP-provided services in education and healthcare for its lack of international accreditation, even though nowadays NMSP's Mon national college is expanding its educational credibility with foreign universities in Thailand. Additionally, NMSP faces resource shortages in education and healthcare as schools and clinics find it challenging to secure qualified staff for services, affecting the consistency of service quality. The issues in service quality of NMSP's governance seem great challenges to its effectiveness, which were also similar problems in Hezbollah's Jihad al-Binaa and Imdad Committee, and their performance. Moreover, these restrictions resonate with critical arguments of decentralization theory where administrative and service capacity could be

significant struggles for local governance entities to sustain effectiveness and responsiveness (Rodden, 2004; Schneider, 2003).

In addition, the findings expressed participants' concerns about corruption, forced taxation and bureaucratic inefficiencies of NMSP governance, which further pointed out accountability and transparency gaps of EAO-led governance. Despite consistent taxation, inconsistencies in service provision and bribery in local administration decisions expose governance vulnerabilities. These issues were also major challenges in governance systems of MILF and FARC where rebel taxations turned to corruption and loss of public trust though the initial purpose was to fund local services (Schultze-Kraft et al., 2016). These findings strengthen the complication in the perceptions of EAOs as effective governance actors, conveying that while they may act as alternative governance roles, they are not necessarily more accountable or transparent compared to state institutions.

Furthermore, another issue is the urban-rural divide found in EAO-led governance. Urban communities in Mon state are less likely to be influenced by NMSP-governance than rural communities because urban areas are more dominated by state institutions. Moreover, findings indicate that there is a significant drop in Mon language speakers among younger generations, presenting it as a cultural and political challenge for NMSP because ethnic identity and governance legitimacy are closely linked to language preservation. These trends raise broader questions about long-term sustainability of EAO-led governance, especially if younger generations are more distant with ethnic-based governance structures.

4.3 Implications of EAO-led governance for Myanmar's federalization in the post-conflict

Findings exhibit that EAO-led governance may contribute to Myanmar's federalization and

decentralization but in an informal and contest manner. Decentralization theory argues that transferring governance responsibilities to local governments promotes responsiveness and efficiency (Oates, 1972), and NMSP's governance model reflects these principles to some extent. NMSP proves that alternative governance functions may emerge in the absence of a strong central government by offering localized services in education, healthcare and administration. However, fragmentation and inconsistency found in EAO-led governance contributes to concerns about its scalability and integration to a formalized federalization.

As one of key barriers to the integration, EAO-led governance appears to be vulnerable to legitimacy challenges. The lack of political legitimacy results in political vulnerability of EAO-led governance, subject to state objection. Moreover, ethnic-based EAO-led governance also faces representational issues. Non-Mon ethnic minorities within EAO-controlled areas may be subject to non-inclusivity and discrimination in pursuing services and administrative justice (Joshi et al., 2024), mirroring similar challenges experienced by MILF governance in the Philippines where there were concerns over ethnic exclusivity and political patronage which complicated its transition into formal governance models (Breslawski, 2022). Besides this, since the tensions persist between EAOs and the central government particularly in the post-coup, decentralization debates in Myanmar remains contested with the idea that state actors may resist formalization of EAO-led governance.

Another major implication is that different EAOs may present variations in governance effectiveness. This raises questions regarding whether decentralization in Myanmar should follow a uniform or flexible approach. Subsequently, findings state inconsistencies in service delivery of healthcare and taxation by NMSP governance, implying that not all EAOs have the

same capacity to govern effectively. These resonate with critical arguments of decentralization theory, which says that governance efficiency can be enhanced by decentralization, but it can also result in inequality service distribution and administrative fragmentation (Schneider, 2003). Therefore, ensuring consistency in governance quality across various ethnic regions would be a major challenge if EAOs were to be formally integrated into Myanmar's federalization.

Finally, the findings express the dependence of future of EAO-led governance on broader socio-political trends, especially changes in public perspectives, demographic shifts and economic mobility. Since there is an increase in youth migration of Mon population to Thailand for economic opportunities, this conveys long-term legitimacy may be a struggle to be retained by EAOs, particularly when local people become less reliant on them for essential services. Moreover, a decline in Mon language proficiency and use by urban populations highlights potential cultural shifts, imposing influence on governance dynamics in the future. These demographic and socio-economic challenges raise many questions about EAO-led governance and its sustainability in ever-evolving political landscape of Myanmar.

5. Conclusion

The study critically assessed the role of NMSP as a local governance actor, with a specific focus on its governance functions in education, healthcare and administration. Findings reveal that NMSP fill governance voids ignored by the state, particularly in marginalized ethnic groups, resonating with rebel governance theory. Even so, despite its provision of essential services, NMSP-led governance remains in informal, fragmented and contested conditions, with critiques about long-term legitimacy and sustainability.

The analysis illustrates that decentralization efforts are partially supported by EAO-led governance through provision of localized and

culturally responsive services. Regardless of that, resource limitations, taxation issues and inconsistencies in governance effectiveness underscore systemic barriers of these governance models, highlighting critiques of decentralization theory. Moreover, there are also complications in the lack of state recognition on the role of EAOs in governance in Myanmar's socio-political dynamics.

Contrasting viewpoints contend that EAO governance is deficient in accountability, inclusivity and institutional oversight, contributing to risks of corruption, coercion and ethnic marginalization. And, the gap between urban and rural populations sparks discussion on the viability of EAO governance since economic shifts and migration alter demographics and political dynamics. These factors cast doubt on whether EAOs could evolve from informal governance entities into legitimate political institutions in a federal Myanmar.

Given these complexities, further research should be undertaken to cross-examine comparative governance models in other ethnic regions of Myanmar, evaluate the adaptability of EAO-led governance, and analyze possible conditions under which EAOs could be incorporated into formal political structures. The evolving role of EAOs in Myanmar can be seen as an ongoing debate that requires further scholarly research and critical debates.

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