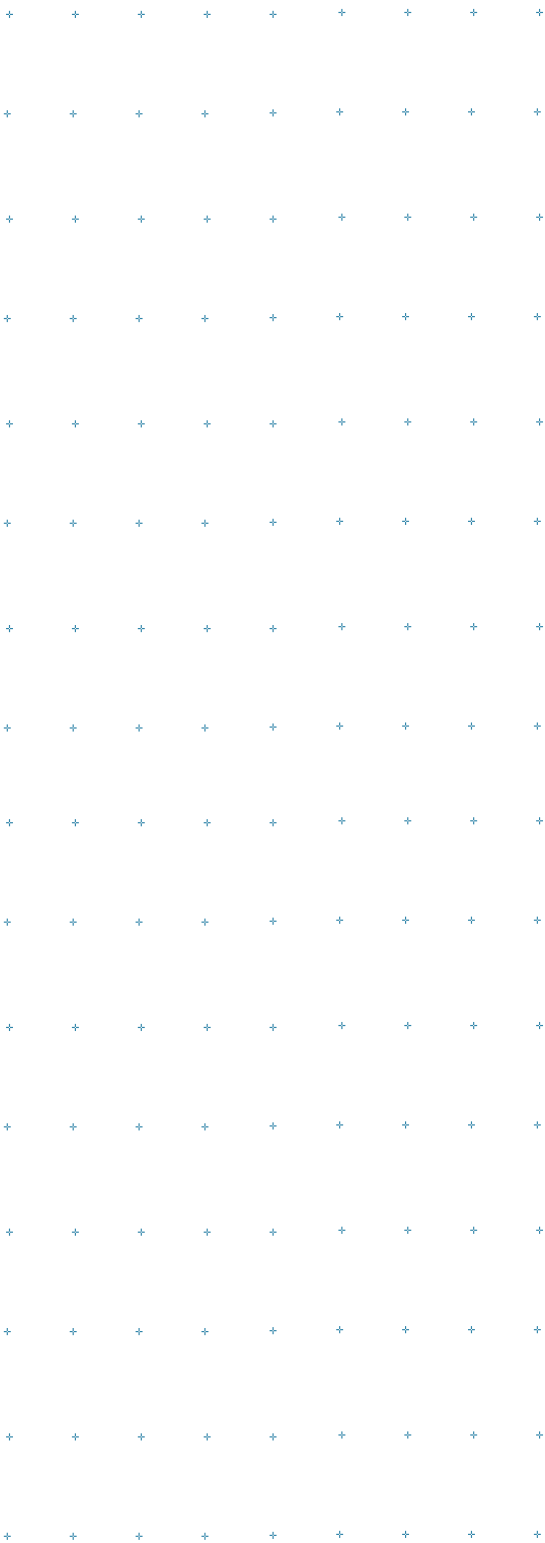


# 2019 in Review, 2020 in Forecast







**2019** was a significant year for Myanmar. New dimensions of the crisis in Rakhine State emerged and dominated news cycles. Simultaneously, the impact of The Gambia's case against Myanmar's treatment of the Rohingya – and Aung San Suu Kyi's trip to the International Court of Justice – sent ripples through the Myanmar public. With a critical election upcoming in 2020, how can humanitarian response actors reference the events of 2019 in order to better anticipate the year to come?

The Community Analysis Support System (CASS) asked some of Myanmar's top analysts what they believed to be the key developments of 2019, and what they thought most likely to capture attention in 2020.

Their responses have been collated here.<sup>1</sup> ●

<sup>1</sup> Analysts were given the opportunity to speak anonymously.

# CASS

*CASS is an analytical platform that consolidates, distills, and interprets data and local perspectives. CASS support humanitarian actors through the analysis of relevant factors, systems and stakeholders that shape humanitarian space in Myanmar.*

“I think that clearly the most significant development of 2019 was the [International Court of Justice] ICJ case, which has the potential to re-cast Myanmar’s domestic politics and international relations. This will also dominate the start of 2020, with the expected decision on ‘provisional measures’. Beyond that, the elections will structure much of politics from the expected May announcement of the election date, through to the November polls.”

— **Anonymous,**  
**Yangon-based Senior Political Analyst**

“Armed conflict between the Arakan Army (AA) and the Myanmar military was the major controversial issue in 2019, and held many important consequences. Based on the 4 January 2019 AA attack on police forces, tensions between Bamar and Rakhine flew high. Many Burmese commenters on Facebook referred to AA as ‘traitors’ and ‘backstabbers’, which they saw as turning on the very military which offered them protection from ‘Rohingya Terrorists’. Another dominant Bamar narrative has tended to portray Rakhine IDPs and villagers as de facto AA supporters and potential fighters.

In some cases, Bamar social media users call on the military to cut the food supply of Rakhine IDPs as they argue that these food complements are being used to feed AA. When the AA murder video spread on social media on 30 October, Bamar social media users were calling to revenge AA and the supporters of AA. All of these narratives are the same pattern of the widespread framing of the Rohingya in 2017.

From the Rakhine side, the anti-Bamar narratives are also very common. At the end of December, a statement attributed to ‘Arakan Youth Organisation’

demanding Bamar ethnics to leave from Rakhine State before January 5, 2020 went viral on social media. Especially during December 2019 anti-Bamar narratives were viral.

Looking at these narratives from 2019, inter-communal conflict between Rakhine and Bamar can happen in 2020. There is an emergency need to find a way to reconcile between Bamar and Rakhine now.”

— **Myat Thu,**  
**Yangon-based**  
**Social Media Analyst**

“Naypyitaw is likely to come under unprecedented pressure in 2020 with regard to accountability for alleged crimes against humanity in Rakhine State, as the breadth of support for international inquiries expands, domestic efforts at accountability are dismissed as inadequate, and dwindling hopes for near term repatriation are dashed. Whether these efforts are used to facilitate an improvement in the humanitarian situation will depend upon how international actors and Myanmar respond.

State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi’s appearance before the International Court of Justice at the Hague in December 2018 appears to have represented a turning point in international opinion. Though she had previously denied full knowledge of atrocities in Rakhine State in oblique terms, her appearance at the Hague clarified for those still in doubt that she and her government have been in the lead in Myanmar’s efforts to evade accountability. In a vote on a resolution of condemnation several days later in the UN General Assembly, 81.3% of states voted for the resolution, while only 5.3% voted against it. The remainder abstained. Even within ASEAN, which had previously sought to form a united

front on questions related to Myanmar at the UN, five of ten members voted for the resolution.

The ICJ may order provisional measures on 23 January, which could include an injunction on Myanmar to avoid ‘further’ acts of genocide, preserve evidence, and grant access to international investigators from the ICC, IIMM, or special procedures of the UN Human Rights Council. Having legitimized the ICJ proceedings by attending the provisional measures hearings in the Hague, it might then be difficult for the State Counsellor to completely ignore the Court’s ruling, which under the UN Charter would be binding on Myanmar.

Nor are domestic investigations -- such as Tatmadaw courts martial or the union government’s Independent Commission of Enquiry (ICOE) -- likely to shield Myanmar further scrutiny. The Tatmadaw has conducted the court martial into the atrocities at Gu Dar Pyin in total secrecy at regimental headquarters in Buthidaung. While the ICOE’s investigation has been more transparent, it is also unlikely to deliver meaningful accountability, given the commissioners’ stated reluctance to apportion blame and refusal to adopt international standards of victim protection and evidence preservation.

All of these factors are likely to add to international pressure on Myanmar in the midst of the uncertainty of an election year. The international community could use this pressure to press for greater humanitarian access. But it could also harden Myanmar attitudes toward the international community, leading to less cooperation on humanitarian issues.”

— **Aaron Connely,**  
**Research fellow, International Institute**  
**for Strategic Studies (IISS)**

“Existing humanitarian issues in Rakhine will continue into 2020, and new ones may even spring up. Rohingya will not be repatriated at least in 2020, and Rakhine IDPs may not be able to go back to their original places soon. The fighting between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw will continue. When elections are closer, fighting in Rakhine may even become more intense and there may be some electoral violence because one of Arakan Army’s main aims is to attract Rakhines away from ‘electoral democracy’ to armed insurgency.”

— **Regional Based  
Researcher on Myanmar**

“Despite little development at the macro-level policy making process in 2019, there were important incremental changes at the micro-level, especially in the non-conflict rural setting. In Myanmar, so much attention is paid to the union-level politics, that perhaps granular development on the ground is overlooked.

In 2019, more focus was given to the role of Ward/Village Tract Administrators (WVTAs) in conflict intervention and the justice sector. NGOs and Civil Society Organizations provided trainings to WVTAs on topics such as mediation and negotiation, conflict prevention, and rule of law. WVTAs in non-active-conflict settings participated in regional and national level events organized by NGOs, CSOs and Union level Enterprises, where they shared the concerns and interests of their constituents. In comparison to national-level elections, WVTA elections are more democratically representative as the candidate-voters relationship is more vital than the preference of political parties.

In 2020, Myanmar analysts/watchers should keep an eye on this trend and

take a closer look at the relationship between WVTAs and their constituents in conflict prevention, justice, and development issues; their relationship with state or region governments in implementing bigger policies on topics such as development or peace, and policy changes in their areas; their relationships with ceasefire and non-ceasefire armed groups’ taxation, and recruitment; and their role in understanding and intervening in hate speech and inter-communal conflicts. Myanmar analysts should be watching for the elections of WVTAs in 2020, which will likely occur after the 2020 general elections. It is difficult to know the exact timing of those elections. In 2015, some areas of Myanmar did not hold a transparent and effective WVTA elections, while the elections were held on different dates in different regions.”

— **Eaint Thiri Thu,  
Independent Consultant**

“The government’s reaction to the ICJ trial and accompanying advocacy efforts will greatly shape how aid actors are seen and treated in Rakhine. Humanitarian actors, already treated with a great deal of suspicion by state and Union governments, may face further operational difficulties or sanctions as local, state and Union officials associate their work with the ICJ case. Humanitarian access challenges, which have already forced the premature closure of one major development program, may become more severe as a result. Conversely, the imposition of provisional measures may lead the government to loosen its heavy-handed restrictions as a way of gaining favor with the Court.

In a continuation of a 2019 trend, and in light of the ICJ trial, the government will continue to relieve international pressure by promoting tokenistic efforts at building social cohesion or

facilitating freedom of movement, without taking meaningful steps to address systemic discrimination and persecution that have led to Rohingya crisis. The 88 recommendations of the Rakhine Advisory Commission -- the only meaningful framework for addressing the root causes of not only the Rohingya crisis but also the Arakan Army-Tatmadaw conflict -- will continue to be invoked in name only.

Driven by a desire to invest in and promote positive change -- and remain geopolitically relevant -- in Rakhine, Western donors will continue to use the ‘nexus’ of development, peace-building and humanitarian assistance as a programmatic entry-point into Rakhine. But without clarity about how nexus programs should actually work in practice, there is a major risk that most nexus-labeled initiatives will actually only be contextually-insensitive development programs that risk perpetuating the structural inequalities and systemic human right violations that characterize the Rakhine context.

With little incentive for either side to seek immediate peace, the AA-Tatmadaw conflict will intensify, with the AA attempting to establish a more permanent presence and exert state-like powers in its areas of control. While many Rakhine hold little faith in elections following the 2015 vote in which their ethnic party won a majority in their state but received little governing power, the 2020 elections may prove to be a last chance for more moderate Rakhine to find value in the current Union-led political system. A similar outcome to 2015, or reports of voter suppression or irregularities, may drive even more Rakhine to fervently support the AA’s ambitions for WA State-like autonomy.”

— **Anonymous,  
Senior Humanitarian Analyst**

“2019 began with a number of events that encapsulate the current state of politics in Myanmar and that highlight an apparent contradiction. On the one hand, Aung San Suu Kyi became more closely aligned with the Tatmadaw on internal armed conflict and ethnic affairs, with her government vowing to ‘crush the terrorists’ in response to police killings by the Arakan Army. At the same time, she remained the Tatmadaw’s main political adversary, announcing the formation of a parliamentary committee to reform the constitution, directly challenging the military’s role in politics, just one month after the government had taken over the military’s powerful General Administration Department. Similarly, the year ended with her defending the Tatmadaw against genocide allegations at The Hague, all the while pushing to reduce the military’s powers and preparing for another landslide election victory.

Those who have suffered most from Aung San Suu Kyi’s alignment on military affairs are civilians, including the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees whose land is being bulldozed along with their history, and the Arakanese/Rakhine public, who were displaced in the tens of thousands and were killed and raped in the dozens, including seven killed in the January ‘Mrauk-U massacre’. All the while, the Tatmadaw maintained a unilateral

ceasefire with a number of ethnic armed organisations while explicitly excluding the Arakan Army. This follows a trend of divide and rule negotiation tactics that – since the 1980s – has allowed the military to talk big on peace while endlessly perpetuating and escalating conflict. As she enters her 4th decade in politics, Aung San Suu Kyi is offering little hope for those demanding peace, justice and basic human rights. Nonetheless, she remains the one civilian who has been able to steadfastly increase her power and force her way into a male and military-dominated government where she was never made welcome. 2020 will likely see her pull further power away from the military and increasingly establish norms of civilian leadership. One can only hope that by 2030 there will be civilian leaders building on these foundations to establish a government that genuinely serves and protects the country’s diverse and long-oppressed public and that truly believes in peace.”

— **Anonymous,**  
**Regional Conflict Advisor**

“The escalation of violent conflict in Rakhine between the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw in 2019 greatly transformed the dominant conflict dynamics there, or at least brought to the fore different dimensions of

Rakhine’s ongoing conflicts in ways that impact each of its multiple conflicts in turn. For 2020, I’ll be looking to see the extent to which Rohingya and Rakhine find common cause in their opposition to the Tatmadaw and (Burman) state political leaders, as well as how the Chin continue to be impacted by and respond to the AA/Tatmadaw conflict.

The state of the political dialogue/peace process in 2019 was nothing short of depressing. I will be looking for how the 2020 election will address and potentially impact this process. Might it compel some movement so that the NLD can challenge any criticism waged by the military as part of electoral politics that it/Aung San Suu Kyi has been unable to build on the efforts under Thein Sein? Will the ethnic armed organisations be able to leverage this moment?

Some monks associated with Ma Ba Tha were very active in the last presidential election, campaigning for the military party, mobilizing around the four Race and Religion laws. These same figures, and their sympathizers, were quieter in 2019. Will we see any “Buddhist nationalist” campaigning as part of the 2020 election and if so, what might be the issues around which they mobilize?”

— **Rev. Susan Hayward,**  
**Senior Advisor, Religion and Inclusive Societies, United States Institute for Peace**



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