



CASS

Community Analysis Support System

INFORMATION ECOSYSTEMS PAPER 2

Southern Rakhine

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This paper is the second of a multi-part series examining the shifting sociocultural landscapes of minority and conflict-affected populations across Rakhine. The series uses three aspects of information ecosystems mapping – the role of influence, social trust, and information use – to explore the ways in which changes have contributed to community attitudes and impacted the efficacy and sustainability of humanitarian interventions. The first paper in the series examined the changing sociocultural dynamics of Rohingya communities in Cox Bazar. This paper looks at southern Rakhine’s minority Muslim communities, particularly their experiences of prolonged displacement, their access to information regarding the escalating conflict between the Arakan Army and Myanmar military, and their views on the scheduled – but uncertain – 2020 elections.

Executive Summary

The escalating Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) conflict in Rakhine State and southern Chin State has severely curtailed access to information. The southern townships of Rakhine State have thus far been relatively unaffected by the conflict playing out in the north and central parts of the state. However, local dynamics, such as the union government’s camp closure process and the vulnerable position of religious minorities vis-à-vis the uncertain 2020 elections should not be overlooked. The waves of intercommunal violence, which radiated across Rakhine state and the rest of Myanmar in 2012, and again in 2014, undermined the security and resiliency of Muslim communities in the south.

Though occasionally treated as such, non-Rohingya Muslim communities in Rakhine State are not monolithic. For instance, the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims have different political orientations and immigration issues,

while a small community of Ahmadiyya Muslims follow a different interpretation of Islam. Differences in origin stories and ethnic identities affect intercommunal relations, but also orientations to and interactions with the various levels of governance overlapping and contesting authority within the state. Humanitarian response actors should be sensitive to these differences in attending to the needs of these vulnerable groups.

Information ecosystem mapping can support response actors in making sense of the way by which information circulates within and amongst these communities. It is a particularly effective means of understanding how circumstantial changes, such as AA troop advancements and election rumours, affect not only the flow of information, but also its perceived trustworthiness and eventual impact.

Key Findings & Recommendations

- When it comes to Muslim communities in Rakhine, numerous origin stories intermingle. Whilst there is some indication that Kaman are more likely to align themselves with the story which suggests they came to Myanmar as royal archers, this is by no means universal. The reality is that however they arrived, these communities have intermarried with each other and with Rakhine Buddhists. As such, **historical claims to citizenship rights are an ineffective (to say nothing of unethical) means of arguing for or against what should be universal access to rights.**
 - Humanitarian actors should **be cautious about perpetuating the idea that access to human rights is determined by a person or community's history in a place.** Arguing, for instance, that Rohingya communities have existed in Rakhine for 'many generations' – as it is commonly framed – is not only ineffective but also serves to legitimise the idea that rights are tied to this heritage.
- Rakhine and Kaman Muslims have numerous points of social intersection with each other and with Rakhine Buddhists. In particular, they intermarry, celebrate key holidays, such as Thingyan, and participate in community games. Rohingya are largely absent from these social exchanges and activities and on the whole have fewer opportunities for developing resilient relationships with other communities. This is largely due to movement restrictions, but **there are cultural and religious differences that prevent Rakhine and Kaman Muslims from developing closer ties to Rohingya communities.**
 - Mutual participation in celebrations and festivals is a crucial aspect of social cohesion in Rakhine. Humanitarian actors should **ensure that their staff members participate visibly in these celebrations and festivals**, particularly when they are hosted or invited by the government.
 - Though displacement makes it difficult for these celebrations to be observed, **it is important that communities be supported in honouring these traditions** in some way. Not only is it important for the morale and dignity of those affected, it is a means by which intercommunity cohesion can be encouraged, including across ethnic and religious lines.
 - **Full moon day dinners are an important venue for youth mobilization** and an excellent opportunity for understanding youth issues and concerns. They are particularly valuable in that they offer a venue in which youth do not have to contend with the voices of older community members.
- **Rohingya and Rakhine/Kaman Muslim communities are not always – if even commonly – in agreement on key social and political issues.** The Rakhine and Kaman Muslims tend to see the Rohingya as low status labourers, and the Rohingya sometimes suggest that the Rakhine and Kaman Muslims are not sufficiently pious. These dynamics have been improved by the recent conflict, but these perceptions remain underlying factors in determining how the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities have responded to issues such as debates on the subject of repatriation. **It should not be assumed that all Muslim communities in Rakhine share the same religious beliefs and practices, or that they have the same attitudes toward social and political issues.** On the whole, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims consider themselves religious moderates who are opposed to mandatory veiling and sex-based discrimination. Religious sensitivities are likely to be an ongoing point of contention that can, under certain conditions, erupt into outright tension or in extreme cases, low-level violent inter-communal conflict.
 - Humanitarian actors, in an attempt to respect the religious preferences and practices of some Rohingya communities, may **unintentionally ostracize the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims**, especially women.
 - **'Muslim' enclaves may not be the inclusive or even socially cohesive spaces;** Kaman and Rakhine women are likely to bristle under the social guidelines espoused by Rohingya religious leaders, and Kaman/Rakhine Muslims may discriminate against Rohingya workers and traders.
 - Response actors should consider differences in the influence of religious actors when developing sensitization activities. It is particularly important to note that **religious leaders from one community will have little to no influence beyond their own ethnic group** – i.e. a Rohingya Moulvis will not be able to exert influence in Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities, and vice versa.
 - Response actors should also be aware that **keeping religious leaders from public discussions and advocacy is a conscious choice;** religious leaders are not only highly vulnerable to government harassment, but their participation may undermine a community's attempts at demonstrating an embrace of secularism – something the Kaman, in particular, see as essential to gaining Rakhine Buddhist buy in for their positions.

- Those with legal education are considered very influential in the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities.
- Response actors should **consider engaging lawyers in consultation and sensitization activities**. This is particularly true for Housing, Land, and Property (HLP) and citizenship interventions, but extends to any programme which seeks to improve vertical cohesion between Muslim communities and the various levels of state and union government.
- The small community of **Ahmadiyya Muslims in southern Rakhine are very vulnerable to exclusion**.
 - Response actors should ensure that the ‘Kardiyarni’ community is considered in outreach and distributions and **should not assume that Kaman, Rakhine, or Rohingya community representatives will proactively include them**.
- The Arakan Army’s language, which suggests to Rakhine Buddhists that anti-Muslim sentiment is a ‘divide and rule’ tactic of the Tatmadaw, has softened Kaman and Rakhine Muslim views on the group. This is not to suggest that the Arakan Army has popular support among the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims, but rather, that these communities believe that this rhetoric has improved intercommunal relations. As has been the case for Rohingya communities in northern and central Rakhine thus far, **Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities will be in a very precarious position should the Arakan Army advance further south**. They will be under extreme pressure to demonstrate their solidarity with Rakhine Buddhists, but will likely lack the personal contacts into either armed group that would enable them to have advanced warning of planned skirmishes thereby allowing them to relocate proactively. This may make them dependent on the military for protection, which will in turn weaken relations with their Rakhine Buddhist neighbours.
 - **Response access should consider opportunities for improving access to information**, particularly early warning systems, to support Muslim communities in the southern part of the state. Indeed, such interventions would likely be welcomed across Rakhine and amongst all minority groups.
- **The Kaman National Development Party are not unbiased representatives for the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim community** on the whole. Statements from the party should not be conflated with broader community views.
 - Response actors should be careful to identify where the party is presenting itself as a legitimate voice or advocate for the community. This includes taking their demographic data seriously – it is likely better understood as a reflection of their membership rolls.
- Response actors with legal and immigration expertise should **consider the party’s issuance of ethnic identity certificates an area of immediate concern**.
- Whilst any union of state government moves to extend voting rights to Kaman and Rakhine Muslims should – in theory – be welcomed, in advance of the 2020 elections, such a decision could put the community at considerable risk. Rakhine and Kaman Muslims in southern Rakhine have not forgotten the events of 2012 and the ways in which their voting rights were manipulated for political purposes.
 - Response actors should monitor the situation carefully and, **in the event changes to Muslim voting rights are rumoured, proposed, or made, immediately scale up protection mechanisms for these communities**.
- One effect of exposure to persistent, low-quality, low trust information – on issues such as elections, or the planned special economic zone – has been a decrease in interest. Even the most important issues can, over time, become overwhelmingly opaque to communities, and they may respond by ignoring them.
 - Response actors should anticipate that the longer key issues go on, **lack of access to high quality / high trust information may depress community engagement and activism**. This should not be understood as a sign that these issues have been resolved.
- **Rakhine and Kaman Muslim communities are affected by planned IDP camp closures**. Identity and linguistic differences have an impact on how these issues are framed. For instance, IDPs from urban areas in Kyauk Phyu are more likely to identify as Kaman or Rakhine Muslim than those from the burned coastal site. This creates issues vis-à-vis the question of return to point of origin as a demand that can be made on the basis of Kaman ‘*thaing yin thar*’ status.
 - Response actors should be aware that **political economy is not the only analytical lens appropriate for understanding how communities respond to the various government proposals**. Identity issues are also of considerable importance.
 - To that same end, identifying the economic drivers of certain decisions is important, but so too is understanding the face-saving measures involved and how that may lead stakeholders to adopt intractable positions.

Defining the System

“Information ecosystems are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows. Through information ecosystems, information appears as a master resource, like energy, the lack of which makes everything more difficult.”¹

Information ecosystem mapping takes a Systems Theory approach to understanding the flow of information through lived environments. Accordingly, both human and non-human factors are studied in order to map the interrelated and interdependent dynamics that influence perceptions and practices. Information ecosystem mapping thus accounts for social relationships, cultural context, religious belief and practice, as well as the dynamic networks of control and influence constituted and contested by communities and their members. Information ecosystems thereby function as the scaffolding upon which individuals construct an understanding of the world around them and the conditions of possibility enabling or constraining their agency and action.

Information ecosystem mapping works at three levels:

1. Macro-level analysis (i.e. media landscape and political/regulatory environments);
2. Granular observations (i.e. information availability, needs, and distribution);
3. Human and social insights (i.e. identifying information disseminators and influencers).²

Response actors are familiar with the ways in which mapping information needs, production, circulation, and access improves communications with beneficiary communities. What has been less well appreciated to date is the opportunity mapping exercises provide for programme forecasting. Indeed, information ecosystems mapping – particularly the role of influence, social trust, and the use of information – offers an especially helpful interpretive framework through which questions about the future can be examined in the present.

Of particular relevance to response actors working in Rakhine State, information ecosystems mapping can aid in anticipating how contextual changes may pressurise existing intercommunal tensions, shaping responses to various government actors. Further, it can support in identifying the factors that most strongly determine a community's relative vulnerability in times of armed conflict.

[1] Internews, 'Why Information matters: A foundation for resilience', 2015.

[2] Ibid.

Constituting Influence in Southern Rakhine

Southern Rakhine is predominated by ethnic Rakhine Buddhists. However, a number of Muslim communities exist alongside that majority: Kaman Muslims, Rakhine Muslims, and small numbers of Rohingya. Though 'Kaman' is often used by response actors as a default term for all non-Rohingya Muslims, in reality ethnic identifiers are more nuanced and have considerable implications for political and citizenship issues. Whilst these differences have a material impact on Muslim communities in the South, they too are a product of the state's complex history.

According to oral tradition and various historical accounts, Muslims have lived in Myanmar's westernmost state at least since the 8th century A.D.. The means by which they arrived in Rakhine (then Arakan) is debated, even within the community.³ Various academic accounts have been produced which examine the history of Muslim communities in Rakhine through archival evidence, however, given the inherent challenges of relating modern identities to those documented by various governance actors and foreign visitors, this paper privileges the origin myths which are provided by communities themselves.⁴ For instance, prior to independence, Muslims in Arakan were generally – though, not uniformly – referenced in British colonial documents merely by their religion.⁵

After independence, in 1977, the U Nu government announced that those Muslims in Rakhine who identified as 'Kaman' (imagined to be descendants of the royal archers at Mrauk-U), would be considered 'indigenous' (thaing yin thar) and granted citizenship rights. Whilst some of the Muslim communities from Ramree and Sittwe identified themselves as Kaman, others continued to consider themselves 'Rakhine Muslim' or, increasingly, 'Rohingya'.

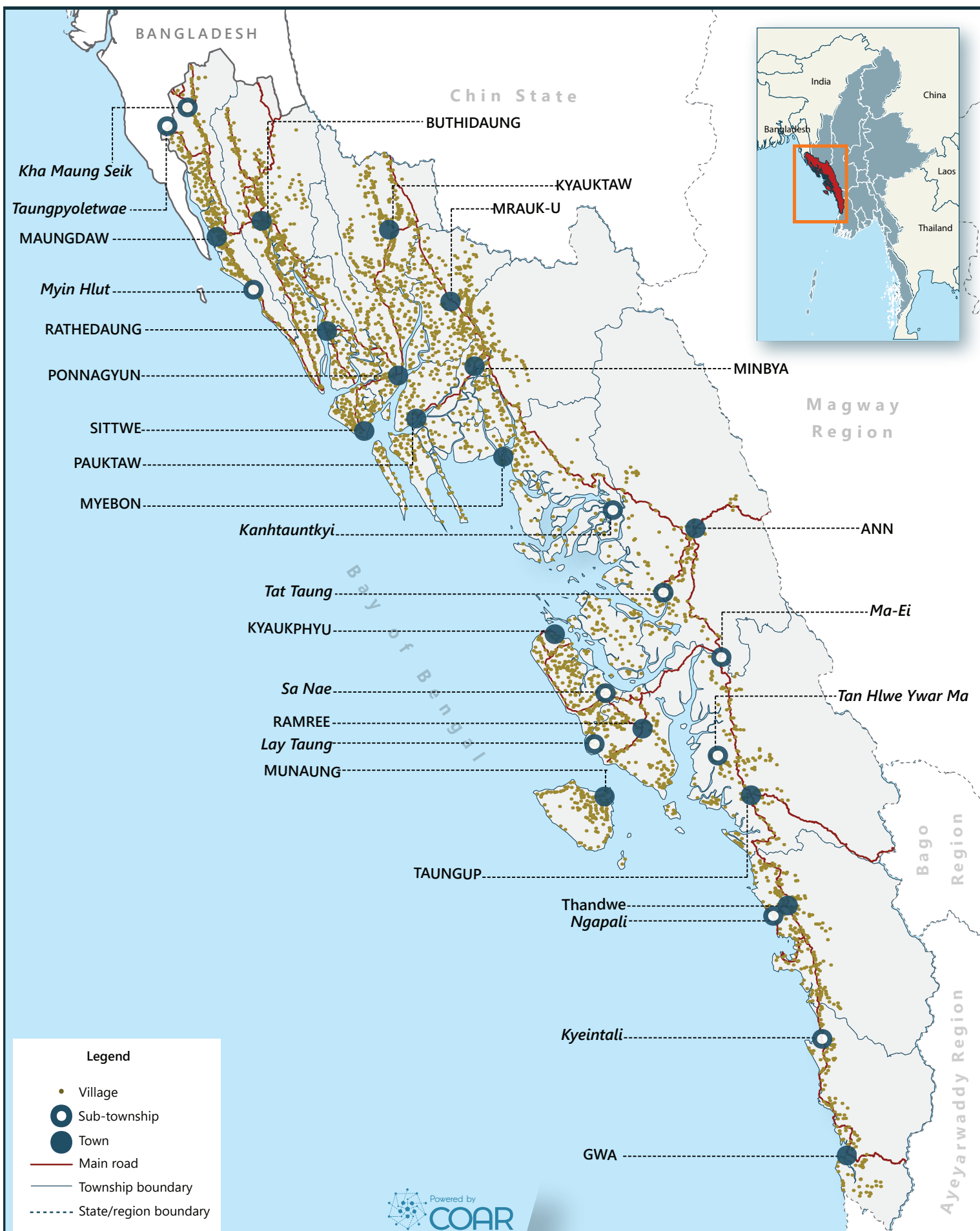
As is the case throughout Myanmar, the exact population figures are speculative and subject to human error as well as structural bias. Though the 2014 census gave the Kaman an identification code ('702'), the government has not released the results, citing political and conflict sensitivities. Even without intentional suppression or manipulation of the data, ethnic differentiation is problematic. Many of those who identify as Kaman today will, almost inevitably, have intermarried over generations with ethnic Rakhine and Burmese, as well as with the descendants of Pashtun, Arab, Indian, and Bengali immigrants, merchants, sailors, and slaves.

[3] In one telling, Muslims of varied ethnic heritage arrived on the Arakan coasts as merchants and shipwrecked sailors whilst traversing the trade routes connecting the Abbasid Caliphate to the T'ang Dynasty (see Moshe Yegar, 1972). Another possible point of origin, particularly for early arrivals from Bengal, was the founding of the Mrauk-U dynasty in the 15th century. In 1406, King Min Saw Mon, having ascended to the throne just two years prior, was driven out of Arakan to Bengal by the Crown Prince of Ava. In his attempt to retake the throne in 1429, Min Saw Mon accepted the support of the Bengal sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah. With the sultan's troops, many of whom, as historian Thant Myint-U (2006) recounts, were "Afghan adventurers," Min Saw Mon reclaimed his kingdom, which then remained a vassal state to Bengal for some time. Many of Min Saw Mon's troops remained in Arakan. In later years, the Muslim population would grow through intermarriage and the later arrival of other Muslim slaves, brought to the kingdom in the 18th century following raids along the Bengal coast.

In yet another account, Muslims in Rakhine are envisioned to have descended directly from the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (reign 1628 - 1658), through his son Shah Shuja. According to this origin story, the Kaman followed Shah Shuja to Arakan in 1660 as soldiers, specifically, royal archers, and were later absorbed into the Arakan Court at Mrauk-U. Indeed, the name 'Kaman' is said to be derived from the Farsi word for 'bow' (Harvey, 1925). In another variation of the tale, following a breakdown in relations between Shah Jahan and his Arakan host, King Sanda Thudhamma (reign 1652 - 1684), all Muslims living in Mrauk-U were expelled and sent to Sittwe, Thandwe, and Ramree Island (see Aye Chan, 2005).

[4] Most of the accounts by historians and even these local origin stories posit Muslims in Myanmar as 'having come from somewhere else'. However, the Mrauk-U kingdom stretched as far as Chittagong for a period, and exerted influence as far as Dhaka. Muslims didn't always come to Rakhine/Arakan – in many cases Islam came to Arakan (as it spread through Bengal in the 1200s), and on other occasions Arakan came to Muslims. Given that the popular narrative of Muslims as foreign is used to prohibit Muslim communities from citizenship, these narratives should be critically analysed.

[5] It was not uncommon to see Muslim communities referenced as 'Mahammadine' or 'followers of Mohammad'. A third paper in this series will address issues of recognition pertaining to the Rohingya.

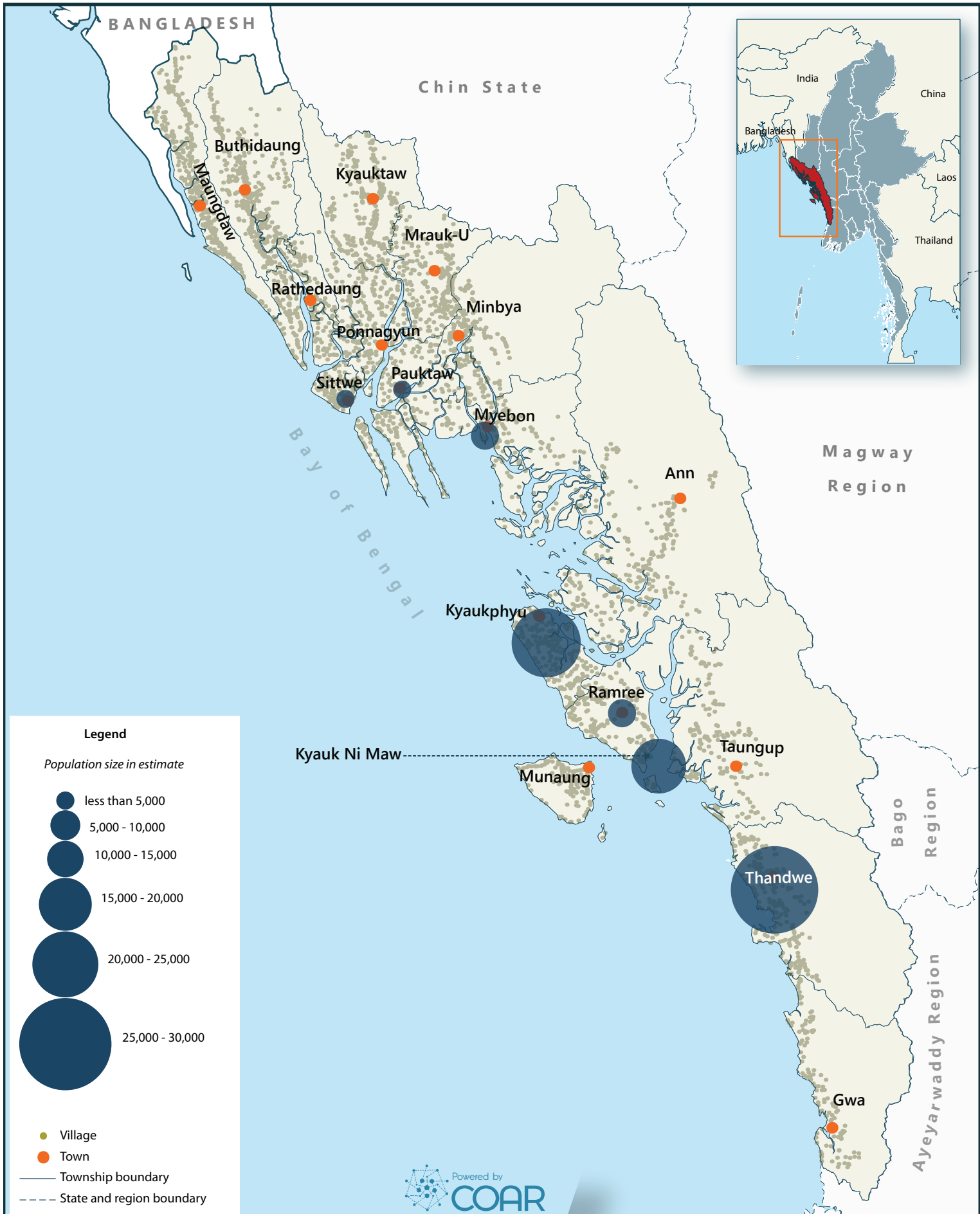


The Kaman

Today, the Kaman live primarily in Rakhine and central Myanmar, particularly Mandalay and Sagaing, but also Yangon. In central Rakhine, the Kaman can be found mostly in Sittwe, Kyauk Phyu, Rambre, Kyauk Ni Maw, Myebon, and Pauktaw townships. In southern Rakhine, the largest community of Kaman is settled around Thandwe and spread across five villages: Tabuchine, Kyaugtike, Zardipyin, Myapyin, and Myin Sine Maw. According to locally-held records, after independence, communities of Kaman and Rakhine Muslims lived in the villages of Manaung island, Ramree township and Kyauk Phyu township. However, these communities have gradually, through threat, force, and economic imperative, coalesced around Sittwe, Kyauk Phyu, Rambre, Kyauk Ni Maw, and Thandwe. For instance, the last Muslim family reportedly left Manaung island in 1990; all that remains is a mosque compound. In Sanae and Toungoup, Muslim families had all but relocated entirely by 1988. In Laytaung, the exodus occurred earlier, likely prior to 1948, leaving behind a notable tomb as well as a large mosque compound.

Population figures for the the Muslim community in southern Rakhine are highly contested and complicated by high levels of displacement. For instance, in 2017 the Rakhine State Government estimated the number of Kaman in the state to be approximately 5,000.⁶ However, according to interviews with Kaman community leaders across southern Rakhine, prior to 2012 the Kaman community estimated their population in Rakhine to be distributed roughly as per the [following map](#):

[6] Source: Rakhine State government. Available from: https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Population_by_Ethnic_Group_in_Maungdaw_District_and_Rakhine_State_Jul2017.xlsx. The union government has chosen not to publish data on ethnicity collected in the 2014 census.



Rakhine Muslims

According to oral tradition, the Arab, Persian, and other shipwrecked sailors and travel-weary traders who landed on the Arakan coast settled and intermarried with local Buddhists. Their descendents genderally called themselves ‘Arakanese Muslim’ or later, ‘Rakhine Muslim’. According to interviews with Rakhine Muslim community leaders, when the Burmese king Bodaw Phayar dethroned the last Arakan King, Thamada, in 1785, many Rakhine Muslims were resettled at Taungoo, Meikhtila, Shwebo, Kanbalu, Yindaw, and Amarapura. Known as the ‘thone htaung khone nayar’ (‘3,700’) -- the number of those relocated -- these Muslims later integrated into Bodaw Phayar’s military forces.⁷

According to interviews with Muslim community leaders in Rakhine, until 1988, the name ‘Kaman’ was not popular or widely recognized. Following the 1988 coup, however, the State Peace and Development Council (SLORC) government planned a ‘national verification card’ (NVC) programme to issue National ID cards (known colloquially as ‘pink cards’). Immigration officials reportedly refused to allow Muslims to identify their ethnicity as anything other than ‘Kaman’. Other minority communities faced similar challenges; Christians, Hindus, and Maramagyi who had previously identified themselves as ‘Rakhine’ found themselves now forced into a new ethnic category, lest they forgo citizenship rights.

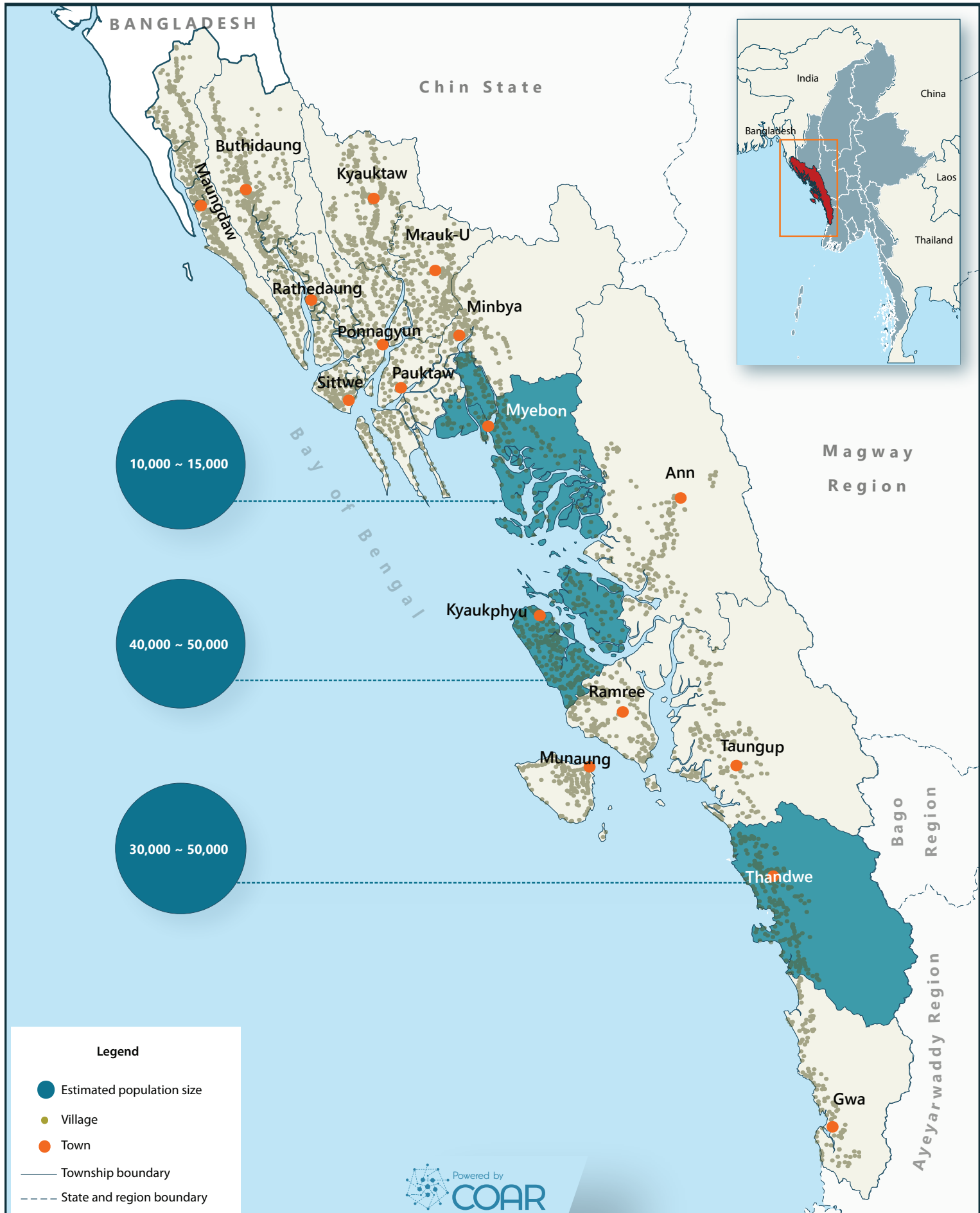
According to an oral statement made by former prime minister U Khin Nyunt, there are 135 indigenous ethnic groups in Myanmar, including Kaman; other ethnic groups are not recognized as citizens. Though scholars, lawyers, and advocates have demonstrated its numerous shortcomings, this same, astrologically-significant number has carried into the contemporary immigration regime. Though the Kaman are currently included in this figure, both ‘Rakhine Muslim’ and ‘Burmese Muslim’ have been erased. This exclusion appears to have occurred during a period of increased xenophobia, which came to a head as the Myanmar military launched the Naga Min (‘dragon king’) operation in ethnic minority areas such as Rakhine and Kachin – ostensibly to drive out illegal migrants.

Whilst some communities were happy to choose ‘Kaman’ as their ethnic identity, despite having never identified as such prior, others preferred to remain known as ‘Rakhine Muslim’, as this identity connected them to their ancestors and their sense of history and place in Myanmar. In the end, many Rakhine Muslims were excluded from the NVC process, particularly in Kyauk Phyu, Kyauk Ni Maw, and to a lesser extent, Thandwe. Of those who did not accept the conditions of the NVC card, many were still recorded by immigration as being ethnically ‘Rakhine’, but denied documents.⁸

According to interviews with Rakhine Muslim community leaders, their estimated population pre-2012 was distributed as per the following map:

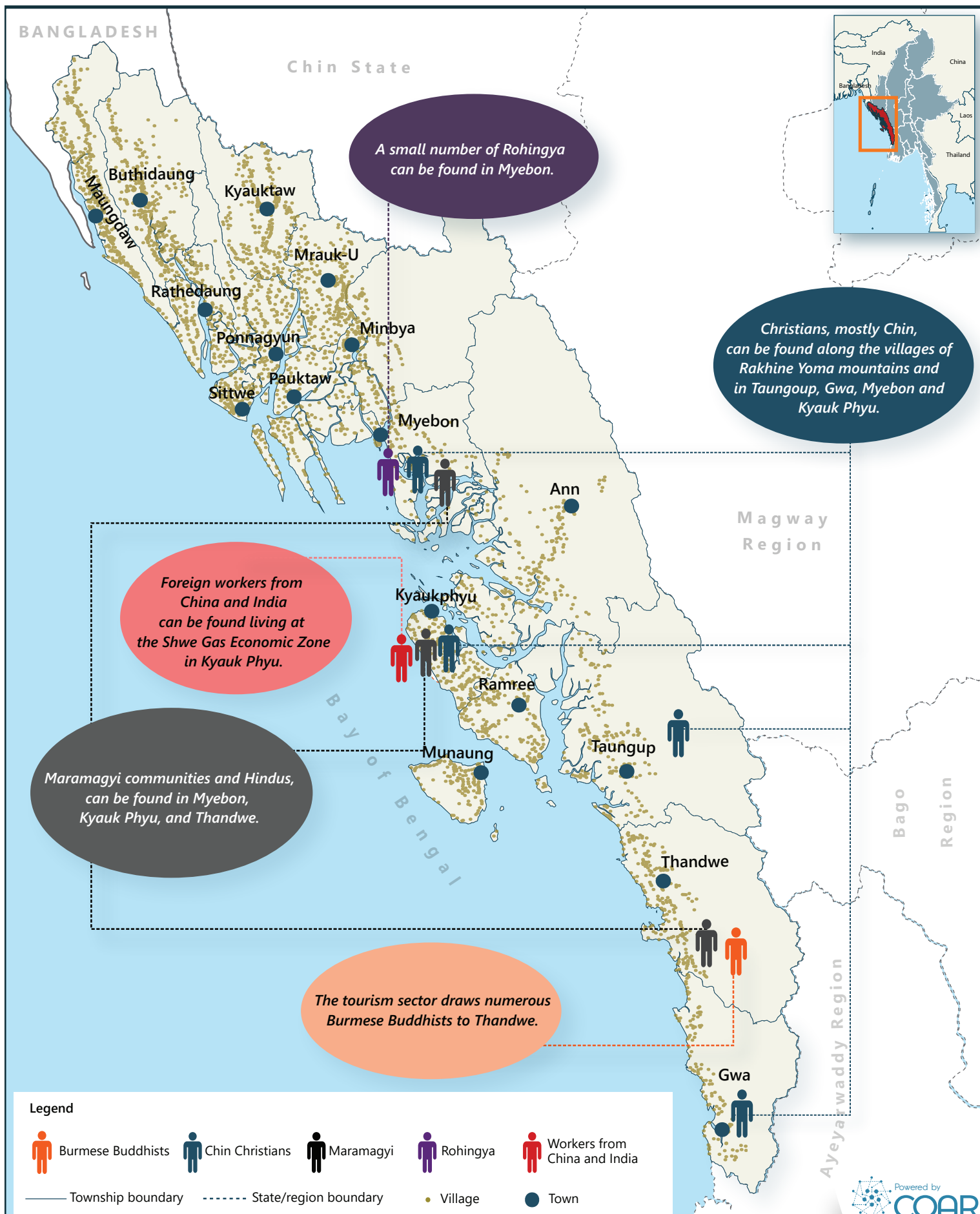
[7] In 1707 the Burmese also resettled some of the Muslims they captured in Thandwe in Mye Du in Sagaing. According to interviews conducted with community leaders in Thandwe in 2016, when the Burmese invaded Rakhine in 1784 the descendents of some of these Muslims were in the Burmese military, and ended up settling in Thandwe. For a while they were known as ‘Myedu Muslims’ but later came to identify as Kaman. See also Yegar, *The Muslims of Burma: A Study of a Minority Group*, page 6.

[8] According to interviews conducted in Thandwe in 2016, as early as the 1990s some Rakhine Muslims had their citizenship documents confiscated and were told that ‘Rakhine Muslim’ was not an acceptable identity. Citizenship cards were sometimes replaced by ‘white cards’.



Other Notable Communities

In southern Rakhine State, a small number of Rohingya can be found in Myebon. Similarly, Christians, mostly Chin, can be found along the villages of Rakhine Yoma mountains and in Taungoup, Gwa, Myebon and Kyauk Phyu. Maramagi communities and Hindus, can be found in Myebon, Kyauk Phyu, and Thandwe. The tourism sector draws numerous Burmese Buddhists to Thandwe; similarly, foreign workers from China and India can be found living at the Shwe Gas Economic Zone in Kyauk Phyu. As this paper looks primarily at non-Rohingya Muslim community dynamics, these other communities will not be discussed in detail.



Examining Influence

Influence cannot be understood as a fixed or immutable characteristic. As such, it is important to understand the composition of influence; for instance, which social or economic factors can be leveraged to build it, and how those factors evolve over time and in response to contextual changes. In doing so, it is easier to anticipate how influential actors will frame certain issues and what that means for the way communities make sense of new information and changes in their circumstances.

Power & Hierarchy

Kaman and Rakhine Muslim families are organized in the same way as Rakhine Buddhist families: men have power outside the home and in the community, and women retain the lion's share of control inside the home and within the family. Kaman and Rakhine Muslims tend to live together, though Rakhine Buddhists may also live alongside them in mixed villages. There are limited opportunities for the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims to organize beyond their immediate family units, with the notable exception being cultural associations and political parties. Though not an absolute rule, Kaman are somewhat more likely to support the Kaman National Development Party (KNDP), whereas Rakhine Muslims lean toward the National League for Democracy (NLD). A small number of both groups support the Arakan National Party (ANP). According to interviews, cultural associations have greater influence amongst the community than individual leaders, including Village Authorities (VA), and religious figures such as *Moulvis* (religious leaders) and *Hafiz* (Islamic scholars).

Kaman and Rakhine Muslims intermarry with each other, and also occasionally with Rakhine Buddhists. Most weddings are arranged, but love marriages are not entirely unusual. Indeed, this is just one way in which the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities are interwoven; they also pray together in the same mosques, celebrate each other's weddings, and attend each other's funerals. Kaman and Rakhine Muslims also share numerous cultural and social practices with Rakhine Buddhists; they celebrate many holidays together, for instance, Thingyan, the Myanmar New Year, and Thadinkyut. They celebrate other social events together, too, including football games, boat, kite, and beach races, and a traditional game called *Kyin*, a form of wrestling.

Though they share the same religion, there are many cultural differences between Kaman/Rakhine Muslim communities and the Rohingya. The Kaman and Rakhine Muslims dress like the Rakhine Buddhists,

eschewing religious attire. Women rarely, if ever, wear the veil. Kaman and Rakhine Muslim women are encouraged to seek education, work outside of the home, and travel. Comparatively, in Rohingya communities, women are not generally allowed to travel far from home – even when movement restrictions would allow it. Few Rohingya girls are allowed to continue their education past adolescence, whether or not opportunities are available to them. As fathers increasingly kept their daughters from leaving the home this exclusion became culturally normative. Movement restrictions have limited Rohingya boys' academic achievement, too. As a result, most are sent instead to religious schools (*madrasa*). In contrast, secular education is the first priority of Kaman and Rakhine Muslim families for both boys and girls, which, along with comparatively better freedom of movement and access to identity documents, translates to a relatively high rate of access to university.

Religious interpretation and practice also differentiates the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims from the Rohingya. Kaman and Rakhine Muslims consider themselves moderate, and believe the Rohingya to be significantly more austere. To that end, the influence Rohingya religious leaders appear to exercise within their communities is much greater than that enjoyed by the religious leaders of Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities.

Intermarriage between the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims with Rohingya is very rare. Villages, too, are rarely intermixed.

Intermarriage between the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims with Rohingya is very rare. Villages, too, are rarely intermixed. To some extent, this is a feature of geographic distribution; most of the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims live in southern Rakhine. Still, the two Kaman villages in Sittwe live separately from the Rohingya, and this was true prior to the mass displacement of 2012. It should be noted, however, that Kaman and Rohingya live together in the Sittwe IDP camps. In the south, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims lack substantive economic linkages with the Rohingya.

Indeed, Rohingya relations with the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities prior to the 2012/2014 conflicts were quite poor; whilst the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims saw the Rohingya as low-status workers, and often treated them as such, the Rohingya very often denied that the Kaman were even Muslim. The conflict has, however, created at least a marginal sense of solidarity, particularly as Muslims in Rakhine are increasingly treated as a singular category by immigration and other authorities. Still, there is little-to-no formal means of communication between the Rohingya and the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims – to say nothing of opportunities for organisation. Influence rarely traverses the cultural and religious divide.

How Influence Works

Amongst the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims, influence is understood in degrees of closeness, which in turn enables those with charisma, education, or other forms of power (wealth, male gender, age) to exert their will through suggestion. Certain social roles can imbue a person with influence; for instance, teachers, the elderly, religious leaders, and members of volunteer committees for health, education, and funeral services are paid respect by the community. Men are more likely to occupy these roles than women, as is the case throughout Myanmar. People who are highly educated, have legal knowledge, experience working with the local administrative office, or good connections with community leaders from Yangon are likely to be seen as influential. Still, none of these roles or qualities translates easily to control over individual or collective behavior. An influential person in the Kaman or Rakhine Muslim community will not have sufficient authority to act effectively to mitigate conflict, interpersonal or otherwise. However, influential figures can sway political views, as community members are likely to ask for and value their opinions on for whom to vote.

Though women generally enjoy significant influence over the domestic sphere, those who are teachers, nurses, doctors, or lawyers enjoy broader influence amongst other women. Young people who finished higher education, and who represent the Kaman community in cultural or trade associations, business, or politics, are likely to be seen as influential amongst their peer group.

I attended the National Ethnic Youth Forum in 2016 in Pinlong, Shan State as a Kaman representative. Youth from different ethnic groups attended the forum to raise the issue about peace in different regions. I got many friends from different regions and related to the forum, I got some opportunities for youth exchange programs and explained about our ethnic group. I think having a connection with different people can somehow influence the youth.

**- 22 year old woman from
Zardipyin, Thandwe⁹**

Opportunities for exerting influence are also localised. Every full moon day, Kaman and Rakhine Muslim youth, both female and male, gather in the evening for a late dinner. In each township, one young woman and one young man are elected to present to the other youth. These youth representatives have to organize the full moon day dinner, including finding a house to host the event. Around 5 pm, the youth come to the agreed upon house bringing something they prepared in advance at home. In some cases, the food will be prepared together. They eat out where they can see the moon, and discuss youth issues in their township. They also sing together, recite poems, and engage in courtship (boys will often offer to escort girls back to their home as a means of showing interest). Despite the potential for youthful indiscretion, parents allow girls to go to these full moon day dinners because it is a cultural tradition that has been handed down over generations. If these youth leaders work hard and reliably, they will be influential amongst the other youth. Indeed, this may also translate into opportunities for intergenerational advocacy, as especially hard working youth leaders often gain the respect of the community elders.

[9] Interviews were conducted in Rakhine and translated. Wherever a translation has been included in the text, it will be presented in italics. The authors have prioritised the original sense and style of speech over accurate English grammar.

I was born and raised in Kyungtike village in Thandwe. I moved to Yangon in 2016. I am trying to be an actor. Now, I have had some supporting roles in movies. When I lived in the village, I was one of the youth leaders around 2015. I was proud that I did some work for my community. I went back to my village every three months. I did some short video clips with my friends about how Kaman rural life is and our culture. We posted it on our Facebook page and got lots of support from the Kaman and Rakhine community. I think using social media for the community is one way to become influential.

- 28 year old man from Thandwe

Role of Religion

Both Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities are Sunni, following the Hanifi School of Islamic jurisprudence. There are no significant differences in interpretation or practice between the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims. A small number of Muslims in Kyauk Ni Maw and Thandwe follow the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement.¹⁰ Of the estimated 2,000 Kardiyanis living in Kyauk Ni Maw, 1,000 in Thandwe, and 1,000 in Yangon, the community has only one formal representative, based in Thandwe. The Kardiyanis religious leader is very influential amongst his followers; almost everything, from business, to family matters, and what to do for their community and followers, must be discussed with him.

Religious education tends to follow Indian style of madrasa teaching; there is no formal education for religion. Informal learning of basic Islamic teachings is provided by local mosques and madrasas. Higher Islamic theology can be studied at Islamic religious schools, which are attached to the larger mosques.

As is true across Myanmar, the Tablighi Jamaat movement was popular in both south and central Rakhine State. The movement began to weaken at the turn of the century. Even today, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims do not consider the Tablighi Jamaat to be a missionary movement, but rather as a way of translating Islamic belief into increasingly pious forms of practice. However, some Tablighi Jamaat teachings appear to limit the rights of women and girls, and this has led to pushback from Kaman and Rakhine Muslim women's groups. For example, the Tablighi Jamaat believe that women must wear hijab when they go out, but as mentioned previously, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims don't generally accept this interpretation. Rather, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims believe the decision to veil – or not – must be a matter of individual choice.

I have two children. My husband is a Moulvi (religious leader). He never told me to nor forced me to wear hijab. And he never told me not to use contraception. It is only my choice when I should have children. Unlike other men, Kaman is less discriminatory toward women. My husband never says which work is for women and men. He helps in the kitchen for me and I help him in his work. I am happy for that, we live harmoniously in our daily life."

- 28 year old woman from Thandwe

Religious leaders have also been strategically kept from participating in key political processes, as a means of demonstrating capacity for living harmoniously with Rakhine Buddhists. For instance, religious leaders have not been involved in the negotiations on camp closures, in part because the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims, particularly youth leaders, have noted that enforcing a strictly secular approach to the process will increase the likelihood of gaining buy-in from Rakhine Buddhist communities.

[10] These individuals are known locally as 'Kardiyanis', a likely reference to the founder's birthplace, Qadian, or possibly even their own point of origin. The Kardiyanis do not believe that Muhammad is not the last prophet, but rather expect another prophet to appear in the future. Other Muslim communities in Rakhine refuse to recognise the Kardiyanis as Muslim, though it is often the case their actual religious views are poorly understood, if at all. Indeed, the Kardiyanis were all but outcast by the broader community until the 2012 conflict, at which point a larger sense of Muslim solidarity emerged and created new communication channels between groups.

Social Trust

Social trust is essential to communities as they navigate conflicting, biased, or untrustworthy information. As such, mapping information flows can help to highlight the networks that cohere ideas about governance and through which information about contextual changes and conflicts makes its way into communities.

To some extent, anti-Rohingya sentiment amongst the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities can be understood as an expression of anxiety – both communities are juridically and politically vulnerable, and the existence of an effective scapegoat may provide Kaman and Rakhine Muslims with a means of avoiding greater marginalisation.

Political Solidarity Between Muslim Communities

Given a recent history of shared oppression, many of the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims living in southern Rakhine feel the Rohingya should be given citizenship. However, some leaders from the Kaman political party, the Kaman National Development Party (KNDP), are strongly and vocally opposed to the Rohingya, referring to them in public discourse as ‘Bengali’. In 2014, the KNDP made an official announcement declaring that there are ‘no Rohingya in Myanmar’. In this sense, the KNDP adheres to the guidelines established by the ANP leadership, with whom they are in close contact. As a result, the KNDP are strongly against the repatriation of Rohingya from Bangladesh. To some extent, anti-Rohingya sentiment amongst the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities can be understood as an expression of anxiety – both communities are juridically and politically vulnerable, and the existence of an effective scapegoat may provide Kaman and Rakhine Muslims with a means of avoiding greater marginalisation. In effect, by demonstrating greater affinity for and with their Buddhist compatriots than with their coreligionists, they are better able to occupy a ‘model minority’ position.

Lasting Impact of 2012/2014 Conflict

The events in 2012/2014 divided and undermined trust between the Kaman/Rakhine Muslims, and Rakhine Buddhists. According to interviews, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims perceived an increase in religious bias and ethnic chauvinism on the part of the Rakhine Buddhists. As nationalist discourse across the country increased, Islamophobia became more common place, including anti-Muslim hate speech. After 2018, however, with the AA’s increasing popularity, this rhetoric has begun to soften. In fact, the AA leader, Major General Twan Mrat Naing appears to have influenced Rakhine Buddhist perceptions of their Muslim neighbours. The Major General argues that Rakhine Buddhists should not fall “[into the trap of nationalism](#)”, which he believes has been set by the Myanmar military. According to interviews in southern Rakhine, Kaman and Rakhine Muslims believe that it is the Major General’s comments which have caused Rakhine Buddhists to reflect on the situation, and ultimately redirect their anger from Muslims to the Myanmar Military. Kaman and Rakhine Muslims in southern Rakhine report feeling that the relationship between Muslims and Buddhists has started to repair.

This shift in rhetoric is no doubt meaningful, but it should likely not be read as a statement of the AA’s support for Muslim rights in Rakhine. Similarly, that the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims credit the Major General’s statement as positively influencing social cohesion between the Muslim and Buddhist communities should not be taken as an indication of support for the AA and its military objectives. Indeed, it is just as likely the AA see anti-Muslim discourse as an unhelpful distraction, rather than as problematic in its own right. Whatever the case, the Muslim community in southern Rakhine are especially vulnerable to armed conflict because of their lack of freedom of movement. The inability to flee in advance of troop movements makes them especially susceptible to forced portering and at risk of being accused of informing – both of which put the Muslim communities at risk of reprisal.

In addition to violent conflict, other ongoing issues strain social trust in southern Rakhine, in particular, the uncertainty surrounding the 2020 elections, and ongoing complaints about the issuance of identity documents.

Political Leanings

The uncertain 2020 elections are another cause for concern in southern Rakhine. In the 1990 election, the Kaman National League for Democracy (KNLD) won a seat in Sittwe. However, when the Union Election Commission **issued a decision** in March 2010, that all parties would have to renew their registration to run in the 2010 election, the KNLD failed to do so, leaving the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities without explicit representation in that year's race. In 2012, the Kaman National Development Party (KNDP) was founded and ran for election; however, they failed to capture even a single seat. In 2015, the ANP and Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) were the most well-supported political parties in the community. According to interviews, support for the USDP stemmed from a number of well-received development projects, specifically building schools and hospitals. In Thandwe, the newly formed KNDP also ran in the 2015 election, but failed to capture a seat. Instead, most Kaman and Rakhine Muslims voted for the NLD, hoping to see positive changes in their economic conditions, democratic systems, and ability to access their rights.

Though the KNDP is a Kaman party, not all Kaman people support the party's policies, activities, and values.¹¹ For instance, the KNDP have been accused by local Kaman activists of publishing low-quality data. For instance, without conducting the necessary groundwork, the party claimed that there are only 20,000 Kaman in Myanmar. In reality, that figure more closely reflects the party's own membership rolls. The party also stands accused of discrediting dissidents by claiming that they are not – or should not be – recognised as ethnically Kaman. This gatekeeping has been used to a pernicious effect. Around 2014, the KNDP created a committee called Kaman Si Sit Yay ('Checking Kaman or Not'). The committee sells recommendation letters, reportedly at a cost of approximately 5,000 Kyats, which supposedly 'prove' Kaman ethnic identity, and which can be used to support an application for the NRC. As a result, immigration officers almost always ask that a person applying for an NRC as Kaman furnish such a letter. To date, the majority of letters have been given by the committee to those living in the favoured townships of Sittwe and Rambre, and almost exclusively to party members. As a result, those that do not support the

party, or who live in other areas such as Kyauk Phyu or Thandwe, are effectively limited from being able to obtain an NRC. Rakhine Muslims are hardly ever given letters, despite paying for them. As a result, support for the KNDP is a thorny, if outright divisive issue within the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities. Though many community members had high hopes that the KNDP would be a vehicle through which they could advance their rights, the party has to date failed to live up to those expectations.

As a result of this disaffection, new networks for advocacy emerged. Around 2014, the Kaman Ethnic Social Network (KESN) became popular among Kaman and Rakhine Muslims. KESN was founded in 2013 by political moderates with influence in, and good relationships with, different communities across the various townships, including Rakhine Buddhist communities. Lawyers, engineers, social workers, and young people, were all included in the network. KESN tried to act as a bridge between the Kaman and the Rakhine Muslims in order to strengthen the communities and progress their rights claims.¹²

KESN also attempted to reform the KNDP, suggesting that its central management body, the Central Executive Committee (CEC), should include one leader from each township. However, the KNDP was outwardly hostile to the proposal, so much so that the KESN gave up their negotiations and moved instead to renew the KNLD party in advance of the 2015 elections. When the KNDP became aware of the KESN's activities, the party sent a letter of complaint to the Union Election Commission (UEC). The complaint letter alleged that Rohingya activists were involved in renewing KNLD. The allegation had its intended effect; in August of 2015, Special Branch opened an investigation into those mentioned on the party renewal list. The investigation slowed the renewal process, ultimately leading the UEC to declare that because the investigation would not finish until just before the election, they would suspend the party's application for renewal. The incident created a schism within the Kaman and Rakhine Communities, not along ethnic lines, but between those who support KESN and those who support KNDP.

[11] The party has a base in Yangon but no branch office in Rakhine. Indeed, for many Kaman and Rakhine Muslims, the 2015 election was the first they heard of the party's existence. The party leaders are from two townships: Rambre and Sittwe. The perception, amongst many Kaman and Rakhine Muslims, is that KNDP's focus and concerns reflect the leadership's ties to those two townships. As a result, the KNDP only performs well amongst communities living in Sittwe and Rambre. The KNDP's coalition-building approach, involving both the USDP and the ANP, is also seen as disqualifying by many Kaman and Rakhine Muslims. For instance, according to interviews, the general perception amongst the Muslim community in southern Rakhine is that the KNDP's statement about the Rohingya, which asserted the Rohingya are illegal migrants, was a political concession to the other parties.

[12] KESN advocated for all Muslims in southern Rakhine to choose the 702 'Kaman' code when filling out the 2014 census. Their social mobilization was effective, and according to interviews in southern Rakhine, improved the Muslim community's sense of unity and solidarity.

I don't believe KNDP is doing development for the Kaman. I saw them only destroying Kaman communities. And they don't understand politics, too. If we combine Kaman and Rakhine then we become stronger. We can ask for an ethnic minister for us. They don't see that much and only follow the guidelines of Rakhine extremists from ANP. They said there are only 30,000 Kaman in Myanmar. How can it be possible? Even in Rakhine kingdom, there were 20,000 archers serving in the army. How about the women and men who are not serving? Since then, the numbers are more than they mention. If we calculate with the birth rate, there will be many more than that. I live in Yangon. I will not give my vote to KNDP if they are running from my township.

- 41 year old male in Yangon

ID Cards & Voting Rights

The lack of cohesive political leadership has created numerous challenges for the Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities, particularly around the issuance of identity documents. For instance, in September 2017, the local government in Kyauk Ni Maw made an announcement that all the fishing boats would have to register and that only NRC card holders could go out on the boats for fishing. Fishing is one of the only livelihoods available in Kyauk Ni Maw. However, the immigration office hadn't processed any identity documents for Kyauk Ni Maw village since the 1990s. Though most residents had **older versions of the citizenship card**, known for its three-fold format and issued under the U Nu government, they could neither renew them when damaged or lost, nor could they secure documents for their children.

Leaders from Kyauk Ni Maw, with the support of other Kaman in Yangon, raised the issue in Naypyidaw. A team of immigration staff, composed entirely of Bamar, came down from Naypyidaw to Kyauk Ni Maw and issued NRC cards to eligible Kamans. A small number

of local Kyauk Ni Maw community members aided them with data collection. In total, NRC cards were issued to approximately 3,300 out of 3,800 applicants. The initiative immediately drew complaints. At first, the cards were contested by Rakhine Muslims, on the basis that the issuance still failed to adequately accommodate their ethnic identity. Later, Rakhine Buddhist hardliners raised the issue in the parliament. In the end, the KNDP also suggested that Rohingya had 'illegally' claimed Kaman identity as a means of gaining citizenship, going so far as to suggest that they had bribed immigration officers.

We all have full documents that can prove that we are citizens. All of our generations have been mentioned as a Rakhine Muslim, but when we apply for the NRC card, the immigration office says they cannot give us anymore with Rakhine Muslim and have to accept as Kaman. In form one of the immigration document, all Kaman generations have been mentioned as Rakhine Muslim like us. There is no different between Kaman and Rakhine Muslim. So we accepted Kaman in our NRC. But people from the KNDP are against us and sent a complaint letter to the immigration office. It is because we didn't give our vote to their party in the 2012 election, and also because we didn't request recommendation letters from their committee. Because of that, they targeted us as an enemy. Voting rights is one of the most important rights for citizens of a nation, but we are very concerned about who to give our vote to in the upcoming election. If we vote for ANP, the Kaman party will be angry, and if we vote for KNDP, the Rakhine will be angry.

- 33 year old man from
Kyauk Ni Maw village

According to interviews, interest in the uncertain 2020 election is low, particularly amongst those living in IDP camps. Voter education by the government or civil society rarely reaches into the camps, nor do candidates schedule visits in the campaign period. The lack of representation also depresses enthusiasm for participation; the Kaman and Rakhine Muslims interviewed for this paper felt there were no candidates who would raise their voices to demand the Muslim community be given access to their rights. To that end, the ability to vote is not necessarily guaranteed. For instance, though people in the Kyauk Ta Lone camp were allowed to vote in 2015, only those with NRCs could. Those with NVCs – an estimated 60% of the population – were not eligible.

In Thandwe Township, civil society organisations successfully raised the issue of NVC holders' voting rights. In recent elections, NVC holders in Thandwe have been included in the election lists and allowed to vote.¹³

In the 2015 election, we were eligible to vote but we faced many difficulties. At first, we were not on the voting list because most villagers lacked NRCs. Our elders had three fold cards. With the help of people from Yangon, we were added to the list to vote and we got our NRC cards in 2016. We haven't heard anything about the upcoming election. We hope all the villages can vote again.

**- 52 year old man from
Linn Thi village, Thandwe**

In the 2010 election, every Kaman in Kyauk Ni Maw village, with or without NRC cards, had a chance to vote if they were of legal age. In 2015, however, only approximately 188 out of 700-800 Kamans were eligible for voting, as voting rights became dependent on carrying an NRC card.

As much as I know, there is no voter education by the government or political parties for the grass root community in our area. If people have no information about voting, they may not vote for the suitable parties, or they may choose wrong or unsuitable parties. We need a political party which can work for the development of our community.

**- 62 year old man from
Kyauk Ni Maw**

The changeable voting status of 'white card' holders has been a further hindrance to Muslim election participation. Issued under the SLORC, these temporary identification documents granted those that held them the right to vote in the 2008 referendum and 2010 general election. The vast majority of white cards in Myanmar have been issued to Muslims in Rakhine state. At the time, Muslim support for the Rakhine ethnic political party was extremely limited, and thus a greater number of Muslim voters could serve to undermine the party's popularity (Burke 2016).¹⁴ Conversely, the USDP, realising it would struggle to gain the support of Rakhine Buddhists, was highly incentivized to protect white card holders' right to vote. Indeed, the white card vote appears to have prevented Rakhine politicians from taking total control over the local parliament. In advance of the 2015 elections, noted Rakhine nationalist Dr. Aye Maung submitted a proposal to the Amyotha Hluttaw to amend the Political Parties Registration Law created by the former junta. Specifically, the proposal would strip the provision which enabled white card holders to vote. Though president Thein Sein attempted to avoid the issue, eventually he and his government capitulated and announced that white cards would be allowed to expire in the spring preceding the 2015 elections.

As a result of having their voting rights manipulated for political gain, many Muslims in southern Rakhine (as elsewhere) have lost interest in the democratic process. As one Kaman activist commented, "We have to be very

[13] In interviews with an ANP candidate in Thandwe in 2016, it was alleged that 'illegal Bengalis' were allowed to vote on white cards in the 2015 elections. The ANP candidate also raised a complaint against the successful NLD candidate there, which was subsequently dismissed. UEC 2015, Open Election Data: Electoral Complaints, available from: <https://openelectiondata.uec.gov.mm/complaints2015/index.html>.

[14] https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916632?Search=yes&resultItemClick=true&searchText=southern&searchText=Rakhine&searchText=USDP&searchText=Burke&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dsouthern%2BRakhine%2BUSDP%2BBurke%26amp%3Bacc%3Don%26amp%3Bwc%3Don%26amp%3Bfc%3Doff%26amp%3Bgroup%3Dnone&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_SYC-5152%2Fcontrol&refreqid=search%3A62cae95efb11d05a40a21778b50520f0&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents

careful at election time because we are like cheese in the middle of a sandwich”.¹⁵

Beyond Rakhine

Social trust is critical to the way these issues will develop in the coming months. Indeed, it also shapes the ways in which people seek out trustworthy information beyond Rakhine. For instance, the Muslim communities in southern Rakhine tend to seek information on the basis of township networks; people from Kyauk Phyu will turn to the Kyauk Phyu social and cultural association, whilst those from Sittwe will go to the Sittwe social and cultural association. These associations play different roles, but generally collect monthly donations from each house and redistribute it to support funeral services, or hospital fees for poor community members who travel to Yangon for treatment. They also gather young people to serve the community, and help and connect community members on social issues by hosting meetings. Most of these social and cultural associations are based in Yangon. The Sittwe association has many members from the KNDP and has been registered by the government as an official association.

Outside Myanmar, Muslim communities in southern Rakhine are most likely to turn to Malaysia. Around 2,000 people fled to Malaysia after the conflict of 2012, and those links remain strong. Kaman or Rakhine Muslims living in Malaysia often remain influential through active social media accounts, some of which include rights education, and others religious teaching. These figures can at times mobilize their workers to donate to IDP camps, others act as unofficial scribes for the community’s history. A few educated community members have been able to find work in Dubai, and still others to Europe on the basis of having been granted a UN refugee card.

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[15] Interview with a female Kaman activist in Kyauk Phyu.

Information Use

The impact of information on communities is not always positive; in certain circumstances, information flows can also serve the interests of bad-faith actors. For instance, information can be managed in such a way as to further divide communities, limiting their capacity for effective advocacy. Information that is closely managed, by state or non-state actors (for instance the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army), can serve to fray resiliencies between communities, and undermine social cohesion. Understanding the impact of information on communities can thus help response actors to more effectively counter the effects of anti-social discourses on issues such as economic development projects, camp closures, and ongoing armed conflict.

For Muslim communities in southern Rakhine, access to trustworthy information is extraordinarily limited, which undermines community mobilisation and advocacy efforts, and increases vulnerability to future displacement as a result of the escalation in AA and Tatmadaw fighting.

Planned Economic Developments in Kyauk Phyu

Both the Muslim community and Rakhine Buddhists lack adequate information on the planned economic developments in Kyauk Phyu; other minority ethnic groups, for instance, the Mro, also lack access. The information the government releases through TV channels, for instance, daily MNTV news broadcasts, but also government-owned radio stations, is very general, often lacking hard data and clear facts. In response, residents of Kyauk Phyu increasingly rely on updates from different channels, particularly social media. However, the lack of information – and perceived lack of movement – has led to a decrease in local interest in the proposed Special Economic Zone (SEZ) project.

Some young people from Kyauk Phyu have got jobs as general labour in the construction projects. Some Kaman young people got jobs, too, before the conflict happened. People do not know much about the SEZ and I think there is no benefit or disadvantage from the SEZ for us, with or without access to information of SEZ.

– 36 year old man from
Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp in Kyauk Phyu

Lack of community buy-in to the SEZ project is a significant risk factor for future conflict. If the project does not appear to present economic opportunities for local communities, the likelihood that Rakhine politicians will use the SEZ as a point of leverage against the union government increases. The continued presence of foreign workers, coupled with the perception that the SEZ offers few direct benefits to the local community, may increase tensions between the communities – particularly if there are some segments that have found opportunities to make money from the foreign workers, for instance, through renting their properties. In 2014, rumours travelled through the community suggesting that the Pike Seik burn site had been sold to SEZ and that the community's crematory space had been destroyed and used to build a foreign company building.

At the moment, the Muslim community in Kyauk Phyu has no concern that the SEZ could make them a target in the AA/Tatmadaw conflict. As one Kaman activist noted, the AA's presumed positive relationship with China, and their allies' dependence on Chinese tolerance for their border activities, makes any action that would undermine Chinese economic interests in Rakhine a non-starter.

Planned IDP Camp Closures

The Myanmar union government has made clear its intention to close IDP camps across the country. In addition to Kachin, some of the most acutely-affected communities can be found in southern Rakhine. In the 2012 conflict, almost every southern township in Rakhine was affected. Most of the Muslim community relocated to IDP camps, five of which hosted Kaman and Rakhine Muslim families. Since 2016, after the release of Kofi Annan-led Rakhine Advisory Commission's final report and recommendations, the union government made clear its plans to close the camps. However, there was never a clear plan for how that should be done. The government finalised its National Strategy on Camp Closures in November 2019, although no final version has yet been made public. Nor did the government invest in adequate community consultations. Few in the camps know what the strategy actually entails. Whilst two camps have already been closed, three camps hosting Muslims from southern Rakhine still remain. Overall, the experience of camp closures has, to date, not only been demoralising for the Muslim community in southern Rakhine, but has also pressurised inter-communal relationships.

Rambre camp (closed): About 1,200 people moved to the camp in Rambre in 2012. Over time, approximately 500 people were relocated in Yangon, whilst a small number of others were resettled in 2018 at a new site nine miles away from their place of origin; currently, only four or five families remain whilst the others have migrated to Yangon. Though the affected communities voiced their preference to return to their place of origin, the government seemingly ignored their requests and instead offered to send those who held citizenship cards to Yangon by plane. The proposal, made to a Kaman community leader, was ultimately accepted in the face of few other options. The new settlement site for these families was located in Bwetgyi ward, Htaut Kyant township – a two hour drive from Yangon proper. Each family that relocated was given 5 Lakh (approximately 350 USD). Muslim community networks supported the arrivals with the donation of land. The families have now formed a small Kaman village, which is visited at times by the Rakhine Ethnic minister and also serves as a location for KNDP-hosted festivals, including Thingyan. Most are now engaged in general labour and small farming.

Myebon, Taung Paw camp (closed): About 2,900 people lived in this camp. In September 2019, the government closed down the camp and moved the IDPs living there into new houses two miles away from the town. The camp is connected to the town by a poor quality road that is difficult to travel in the rainy season. In this camp, one fourth of the households were Kaman; the others were Rohingya. However, in official government communiques, Taung Paw camp has repeatedly been referenced as a Rohingya settlement. Some Kaman families opted to relocate to Sin Tet Maw camp in Pauktaw before the camp at Myebon was officially closed. They didn't want to live in the new settlement, which had been arranged much like a permanent camp. To some extent, the Kaman families living in the camp also worried that living alongside the Rohingya would make them vulnerable – both to the state and union governments, who were perceived as likely to further marginalise those living in the new settlement, but also to the more populous Rohingya community, whose social and volunteer networks excluded the Kaman, leaving them without representation in key community committees.

Kyauk Phyu, Kyauk Ta Lone: Approximately 1,200 people from downtown Kyauk Phyu, where Rakhine Buddhists and Kaman/Rakhine Muslims had previously lived together peacefully, were displaced by the conflict in 2012 to a camp at Kyauk Ta Lone. Many of the

people living in the camp retained their houses in the town, despite their displacement; approximately half sold their properties over time. The Kyauk Ta Lone camp is currently in the process of being relocated, despite the camp community's protests. For the Muslim community at Kyauk Phyu, the desire to return to their place of origin is in part derived from a desire to protect their own history. The ancient mosque at Kyauk Phyu is famous among the Muslim community. The camp community fears that if there are no Muslims left in Kyauk Phyu town, the mosque will fall into disrepair, and the long history of Muslim presence in Rakhine might be wiped away and a new narrative written.

Whilst the Muslim community in Kyauk Phyu is, on the whole, presenting a united front, the proposed relocation will also impact Rakhine Buddhist communities – many of whom have deep and lasting economic ties with the Muslim community. Further, the process has diminished Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities' trust in the union government, which will have a lasting impact on future humanitarian and development initiatives.

Pauktaw, Sin Tet Maw camp and Sittwe, Thae Chaung camp: An estimated 2,500 people originally from Kyaukphyu still live in Sin Tet Maw camp and another 2,300 remain in Thae Chaung camp. The families in both camps are originally from Kyauk Phyu, Pike Seik ward, the former Muslim quarter. During the 2012 conflict, the Muslim quarter was burned down, forcing its residents to flee by boat to Sin Tet Maw and Thae Chaung. Whilst the vast majority of IDPs in the camps were previously engaged in fishing, still many government staff, including army, police, fire department, as well as doctors and engineers are still in the camps. According to community interviews, these two camps have never been consulted by the government about relocation.

As such, whilst the Rambre and Myebon camps have been closed down, the camps in Kyauk Phyu still remain. The closure of the Rambre and Myebon camps, particularly, the decision to relocate IDPs to sites far from their place of origin, has undermined trust in the camp closure process. Further, though the majority of Muslim IDPs in southern Rakhine have never been consulted about the closure scheme, those that have report that such meetings have rarely offered genuine opportunities for two-way communication. Rather, government representatives tend to appear in advance of building works, at which point they inform the IDP camp community that relocation will occur, without seeking their consent or feedback on the process.

For instance, on January 24th 2020, the union government, led by the Social Welfare Committee and other stakeholders such as The Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development (UEHRD), Rakhine regional government, community leaders from Rakhine and camp committees, held a coordination meeting on closing down the Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp in Kyauk Phyu. The government representatives proposed a strip of muddy land, situated between a mountain and the current IDP camp, as the future resettlement site. The camp committee requested instead that they be sent back to their place of origin; those who still have houses in the town, and those who don't, wanted to stay together with the people from Sin Tae Maw and Thae Chaung in the previously burned down area. The Pike Seik community is reportedly unhappy with this proposed alternative. Still, to bolster their case, the IDP community reminded the government representatives that prior to 2012, Muslims in Kyauk Phyu had been living among the Rakhine Buddhists and

still had strong personal and economic relationships that could facilitate a successful return.

The government, however, showed no signs that they would consider the IDP community's requests. Instead, its representatives asked the community representatives why they protested the move when the government would build them roads, schools, and other services – a sign they lacked any consideration of the sociocultural, economic, and psychological significance that return to place of origin represents for these communities.

Government is planning for camp closure of Kyauk Ta Lone camp. We are very hopeful that we can go back to our houses even though some people sold theirs. We agreed to live with people who sold their house in our origin place, the burned down area called Pike Site. The camp committee also proposed that plan to the government when they held coordination meetings in February. Sadly, no stakeholder from the government side ever visits and meets us in our camp – including Social Welfare, UEHRD and regional camp closure committee.

**- 62 years old man from
Sin Tae Maw camp in Pauktaw**

Though the communities lack many platforms for advocacy, some options have emerged. For instance, the Muslim IDPs from Thae Chaung created the "Social Representative Committee for IDPs, Kyauk Phyu" in November 2018. Three representatives from each camp and six from Yangon who are natives of Kyauk Phyu are involved in the committee. Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp offers the strongest case for relocation to place of origin, in part because economic ties have persisted between the Muslim and Buddhist communities throughout the period of displacement. Inter-marriage is also common and largely accepted.

Still, the Kyauk Phyu district administrator continues to press the camp committee to accept the muddy land and has started the planning process and land digging on April 4th of 2020. According to interviews, camp community members are increasingly concerned that

The closure of the Rambre and Myebon camps, particularly, the decision to relocate IDPs to sites far from their place of origin, has undermined trust in the camp closure process. Further, though the majority of Muslim IDPs in southern Rakhine have never been consulted about the closure scheme, those that have report that such meetings have rarely offered genuine opportunities for two-way communication. Rather, government representatives tend to appear in advance of building works, at which point they inform the IDP camp community that relocation will occur, without seeking their consent or feedback on the process.

they might be sent to the new site by force despite the risks posed by COVID-19. Indeed, some community members speculate that such a move might be expedited precisely because the mainstream media is following the news of the pandemic, rather than the camp closure process.

We are living in the camp since 2012. At that time, we didn't have any conflict with Rakhine Buddhist people. Local authorities and some leaders asked us to stay a few days outside of the town. A few days has become eight years now. Some people from the government always said that we need harmony with the Rakhine people in order to return. We already have that harmony. Since we have been living together for ages, we don't hate each other, we talk to each other, and we are a part of them, too. We had many intermarriages with Rakhine Buddhist people. We are relatives. People from camp are going into the town to work in the construction sites and girls are also working at the shops in the market. In the last two months, we had a wedding in the camp and around 500 Rakhine Buddhist people who are our friends and relatives came to celebrate the wedding ceremony.

**- 35 year old women from
Kyauk Ta Lone IDP camp in Kyauk Phyu**

AA Conflict and Troop Movements

Conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw has escalated in 2020 and affects increasingly broad swathes of Rakhine and parts of Chin states. Kaman and Rakhine Muslim communities worry that they will be affected by the conflict as it spreads into southern Rakhine State. Currently, these communities rely on Facebook to obtain information about the conflict. As a result, views on the conflict are fragmented:

There is little likelihood that AA will start fighting in the Rambre township, as the geographical situation in Rambre township is different from areas of Northern and Central Rakhine state. However, last month, there was a small fighting between AA and Tatmadaw near the village called Kyauk Seik which is under Rambre township area.

**- 62 year old man from
Kyauk Ni Maw village**

Some people in the camp have worries about AA / Tatmadaw armed clashes in Kyauk Phyu Township because our camp is closed to military bases. There are many police/military security outposts (or military bases) surrounding our camp. If we know some information about the conflicts, we can do some preparedness – like keeping some extra rice and foods. Otherwise, we cannot mitigate the risks for our lives.

**- 35 year old woman from
Kyauk Phyu IDP camp**

There are rumours spreading around that the AA and Tatmadaw will fight in Thandwe township after the matriculation exam. Some said Thandwe has no big mountain so it will be difficult to base AA troops here. Some said Thandwe is a tourist area for Ngapali beach, so the government will not let that happen. If conflict does happen, I am a bit worried that I cannot flee to another village.

**- 32 year old man from
Kung Tike village, Thandwe**

The increased number of incidents this year in Kyauk Phyu - including a bomb inside the GAD office - suggests that the conflict may soon entangle southern Rakhine's vulnerable Muslim populations. It is unclear exactly what this might mean for Muslim communities; for instance, the AA's position on the remaining IDP camps and proposed closures isn't clear. Still, as has often been the case throughout Rakhine's recent history, Muslim communities in the south are highly likely to become bargaining pieces in the Rakhine quest for local autonomy, and the union governments attempts to prevent it. Given the extreme marginalization of Muslims across the country, this would leave these communities with few protections.



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