

MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE

CASS

Community Analysis Support System

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IN FOCUS

Elections Unexpected: Rakhine Polarised on Polls

With the 8 November election firmly on the horizon, there remains little interest and enthusiasm for polls among communities in Rakhine State. Armed conflict, displacement and severe disruption to livelihoods continue to occupy Facebook feeds and daily discussions. Additionally, the inability of the government to administer high school exams, maintain village administration, or even travel to many rural areas all suggest that elections will not be held in many parts of central and northern Rakhine State. The lack of confidence in the elections, and a related expected escalation in conflict, will result in a difficult period for the humanitarian response.

There is a widespread perception among Rakhine communities that electoral politics has failed Rakhine State, and that effective decentralisation remains distant under a Bamar-dominated political system. Local support for the Arakan Army has grown out of this discourse, and is reinforced by violent policies from the Tatmataw and Naypyidaw government who seek to suppress the insurgency.

Such disillusionment with electoral democracy is underpinned by the reluctance of Naypyidaw to share power with the states and regions. This problem is likely to be compounded in 2020, as the voices of Rakhine voters will likely be diminished as a result of vote-splitting. In the 2015 election, Rakhine State was unique; two dominant ethnic Rakhine parties merged to form the Arakan National Party – the only ethnic party to win a majority of elected seats in any state parliament that year. In other ethnic states, multiple parties representing the same ethnic group split the vote, leaving the National League for Democracy or military-formed Union Solidarity and Development Party to win in Myanmar's 'winner-takes-all' voting system. In 2020 the Arakan National Party will face competition from the Arakan League for Democracy and the Arakan Front Party, both of which split from the Arakan National Party after disagreements in 2017.

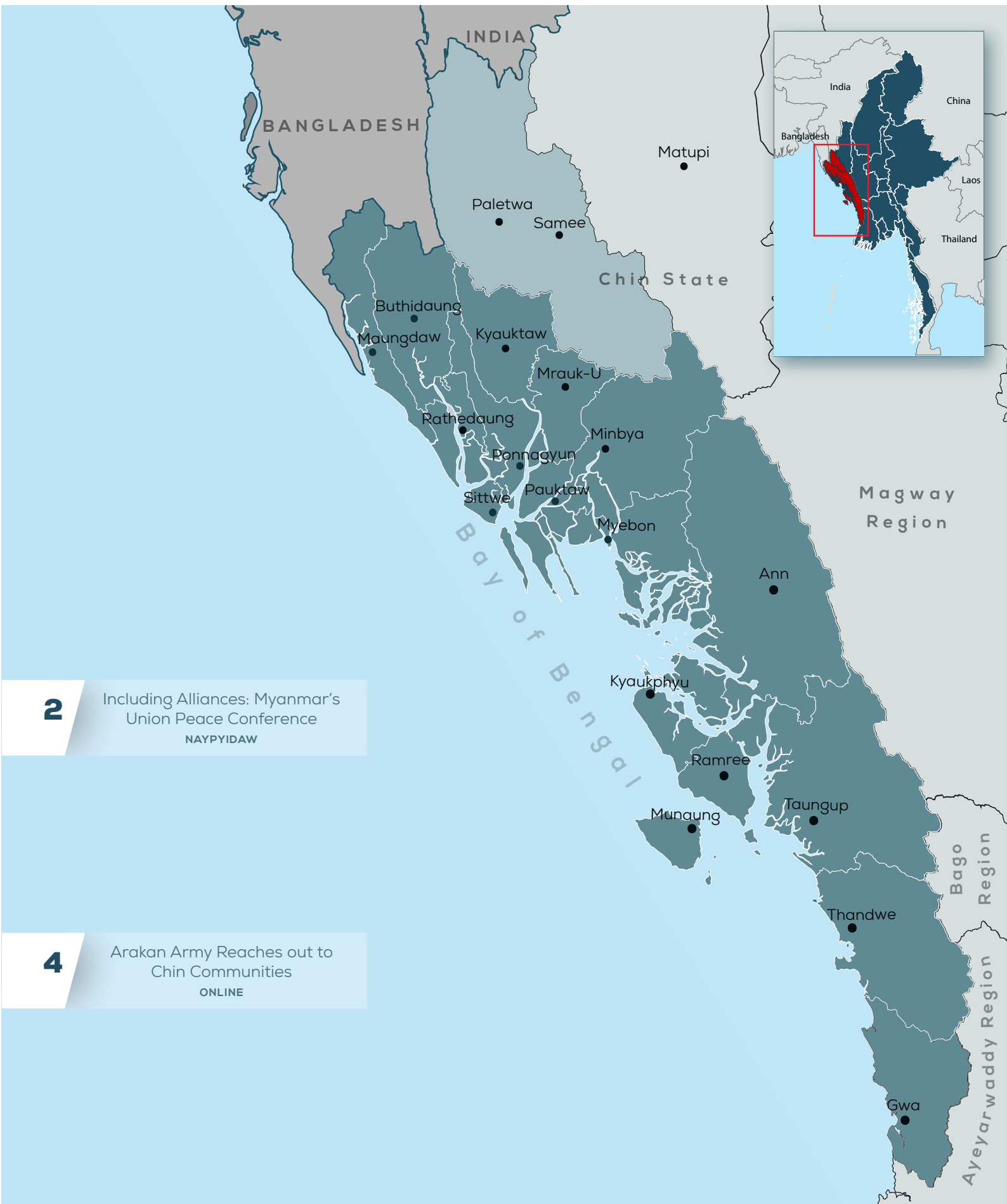
Despite little interest in or likelihood of polls, nationwide voter mobilisation will have significant negative ramifications for the humanitarian response in Rakhine State. With few indications of dialogue forming, the conflict can only be expected to continue as the ruling National League for Democracy Party doubles down on national security rhetoric to appeal to its Bamar Buddhist voter base ahead of polls. As such, insecurity in the region is likely to continue to be a challenge for response actors. An increase in targeted killings of security personnel and civil servants through June and July has increasingly destabilised the urban areas and transport routes where humanitarian agencies operate along the main Yangon-Sittwe main road. Authorities have also increased restrictions on the transportation of goods along these passages, including for private contractors in the employ of agencies. Competition for control of these areas is tightening, and the Arakan Army continues to use violence to destabilise existing institutions.

Electoral violence is also increasingly likely as campaigning becomes visible. The Arakan Army has repeatedly [abducted National League for Democracy members](#) over the last year. Some have died in Arakan Army custody while others remain unaccounted for. Predictably, the ruling party is facing difficulties finding [candidates willing to risk standing for office](#) in many areas of the state. Further violence and related insecurity may result in greater restrictions on humanitarian agencies' movements. Humanitarian responders active in IDP sites should also monitor the potential for protests to develop regarding voting rights for IDPs. Naypyidaw has given the issue little attention, but Rakhine political parties have already begun discussions on the topic.

Looking further ahead, the elephant in the room is the Arakan Army's position on elections. This remains unclear, but is undoubtedly crucial. If the armed group allows polls to go ahead will likely result in the election of Rakhine politicians, but Naypyidaw's reluctance to devolve meaningful power to state parliaments will only buttress support for the Arakan Army's brand of autonomy. Conversely, a cancellation of polls will embarrass the central government and highlight the Arakan Army's success in disrupting governance. In an interview with ethnic Chin media this month, Arakan Army leader Htun Mrat Naing suggested a willingness to allow elections by stopping fighting on election day – but didn't suggest how the Union Electoral Commission would get the access it needs to prepare for polls. The Arakan Army effectively has the final say over the possibility of elections, and it may use this to force the government's hand to come to the negotiating table.

Southern Rakhine State remains a wildcard, where polls are likely to go ahead given the absence of active clashes. The National League for Democracy has historically been popular in the south, which is much more politically diverse than the north. The impact of COVID-19 is also unknown. Bamar economic migrants to southern Rakhine are more likely to support the National League for Democracy, but many have returned to their hometowns due to a downturn in the tourism industry. The emergence of the vigilante group 'National Security Organisation - Taungup Township' this year also embodies increasing polarisation in the south. The group has violently targeted National League for Democracy members in an apparent attempt to force voters to choose with whom they stand. Rakhine political actors, whether armed or not, do not wish to see the National League for Democracy dominate southern Rakhine State as they did in 2015 – especially if seats in the centre and north of the state remain empty. Humanitarian responders can also expect electoral violence to spread south.

If officials cannot access areas to begin preparations by mid-August, elections are extremely unlikely to go ahead in any meaningful way, and will likely be limited to urban areas. The Union Electoral Commission has announced that the training of electoral officials and revisions of voter lists will take place online this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is yet to give any indication of where this leaves those voters under internet shutdown areas in Myanmar's west. //



1 Administration Adversity: The Village Tract

MYEBON TOWNSHIP, CENTRAL RAKHINE STATE

The **5 June mass resignation** of 62 ward and village tract leaders in Myebon Township has had dire impacts to Naypyidaw's governance structure. According to local sources, the Township General Administration Department has negotiated with administrators to guarantee their protection from arrest by the Tatmadaw on suspicions of affiliation with the Arakan Army. As a result, only two or three administrators have left their posts, while others have resumed their duties. Unsurprisingly, this development reflects a trend of similar resignations in Minbya, Kyauktaw, Rathedaung, and Mrauk-U townships in 2019.

Shifting control

Naypyidaw's local administrative mechanisms are increasingly being rivaled by new Arakan Army public governance committees. The Arakan Army has set up its own public governance committees in a majority of villages, where they serve administrative functions such as crime investigation, dispute resolution and the enforcement of alcohol and drug bans. As well as being **driven by fear and intimidation**, ward and village tract administrators are also inclined to resign due to the weakening authority of the General Administration Department, which has in part been replaced by the Arakan Army's governance actors. Although some administrators have returned to perform their administrative duties and functions in name, they do not carry the influence they previously did. The continued movement of the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw through the township also evoke anxieties among administrators, who remain targets. Local sources report that communities in some areas of Myebon Township have more confidence in the public governance committee of the Arakan Army than in village or ward administrators, due to perceived efficiency, supportiveness and effectiveness. Under these circumstances, it is more likely that communities will continue to seek help from the Arakan Army's governance committee rather than the government's. Given the risks of engaging with the Arakan Army's structures while the group remains designated under the Counter Terror act, humanitarian agencies should not engage such

committees. However, agencies should be aware of these shifting dynamics and the implications for village administrators. Engagement may become possible if and when authorities change their approach to combating the Arakan Army. Agencies can continue to operate in these areas through local responders and parahita groups who do have access to these areas. //

2 Including Alliances: Myanmar's Union Peace Conference

NAYPYIDAW

The fourth session of the Union Peace Conference – known as the 21st Century Panglong – has been announced for 12-14 August, following agreement between ethnic armed organizations and the government. A number of preliminary meetings have been scheduled in preparation for the conference. The fourth Union Peace Conference will be the final conference held under the National League for Democracy's five-year term government. With COVID-19 measures in place, the government will be hoping for a successful conference before nationwide elections on 8 November.

All in for peace?

The term 'inclusive' is frequently heard in regards to peace negotiations in Myanmar. It is employed by the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre, the Peace Commission, and ethnic armed groups themselves. However, with little indication that conflict will de-escalate in Rakhine State, the inclusion of ethnic armed groups who have not signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement remains uncertain. The government has not yet invited the Northern Alliance – consisting of the Arakan Army, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, the Kachin Independence Army, and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army – to the conference. Delegates from the Arakan Army may also fear the risk of arrest should they arrive in Naypyidaw. While Northern Alliance members attended the conference as observers in 2018, the Arakan Army's designation as a terrorist organisation in March this year is more likely to result in its exclusion. The Northern Alliance also rejected an invitation for an online dialogue from the government in

June this year, and said dialogue would be impossible until after the COVID-19 pandemic. The government may take the conference as an opportunity to reach out to the Northern Alliance to restart dialogue. Any developments towards greater engagement may be an indicator of a more conciliatory approach from Naypyidaw towards Rakhine State and the Arakan Army. //

3 IDPs Face Food and Shelter Shortages

ANN TOWNSHIP, RAKHINE STATE

Following the Tatmadaw's 27 June verbal order to evacuate villages around Dar Let village tract, Ann Township, civil society group Ann New Generation Youth Association reported that some 5,000 people remain displaced. Approximately 1,732 more have taken shelter in urban wards and nearby villages. An estimated 2,000 others are in other villages in the township. Reports that approximately 700 people remain trapped in Dar Let village tract are extremely concerning. A Tatmadaw checkpoint at the Yoe Chaung bridge continues to restrict villagers' movement and prohibits the transportation of rice and other foodstuffs. Entry into Dar Let village tract is also now prohibited. The Tatmadaw has blocked waterways and seized over 100 motorboats at Ah Lay Kyun and Ah Nauk (Shan Gone) villages' jetties. Villagers report that the Tatmadaw has warned villagers that those using boats will be considered Arakan Army members. Two villagers were subsequently shot and injured by Tatmadaw troops near the Yoe Chaung bridge while travelling via waterway.

Support needed

According to local sources, villagers remaining in Dar Let village tract have faced gunfire from the Tatmadaw checkpoint at Yoe Chaung bridge when they attempt to leave the village. Those trapped in Dar Lat Chaung village tract are facing food shortages and have healthcare needs. Local responders in urban Ann have provided shelter support, but IDPs fear the shelters will not survive heavy rain. International agencies can offer support for food and shelter needs. IDPs have access to markets, so cash payments to communities or CSOs to respond are possible while access

remains restricted for international agencies. WASH support would also be valuable, as there are few functioning latrines in the IDP sites. Displaced persons at monastic and other displacement sites near waterways practice open defecation nearby shelters, risking serious health problems. While access is likely to remain limited due to ongoing conflict and restrictions from authorities, agencies should reach out to authorities through designated experienced staff who act as counterparts for engagement with local government and armed forces. Remote modalities should also be considered. Given increasing limitations on freedom of movement and access to healthcare, medical agencies should explore medical consultations by phone line, or mobile application in areas where the internet is available. Agencies can also consider creating contact lists of traditional birth attendants who are likely to remain among displaced and non-displaced communities. They may serve as effective communicators for health information, and will also limit the risks of excluding women from response networks. //

4 Arakan Army Reaches out to Chin Communities

ONLINE

Among a plethora of statements published by the Arakan Army over the previous week, perhaps the most notable offered a response to characterisations of the Arakan Army as a 'Buddhist' armed group. The statement forcefully rejects that label and says the Arakan Army is made up of all ethnic and religious groups from 'Arakan' – the group's preferred English-language ethnonym over the narrower conception of 'Rakhine'. Arakan Army leader Htun Mrat Naing has given an interview to a Chin media group, and the Arakan Army last week posted a Youtube video of an ethnic Chin Arakan Army soldier addressing villagers in a Chin language in southern Chin State's Paletwa Township.

Minority outreach

These developments indicate that the Arakan Army recognises it will only be successful in southern Chin state if it can foster goodwill with communities there. Southern

Chin State remains strategically critical to the Arakan Army, as it provides access to the border and transportation routes, and is sufficiently remote to avoid much of the government's administration structures and the military's intelligence networks. This is also a part of the Arakan Army's very well oiled communications strategy to appeal to the international community, and not just about the Rohingya. The Arakan Army has long attempted to placate international concerns about the armed group's approach to the Rohingya, and recent reporting from Chin human rights groups critical of the Arakan Army may have prompted the recent outreach from the Arakan Army. The Chin, not recognised by the state or communities as an 'Arakanese' ethnic group, are increasingly trapped between warring parties in western Myanmar, and have been adversely impacted by displacement, shelling and other abuses. //

'clearance operations' in late June. Rathedaung has been perhaps the most conflict-affected township for the past year, and the intensity of clashes there continues to represent this. On the eastern bank of the Mayu river, the situation is stable although communities are concerned about the potential for Tatmadaw troops to return and commit further sexual violence; the woman raped by Tatmadaw troops in U Gar village on 30 June has now opened a case against the perpetrators at the Sittwe No.1 Police Station. Returns to Kyauk Tan remain unlikely for now, despite the urgent need to plant monsoon paddy. Both armed actors continue to use mines and IEDs. Mine risk education will continue to be important as returnees will face unexploded ordnance, IEDs and mines. Humanitarian agencies should also consider the longer term impacts to financial and food security. Displacement during the early monsoon months likely means a failure to plant paddy crops, with subsequent impacts to livelihoods and food security for years. //

5 Civilian Casualties Spike as Operations Continue

RATHEDAUNG TOWNSHIP, NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

The Tatmadaw and Arakan Army continue to clash near the Kyauk Tan village area of northern Rathedaung Township as Tatmadaw operations continue there. The area remains almost completely absent of civilians, and as such no new displacement has occurred from northern Rathedaung. Southern Rathedaung now tells a different story, however. Tatmadaw troops left the eastern side of the Mayu river last week, facilitating the return of some 10,000 people to their villages, but new clashes have occurred on the western coast of Rathedaung. Tatmadaw troops reportedly fired indiscriminately into Aung Ba La village there on 11 July, injuring two women, one seriously. On 12 July the Arakan Army and Tatmadaw clashed just north of Aung Ba La village. As a result, some 500 people fled to nearby villages. On 13 July the Tatmadaw entered Kyein Tar Li village where their artillery and light fire reportedly killed two civilians and injured three others.

Clearance casualties

While displacement related to Tatmadaw operations since late June continue to impact civilians, the severity is not as dire as expected when the Tatmadaw first announced

// Other Developments

- The new United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar Thomas Andrews gave his first report on Monday this week. His predecessor, Yanghee Lee, was banned from visiting Myanmar from 2017, but it is not yet clear whether Andrews will be permitted entry.
- In the early evening of 11 July Tatmadaw troops reportedly fired into civilian areas of urban Ponnagyun, killing one elderly man and injuring two children. There was no report of Arakan Army instigation, and follows the deployment of additional Tatmadaw troops into urban Ponnagyun last week.
- Communities in northern Rakhine State's Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships continue to hear reports of informal returns of people from Bangladesh. Reportedly, many returnees continue to avoid interactions with authorities and quarantine facilities, likely concerned about the imprisonment of informal returnees. While most returnees are reportedly Muslim, there is little further stigmatization of the group reported despite ongoing concerns of a COVID-19 outbreak. Rohingya communities themselves remain concerned about the potential for returnees to spread the virus.

MYANMAR WEEKLY UPDATE / TO WATCH THIS WEEK / KEY READINGS

// To Watch This Week

- Myanmar will commemorate Martyr's Day on 19 July to mark the assassination of independence hero General Aung San and seven other ministers six months before independence from Britain. Aung San Suu Kyi's government has increasingly used the imagery and rhetoric of the independence icon in public-facing governance since 2015 – sparking protests from critics of **a policy they call Burmanisation**. As such, Martyr's Day may present an opportunity for detractors to voice these and other concerns. Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi has asked drivers across the country to continue the informal tradition of sounding their horns at 10.37am to mark her father's passing.
- The Myanmar Times reports that the Union Electoral Commission will post voter lists online on 18 July. Voters will then check the accuracy of lists. It is not clear how voter lists will be circulated in internet shutdown areas of western Myanmar – suggesting polls are increasingly unlikely.

// Key Readings

- Myanmar Development Institute has published **four policy discussion papers** on Cash and In Kind Transfers for Vulnerable Households in Response to COVID-19.
- Key Watching: Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia joins hands with the School of Oriental and African Studies and the Free Rohingya Coalition for a 16 July seminar on "**What Future for Rakhine?:** End Games for the Arakanese (Rakhine, Rohingyas and Other Co-habitants)".



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