



Community Analysis Support System



# MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE

17-23 September 2020

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# The COVID Clampdown

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## IN FOCUS

Since the scaling up of the international response in western Myanmar in 2012, there have been persistent concerns regarding the application of humanitarian principles within a deeply complex conflict context. Humanitarian actors have expressed concerns about issues of humanitarian access, neutrality, and the potential for the instrumentalization of assistance by parties to the conflict. These concerns are approached practically through conflict sensitivity and ‘do no harm’ lenses, and underpinned by the desire to support those most in need and to improve the lives of Myanmar’s most vulnerable people.

The most frequently discussed example of this concern is the question of humanitarian access to Rohingya people confined to camps in central Rakhine State. Here, some humanitarian agencies have argued that humanitarian support risks subsidising and legitimising a de-facto policy of internment. Heated debate continues with respect to the best way to support some of Myanmar’s most vulnerable while also remaining aligned with the humanitarian principles. This debate is complicated by the very real and disturbing choices that face the international community and their impact on camp-bound populations in need.

Other ongoing examples of the politicisation of humanitarian assistance abound throughout the country, most often manifested by the military’s effective veto over which villages and communities receive support in western Myanmar. In the context of the civil war and the Tatmadaw’s ‘four cuts’ strategy — to cut insurgents’ access to funds, food, information and recruits — a military veto on humanitarian access jeopardises the ability of humanitarian actors to implement programs in accordance with both their principles and imperative. Recent experiences — such as in besieged areas in Syria — would suggest that humanitarian advocacy alone will rarely have the desired effect of removing politically-motivated access restrictions.

**A COVID catalyst?**

Most recently, the spread of COVID-19 in Rakhine State and infections amongst humanitarians in mid-August have resulted in the suspension of programming for at least 17 international agencies, while all others have been ordered to limit their activities to only ‘lifesaving assistance’. Lifesaving assistance is defined by authorities as essential food distributions, healthcare, WASH, and COVID-19 response, as well as some shelter and communicating with communities activities. Front-line responders must also prove they have tested negative for the virus before being authorised access, although limited testing capacities in Rakhine State have created a bottleneck on the response.

As noted previously in the [CASS Weekly Update](#), authorities have also raised the prospect of channeling all aid through village tract or ward administrators and camp management committees. While there remain ambiguities about what precisely this would entail, program implementation through local authorities could have a real impact on program monitoring, design, beneficiary selection, and program quality. While these measures have primarily targeted international agencies, local organizations and responders largely retain unimpeded access to camps and villages, in practice if not principle. While controlling the spread of COVID-19 is extremely important, the proposed modalities for delivering assistance have raised concerns among some humanitarians of a further deterioration in access conditions.

It is clear that precautions must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 to vulnerable communities with limited access to healthcare, especially to those who remain in camps and villages. But those very vulnerabilities also demand a continuation of services previously provided by humanitarian agencies. There have already been reports of avoidable deaths in the central Rakhine State camps as a result of restrictions on the provision of, and access to, healthcare.

With more and more restrictions and procedures to understand and navigate, agencies have little space to take proactive approaches, and are instead left scrambling to respond.

### Missing the forest for the trees

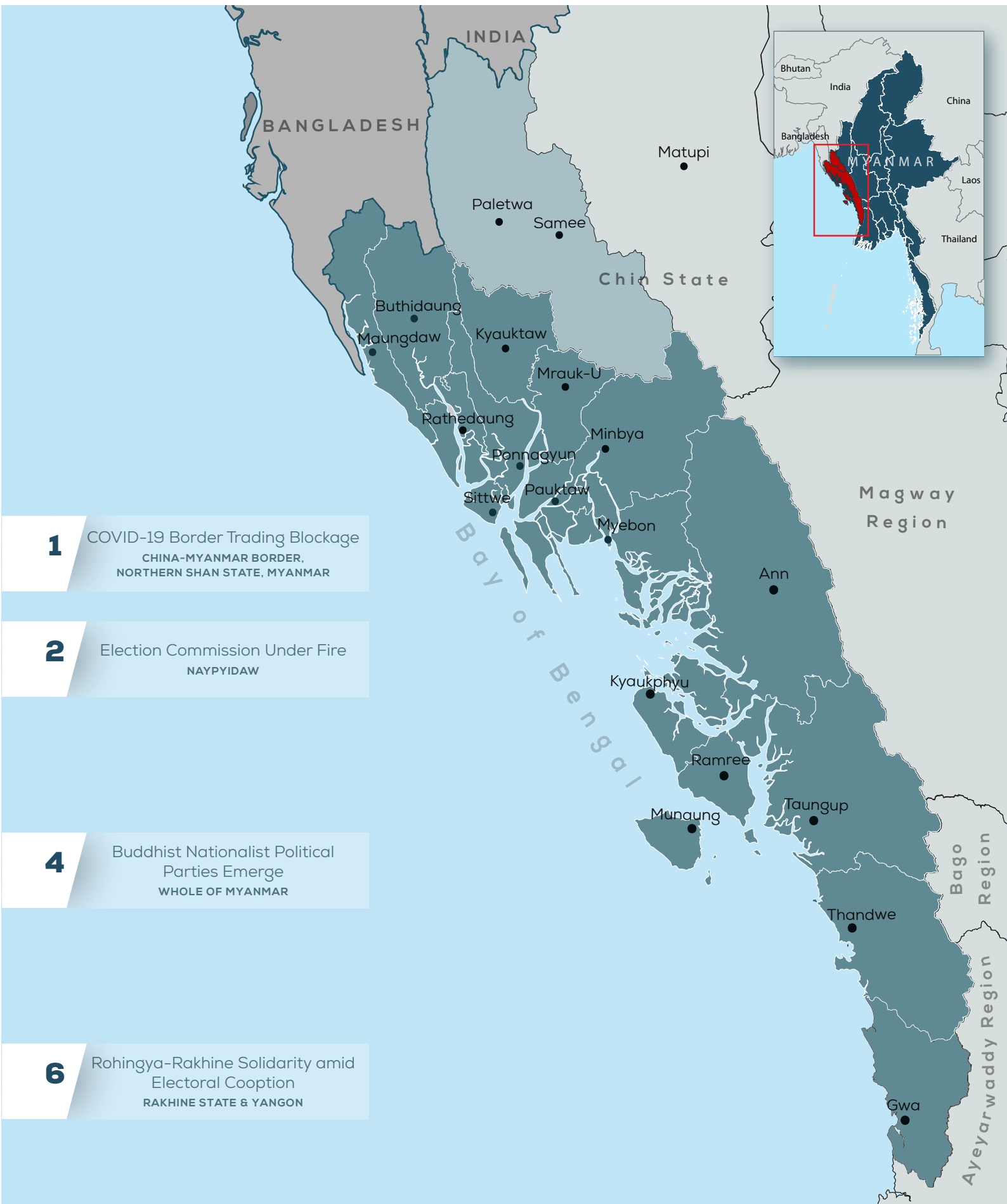
Travel authorisation processes have become increasingly complicated since 2012, as agencies have had to navigate mounting requirements and levels of bureaucracy. There is a necessary pre-occupation with managing each new layer of red tape, and now the necessity to secure COVID-19 testing for front-line responders. This serves to draw attention away from civilian deaths in the line of ongoing armed conflict, and the overall trajectory of the response in western Myanmar. There is also little capacity left to monitor dynamics ahead of nationwide elections expected for November. Looking at the broader picture, there are four key avenues open to agencies to mitigate these limitations.

The first is to support stronger mechanisms for information-sharing between agencies. Inter-agency mistrust and participation in systems encouraging competition to curry favour with authorities ultimately inhibit the sharing of information which could be mobilised for advocacy and joint action. The second, and related avenue, is to establish a public narrative which highlights both ongoing abuses in western Myanmar and the restrictive barriers to a humanitarian response in this context. Such a narrative can raise a platform from which to raise proactive responses.

Third, it is critical to establish better engagement for advocacy and dialogue with the government. Different streams of engagement through diverse forums and individuals will reap the most benefits. A joint strategy using available resources — such as the IRI Freedom of Movement [roadmap of recommendations](#) — will support a coherent public-facing narrative.

Finally, as [previously mentioned in this forum](#), there is a clear need for a deliberate strategy of localisation in western Myanmar. Local organisations are not only better positioned to access local communities as restrictions related to COVID-19 grow, but in many cases have long-standing relationships with those communities affected by humanitarian issues, affording them greater access to physical locations (and better information on needs) than international agencies. Ultimately, localisation is a gateway to improved access, new avenues for legible advocacy, and a sustainable long-term response. There is a need for a well-managed but drastic and concerted shift of resources and capacity to local actors. At the same time, advocacy for international actors' access should continue, and the initial period of the new government in early 2021 will be an opportunity to forge new relationships and influence policy.

Without a radical new approach to western Myanmar, the prospects for any effective response will remain dire. //



# 1 COVID-19 Border Trading Blockage

CHINA-MYANMAR BORDER, NORTHERN SHAN STATE, MYANMAR

On 22 September, China again reopened its customs office and border trade between China's Ruili and Myanmar's Muse border towns after a one week shutdown. Border trade at the gate between China and Myanmar was stopped entirely after a lockdown in the city of Ruili in southwest Yunnan province. Authorities issued a stay-at-home order for all Ruili residents on 15 September following the confirmation of two COVID-19 positive cases — both Myanmar nationals who entered China illegally. No new cases were reported after officials went into what they called 'wartime mode' and launched 200,000 tests — the entire city's population. Heightened COVID-19 prevention measures are now in place across the city and at the border. The China and Myanmar have agreed on a joint fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and a crackdown on illegal border crossings. Thus, local Chinese authorities have established more patrols and border control points to prevent illegal border crossings, while assisting Myanmar with material and financial support for border villages to build strong prevention and control checkpoints. Limited restrictions on trade remain and Myanmar drivers are still required to swap with Chinese drivers at the border.

## Border-trading halt

The Chinese-imposed border-crossing block carried an immediate and severe economic impact, particularly for Myanmar businesses and migrant workers, and reflects Myanmar's vulnerability to economic shocks from across the border. First of all, the sudden halt in border trade prompted serious concerns for local traders over losses and damages. The border is a major trading zone for the two countries, and the majority of Myanmar's agricultural produce is exported through it. Since the coronavirus outbreak, there has been a steady decline in the daily total value of trade between Myanmar and China. The director of the Muse 105 Mile Trading Point reported to BBC that daily trade has declined from an estimated 9 to 10 million US dollars to 6 or 7 million US dollars since the COVID-19 crisis began. In addition, the price of export crops has reportedly dropped by around 5 to 10 per

cent, while local reports also indicate that the price of surgical masks imported from China has increased slightly since last week's border closure. Secondly, the lockdown raised concerns for the thousands of Myanmar migrants working in Chinese factories without any legal claim to residency or settled status. These workers faced the prospects of unemployment and even deportation to Myanmar. Remittances would also cease — just one of the flow-on effects of the shutdown. This is therefore a critical issue for communities in Myanmar reliant on trade with China, and indeed Myanmar's China-reliant national economy. Further disruptions to trade at the border could be disastrous for the country's economy. It is therefore crucial for humanitarian and international agencies to consider their COVID-19 response as a priority for those families, by providing either cash transfers or COVID-19 aid such as basic essential food. //

# 2 Election Commission Under Fire

NAYPYIDAW

Days after Myanmar's Union Election Commission refused to postpone the scheduled 8 November nationwide general elections, two unexploded grenades were found outside the house of the Naypyidaw Union Territory Union Election Commissioner. Numerous political parties have urged the commission to postpone the polls due to a worsening COVID-19 outbreak. Perhaps most notably, the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party was one of 24 parties to sign a letter urging the commission to postpone the poll last week.

## Empty threats?

The fact that neither of the two grenades exploded at the commissioner's house reflects the fact that this was an act of intimidation, rather than an attempt at violence. Simultaneously, this is a reflection of growing polarisation six weeks ahead of scheduled polls, and may be interpreted by hostile parties as a green light for further violence against officials. There are already questions about the commission's impartiality, given that it often appears to take its cues from the ruling National League for Democracy party. As noted in last week's CASS Weekly Update, the government seems intent on pushing ahead

with elections, eager to avoid handing the military the upper hand by tempting the constitutional crisis which would arise from postponement past January. The question remains — will the political opposition use these developments and doubts about the election commission to allege that the electoral process is neither free nor fair? If there is enough weight behind such accusations, resultant instability may provide the military with the justification to take the upper hand and reclaim power. While the prospects of a military coup remain remote, a legal takeover remains permissible under Myanmar's 2008 constitution and can never be discounted. //

### 3 Humanitarian Crisis in Conflict Zone

NORTHERN RATHEDAUNG TOWNSHIP, NORTHERN RAKHINE STATE

It has now been three months since the Tatmadaw launched 'clearance operations' around Kyauk Tan village in northern Rathedaung Township. The operations left thousands of people displaced to urban Rathedaung and villages on the opposite, western bank, of the Mayu river. Armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and Arakan Army has continued in the area, and troops from both sides now regularly pass through the villages. As such, return for most villagers is impossible. IDPs from urban displacement sites want to leave crowded displacement sites due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a lack of humanitarian assistance. However, the situation remains unstable. Fear of incursions or being interrogated and harassed by the Tatmadaw is often the reason villagers choose to flee and remain in IDP sites. Return, or any travel, by waterway is also untenable given the security situation and the Tatmadaw navy's continued use of the Mayu river. As such, indiscriminate shooting by the navy into residential areas has continued, raising the number of civilian casualties. One man was killed and two others injured during shelling on 17 September in southern Rathedaung Township, on 11 September a six-year-old boy was injured by an artillery shell in northern Rathedaung Township and on 15 September another man was injured by gunfire nearby. In addition, some civilians who fled their homes remain unaccounted for by humanitarian agencies, and are believed to be hiding in nearby villages in fear of further shooting from the navy. On 23 September some 2,000 people fled the Ku

Taung village area in southern Rathedaung Township after new Tatmadaw troop movements.

#### Humanitarian access denied

Some international aid has been channeled to IDPs in accessible sites in the northern part of Rathedaung Township through local and international agencies. In more remote areas, CSOs, *parahita* groups and religious leaders have had some success in reaching IDPs. Some IDP sites outside of urban areas, particularly those on the western side of the Mayu river, remain inaccessible due to Tatmadaw navy movements along the river and frequent clashes with the Arakan Army. The Arakan Army positions itself as a caretaker and protector of local communities in northern Rathedaung Township's remote areas, especially by providing services in some key sectors such as physical safety, livelihoods and local governance. Some IDPs are also sheltering in Arakan Army influenced areas, but humanitarian organizations are rarely authorized access — another example of how authorities have instrumentalized humanitarian assistance in this conflict. Cash transfers may be one option for supporting hard-to-reach communities, but agencies must ensure to the greatest extent possible that resources are not being diverted. Engagement with local CSOs, *parahita* groups and religious leaders should be considered by international responders as a solution to these constraints, as local responders can reach IDP sites that international agencies cannot. Advocacy to the Rakhine State government and the military must also continue to lobby for access to remote areas to provide essential supplies including COVID-19 equipment. //

### 4 Buddhist Nationalist Political Parties Emerge

WHOLE OF MYANMAR

A number of political parties with links to Buddhist nationalist groups are preparing to compete in Myanmar's upcoming 8 November election. Typically smaller and recently formed, these parties have attracted limited interest from voters due to the popularity of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) brands in Bamar-majority regions, and the prominence of ethnic political parties in Myanmar's borderlands. Three Buddhist nationalist



parties are worthy of note. The first, the National Development Party (NDP) was founded just a few months before the 2015 election by Dr. Nay Zin Latt, an ex-Tatmadaw official and a well known adviser to former President Thein Sein. The NDP contested 356 seats in the 2015 election but failed to win even one. The NDP will field only 13 candidates this year. The second is the Democratic Party of National Politics (DNP), which was formed in mid-2019 by former Tatmadaw general and minister in the then Union Solidarity and Development Party government Soe Maung and other former senior military officials. The DNP cannot be separated from its sister *Ra Hta Pa La* Association (the name refers to the *pali* term for ‘protection of the country’). *Ra Hta Pa La* has been active in *parabita* activities since at least late 2018. There is crossover between the work and membership of both the DNP and *Ra Hta Pa La*’s, and both have mottos based around a vaguely defined ‘nationalism’. The DNP will contest 105 seats in the upcoming election. The last party worth highlighting is the Yeomanry Development Party (YDP), the founder of which is Michael Kyaw Myint, a controversial and outspoken Buddhist nationalist who became widely known after serving a year in prison for leading a mob to force the shutdown of Muslim worship sites in 2019 (not to be confused with the controversial founder of the United Democratic Party who goes by the same name). The YDP is contesting some 25 seats.

### Fragmentation or sophistication?

First and foremost, the emergence of these parties reflects a shift away from reliance on the USDP. Although certainly limited in their scope, the emergence of these parties implies a significant shift towards Buddhist nationalist leaders adapting themselves to the democratic space, and presenting themselves as legitimate political representatives. This is reflected in three key ways. First, although nationalist politicians in general have become less unified in the 2020 election, they are all avoiding attacks on fellow nationalist parties, minimising competition, and maintaining friendly relations with the USDP and the Tatmadaw — the ally of choice among nationalists. Second, and more broadly, the emergence of nationalist parties is part of a larger trend of Ma Ba Tha members (a very diverse group in terms of socio-cultural and political backgrounds) forming diverse organisations, networks and political parties. These emerging actors specialise in different types of activism — ranging from political *parabita* to legal action and electoral politics. The NLD crackdown on Ma Ba Tha since 2016 and a reluctance among many Ma Ba Tha members to engage in

activities deemed ‘political’ has driven some members to establish their own political activities. Third, regardless of the minimal changes of success, contesting elections is an important milestone for these individuals to re-shape themselves as legitimate politicians and pave the way for their long-term political careers. Nationalist politicians have already met their initial goals of registering political parties, issuing statements and mobilising crowds on an ongoing basis. As a diverse network of active political nationalists are now in operation, donor organisations should ensure that local language social media monitors are adequately funded to monitor online disinformation ahead of elections. In particular, media monitors may expect to see a spike in hate speech and disinformation targetting NLD’s Muslim candidates, members and supporters ahead of the election. //

## 5 Contrasting Narratives on Quiet Deployment

### MYANMAR-BANGLADESH BORDER

Competing explanations for Tatmadaw troop deployments on the Myanmar-Bangladesh border have emerged from civilian and military authorities this week. As noted in last week’s CASS Weekly Update, from 10 September the Tatmadaw deployed numerous troops — estimated between 2,000 and 3,000 — to the border, concerning both local residents and Bangladesh authorities. Following Bangladesh’s summoning of the Myanmar ambassador in Dhaka last week, Myanmar’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs this week called in the Bangladesh ambassador to explain that the troop deployment was “only a regular change of duty of police personnel accompanied by their family members”. The civilian government also claimed that the movements were part of “regular duties undertaken to ensure the prevalence of rule of law and security, and to safeguard the livelihood of all local communities” and were not intended to intimidate or pose a threat to Bangladesh. This explanation, however, contrasts with comments from a military spokesperson who told the Irrawaddy this week that “we have particularly increased security on the land border” due to “increased activities by the AA and ARSA in Buthidaung and Maungdaw.” No new clashes have been reported at the border since the deployment.

## Big moves, little action

Competing explanations for troop deployments have raised further questions about the Tatmadaw's motivations. As noted in last week's [CASS Weekly Update](#), while there are rumoured to be Tatmadaw concerns about more deserters turning up in the International Criminal Court, there are numerous dynamics which may have driven the deployments, not least the recent disappearance and killings of Border Guard Police, concerns about Rohingya returns from Bangladesh and [reports of new Rohingya insurgency](#) activity. The Arakan Army has largely limited its activities in Maungdaw Township but is clearly active along the border region. While both Rakhine and Rohingya villagers near the border have reported no Tatmadaw harassment or abuses, protection actors should expand monitoring as the deployment or subsequent armed clashes may have adverse impacts for civilians. //

## 6 Rohingya-Rakhine Solidarity amid Electoral Cooption

### RAKHINE STATE & YANGON

Inflammatory sentiment regarding the Rohingya and national security has made an entry into the 2020 election campaign. The Burma Human Rights Network has [warned](#) that anti-Muslim violence may result from the mobilisation of political parties around religion during Myanmar's 2020 election campaign. Supporters of the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party allegedly used the slur 'This is a Buddhist country' against a villager who refused to support the party in central Myanmar earlier this month, while in downtown Yangon one independent candidate

raised a signboard highlighting that his campaign rested on the sole policy of 'No Rohingya'. In a campaign policy speech [published in state media](#), National League for Democracy chair and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi has reported that her government pledged 20 billion Myanmar Kyat to build a wall along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border — likely a reference to the [2018 budget allocation](#) for what is usually called a fence. However, contesting these narratives, this week Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh [staged a demonstration](#) in support for three detained ethnic Rakhine student protestors (now released), and Rohingya diaspora groups signed a [joint statement](#) "in solidarity with Rakhine people suffering from Burmese military crimes". Rakhine communities have [reportedly welcomed](#) the expressions of solidarity.

## Shifting sands

While the dangerous electoral rhetoric aimed at building political capital by demonising the Rohingya should be of concern, what is truly notable is how the political tides have turned since the 2015 elections. Some [international media have alleged](#) that the Rohingya have borne the brunt of blame for the latest wave of COVID-19 to sweep Myanmar, but the actual level of public antagonism against the Rohingya has been virtually nil when compared to the leadup to the 2015 election campaign. Then, the Rohingya were [stripped of the vote](#), and Parliament [passed laws](#) designed to limit inter-religious marriages, polygamy and conversion to Islam, and another to control the Rohingya's birth rates. While the absence of anti-Rohingya rhetoric from campaigning nationwide has been notable, this is especially the case in Rakhine State. Political parties who based their 2015 election campaigns on fear mongering have said little on the issue. The shift in Rakhine-Rohingya relationships since the escalation of civil war in Rakhine State is of massive significance. However, as noted previously in this forum, the structural barriers to reconciliation remain immense and rely on the reform of centralised government policies which have marginalised all communities for decades. //



## // Other Developments

- While IDPs who [took shelter in urban Lashio](#) earlier this month have returned home, the Restoration Council of Shan State [predicts](#) further pre-election clashes will take place in Northern Shan State. Civilians displaced by clashes between the Tatmadaw and the Kachin Independence Army and its allies also returned home during the reporting period.

## // What to Watch This Week

- Due to villagers' objections, the National League for Democracy [has taken down](#) one of its campaign signboards in Man Aung Township, Rakhine State. The National League for Democracy won that constituency in 2015, but the mobilisation of Rakhine ethno-nationalism amid armed conflict may change the equation for 2020. Another six signboards were [destroyed](#) by unknown perpetrators this week in Rakhine State, and further political tensions are to be expected.
- Thirty villagers from Tha Yet Ta Pin village in Rakhine State's Kyauktaw Township [were detained by Tatmadaw troops](#) on 23 September, and other villagers fled their homes. Agencies should contact local responders who will be mobilizing support for the newly displaced.

MYANMAR *weekly* UPDATE / TO WATCH THIS WEEK / KEY READINGS

## // Key Readings

- Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Myanmar Tom Andrews addressed the United Nations Human Rights Council this week, where he called for an immediate ceasefire in western Myanmar and questioned the credibility of elections from which the Rohingya remain excluded. A [summary of his remarks](#) are available here, and the [full video here](#).



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