



# Unbowed



April, 2026

**Analysis of Reactions to Nonviolent  
Public Protests Against Revolutionary Forces**



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## Background History of Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization

Athan – a non-profit organization for the Freedom of Expression Movement in Myanmar, was founded by youth activists on 15th January 2018 and intends to ensure the right to freedom of expression to practice in society.

Athan, a research-based organization, was established by combining two organizations, (RTTL) Research Team for Telecommunications Laws and (WSJ) We Support Journalists, to promote Freedom of Expression with three core approaches – research, advocacy, and awareness-raising. Our organization continuously researches and investigates laws, customs, regulations, and case studies that oppress freedom of expression and works on legal reform according to democracy standards, campaigns, and lobbying to achieve a broader level of freedom of expression in respective country categories based on our research and investigation.

Athan and its founder, Maung Saungkha, earned the Human Rights Tulip Award from the Netherlands in December 2018. Athan's ambition for Myanmar is to become a society with complete freedom of expression, which is one of the democratic standards.

## 1. Introduction & Background

The Myanmar military has repeatedly suppressed and restricted freedom of opinion and expression, the most fundamental human right, using various means. Following the 2021 Coup, the regime responded to nonviolent public protests against the coup solely with violence.

The Spring Revolution in Myanmar began as a peaceful, nonviolent movement. It was forced to become an armed resistance, as the military regime violently cracked down on protests. The crackdown used lethal force, mass arbitrary arrests, and torture. As the revolution's landscape shifted, People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and local defense forces emerged across the country. Over the past five years, Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and new resistance groups have gained control of some territories. Currently, they control about 90 townships. <sup>1</sup> The organizations leading the revolution aim to resist the regime's human rights violations and oppression, and seek to establish a federal democratic union grounded in freedom and justice. <sup>2</sup>

However, as resistance forces gained greater territorial control and began assuming administrative roles, they began establishing systems of governance and territorial management. In implementing these administrative mechanisms, it became necessary to ensure the protection of the rights of the governed population, as well as the responsibility and accountability of local authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> တော်လှန်ရေးတပ်ဖွဲ့များ သိမ်းပိုက်ထိန်းချုပ်ထားသည့် မြို့ပေါင်း ၉၀ မြို့၊

Burma News International (၂၀၂၆၊ မတ်လ)

<sup>2</sup> ဖက်ဒရယ် ဒီမိုကရေစီပဋိညာဉ်

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In practice, these requirements have not been fully met. According to independent monitoring reports, restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly have been observed in controlled territories, along with cases of arrests.

Following the 2021 military coup, various organizations have continuously monitored and documented human rights violations and grave abuses committed by the military regime. However, there has been little systematic analysis of human rights restrictions imposed by resistance forces, particularly on freedom of expression and assembly. In pursuing a free and just federal democratic union, it is necessary not only to resist the military regime but also to critically examine the restrictions imposed by revolutionary forces, including their patterns, underlying causes, and impacts.

That is why this research report aims to systematically study the practical restrictions of revolutionary forces against the freedom of expression and assembly in their controlled areas. Moreover, causes and impacts of those restrictions will be exposed through the observations. Findings of this study support revolutionary organizations to amend their governance policies and enhance the protection of human rights standards in their regions.

This research report, therefore, aims to systematically examine the restrictions imposed by revolutionary forces on freedom of expression and assembly in areas under their control. It also seeks to analyze the patterns of these restrictions, their underlying causes, and their impacts. The findings of this study are intended to support revolutionary organizations in revising their governance policies and strengthening the protection of human rights in their areas.

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## 2. Research Methodology and Challenges

This study examines nonviolent public movements directed against revolutionary forces over a five-year period from February 2021 to February 2026. Methodologically, it employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis to measure incidents and qualitative analysis to explore the underlying causes of the protests.

Data and information for this study were systematically collected from independent domestic and international media reports, documentation from partner organizations, and direct monitoring conducted by Athan’s researchers. The analysis categorizes and examines the number of protests, their locations and underlying causes, the response patterns of revolutionary forces, the situation of arrests and detentions, and the responsible actors.

However, documenting all incidents on the ground was limited due to the prevailing security situation in Myanmar and communication and internet shutdowns in certain areas. In particular, some public movements may have gone unreported in the media. Therefore, the cases presented in this report are based solely on incidents independently verified by Athan, and the actual number of protests on the ground may be higher than documented here.

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### 3. Findings

According to data collected by Athan, there were 49 instances of public movements targeting revolutionary forces between February 2021 and February 2026. Of these, 47 were protests, while the remaining 2 were campaigns mobilizing public participation in protests.

By region, Sagaing Region recorded the highest number of cases, with 32 instances of public movements. Sagaing is not only geographically large but also one of the areas where revolutionary forces are most active. It hosts a wide range of groups, including People's Defense Forces under the National Unity Government (NUG), public security units, Local People's Defense Forces (LPDFs), and other organizations. The administrative mechanisms of these forces are not unified under a single centralized command but are instead fragmented. As a result, conflicts have arisen among different groups over authority and territorial control, as well as inconsistencies in taxation and judicial standards. These conditions have contributed to tensions between the public and governing authorities.

As Sagaing region is a revolutionary forces controlled territory, local protest committees organized campaigns to involve more in nonviolence movements.

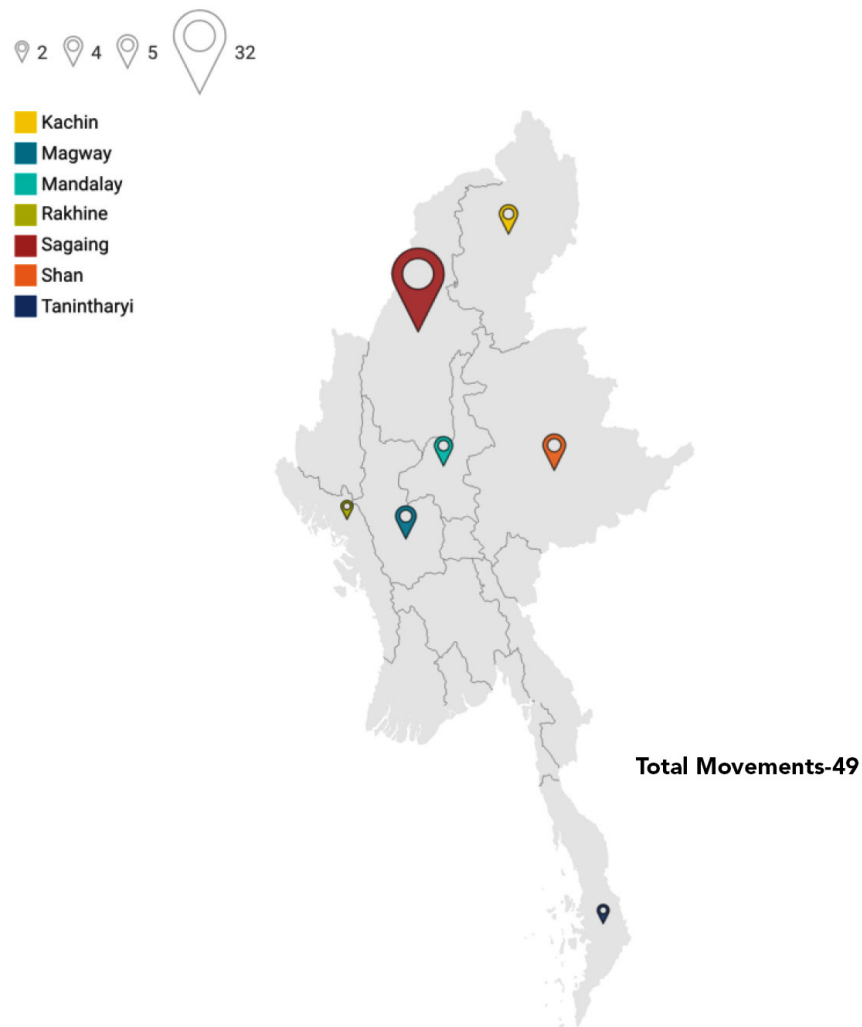
As Sagaing Region is a stronghold of revolutionary forces and a territory under their control, local protest committees have been able to mobilize greater public participation in nonviolent movements. As a result, the public has developed a stronger understanding of their rights and has increasingly taken part in public movements. In addition to the military's inhumane repression, when people face authoritarian practices by revolutionary groups, such as arbitrary arrests and threats, they do not remain silent but instead express opposition and engage in public movements.

Shan state has the second highest number of public protests against the revolutionary forces, and it has four times. Magway region has five times, and Kachin State and Mandalay region has three times

respectively. Protests in Sagaing region are based on governance and taxation, while Kachin State and Shan State have protests for mining and land disputes.

Shan State recorded the second-highest number of protests against revolutionary forces, with 5 instances. Magway Region recorded 4 instances, while Kachin State and Mandalay Region each recorded 3 instances. While protests in Sagaing Region were largely driven by issues related to governance and taxation, those in Kachin and Shan States were more closely linked to disputes over natural resource extraction and land ownership.

(Figure 1) Map showing the number and locations of nonviolent public protests targeting revolutionary forces in controlled territories



Source: Athan-Freedom of Expression Organization . Created with Datawrapper

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### 3.1 Reasons for the Protests

This study identifies five main reasons why people engage in protests:

- a. Protests related to natural resource extraction and environmental harm
- b. Grievances related to governance and taxation
- c. Issues concerning the judiciary and human rights violations
- d. Opposition to recruitment and arbitrary arrests
- e. Movements opposing revolutionary forces

Among these five categories, protests driven by grievances related to governance and taxation were the most frequent, with 15 instances. This indicates that administrative procedures and taxation, which directly affect people's daily lives, can easily spark public dissatisfaction and disputes.

Protests related to natural resource extraction and environmental issues ranked second, with 13 instances. This suggests that the public is aware that the exploitation of natural resources can have harmful impacts not only in the present but also in the long term. It also reflects a growing awareness of and concern for environmental protection, particularly among local communities.

(Figure 2) Chart showing different types of nonviolent public protests targeting revolutionary forces in controlled territories

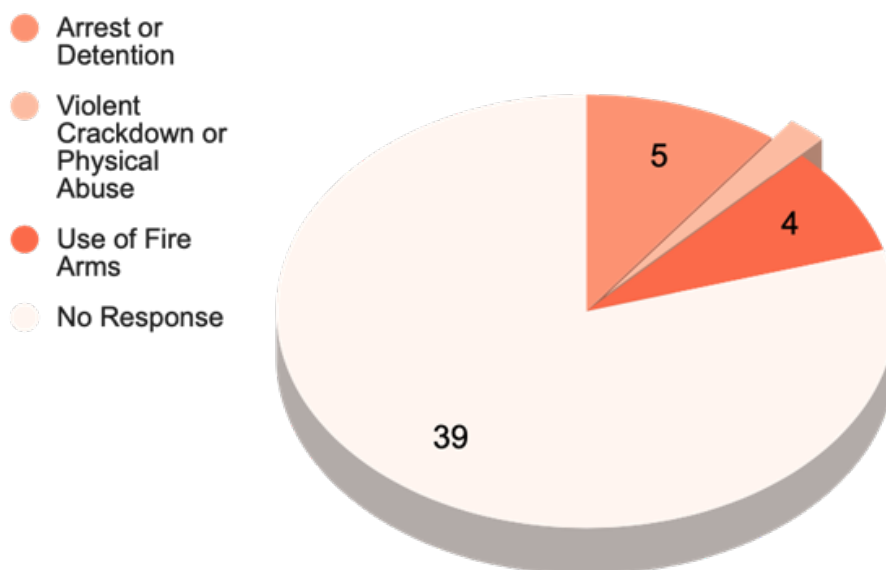
No.	Natural Resource Extraction and Environmental Movements	Fairness in Governance and Taxation	Judicial Issues and Human Rights Violations	Forced Recruitment and Arbitrary Arrests	Movements Opposing Revolutionary Forces
1.	Rare Earth Mining	Governance	Rape case	Release of Arbitrarily Arrested Individuals	We don't want TNLA
2.	Gold Mining	Taxation Issues (Checkpoint Fees)	Criminal Offenses	Forced Recruitment (Portering)	We don't want BNRA
3.	Metal Mining	-	-	-	-
4.	Land Disputes	-	-	-	-

### 3.2 Responses to the Protests

Nonviolent public movements are important forms of civic action, as they highlight gaps in the governance and policy frameworks of revolutionary organizations. However, responses from these organizations vary by group and location.

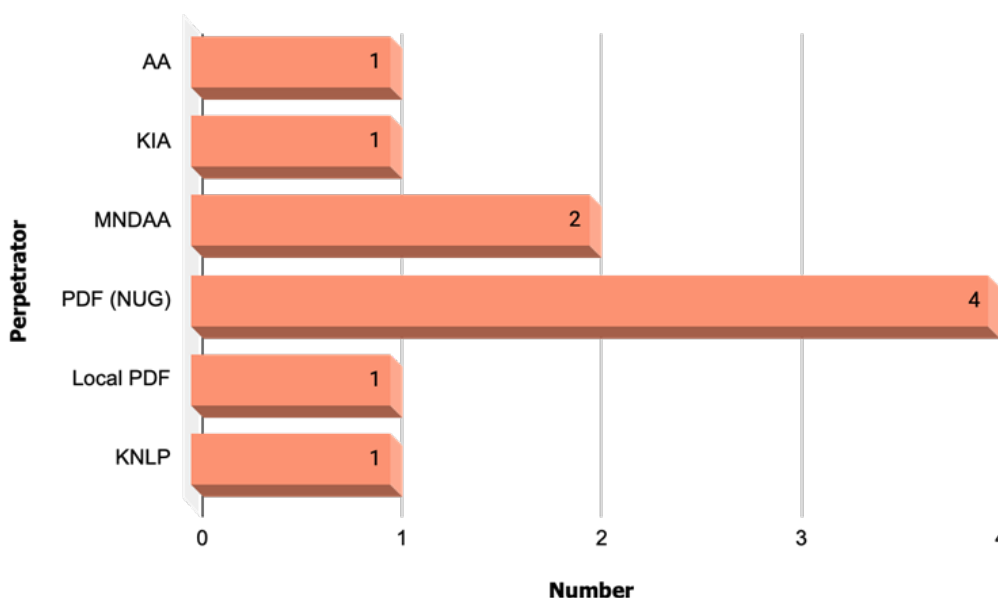
Among the 49 public movements targeting revolutionary organizations between 2021 and 2026, 10 cases (approximately 20 percent) were met with violent crackdowns by local authorities and revolutionary forces. These included the use of firearms, arrests, and physical abuse. The remaining 39 cases (around 80 percent) showed no identifiable response from the respective organizations, based on available information, and are therefore considered as having received no response.

(Figure 3) Chart showing different response patterns of revolutionary organizations to nonviolent public protests targeting them in controlled territories



An analysis of actors involved in crackdowns on public movements shows that People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) under the National Unity Government (NUG) were responsible for the most such incidents. Other groups, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Arakan Army (AA), Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), and local People’s Defense Forces, were also found to have carried out crackdowns. These findings indicate that while responses to public movements vary among revolutionary organizations, the use of forceful crackdowns remains a common pattern.

(Figure 4) Chart showing the number of nonviolent public protests that were met with violent crackdowns by revolutionary forces



An analysis of cases in which revolutionary forces used force to suppress public protests related to natural resource extraction and management shows that, on 6 February 2024, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) opened fire to disperse a protest and arrested more than 50 local residents in Chipwi Township, Kachin State, who were opposing rare earth mining.<sup>3</sup> Some of those detained were released on 16 and 17 February 2024. However, they were reportedly forced to sign written pledges not to oppose the mining project in the future.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ဖရဲဒေသမှာ မြေရှားသတ္တုတူးဖော်ရေးလုပ်ငန်း ကန့်ကွက်ဆန္ဒပြတဲ့ ဒေသခံတွေကို KIA က ဖမ်းဆီးနေဟုဆို၊ Myitkyina News Journal (၂၀၂၄၊ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၊ ၁၄ ရက်နေ့)

<sup>4</sup> မြေရှားသတ္တုတူးတဲ့အပေါ် ကန့်ကွက်တာကြောင့် KIA က ဖမ်းဆီးခဲ့တဲ့ ဒေသခံတွေ ခံဝန်နဲ့ ပြန်လွတ်လာ၊ RFA Burmese (၂၀၂၄၊ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၊ ၂၇ ရက်နေ့)

Similarly, in February 2026, 36 residents of Lashio Township, Shan State, protested a gold mining project. The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) used gunfire to disperse the gathering and arrested participants. While some detainees were released, nine remained in detention as of late February 2026, and some faced beatings and other ill-treatment.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, in controlled territories, authorities of revolutionary forces have often responded to public demands related to governance and social justice with crackdowns rather than negotiation. On 18 May 2025, approximately 50 local residents in Taungup Township, Rakhine State, who protested against the Arakan Army’s (AA) conscription law, were arrested and detained by the AA.<sup>6</sup>

On 6 September 2025, in Wetlet Township, Sagaing Region, a dispute over the collection of customs fees between protesters and members of the People’s Defense Forces (PDFs) under the National Unity Government (NUG) escalated into physical clashes and exchanges of gunfire, resulting in injuries on both sides.<sup>7</sup>

These cases indicate that, in controlled territories, revolutionary forces have tended to rely on power and arms to address public grievances related to natural resource extraction and management, rather than engaging with affected communities’ concerns. They also suggest a lack of constructive dialogue in resolving governance issues and taxation disputes, reinforcing perceptions of coercive responses toward the public.

Between 2021 and 2026, a total of 157 individuals were injured or arrested as a result of crackdowns by certain revolutionary forces.

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<sup>5</sup> မြေသိမ်းရွှေတူးမည့်လုပ်ငန်း ကန့်ကွက်သည့် ရွာသား ၉ ဦးကို MNDAA ဖမ်းဆီးထား၊ ကျော်ဇင်ဝင်း၊ Myanmar Now (၂၀၂၆၊ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၊ ၄ ရက်နေ့)

<sup>6</sup> တောင်ကုတ်တွင် စစ်မှုထမ်းဥပဒေကို ဆန္ဒပြသည့် ဒေသခံ ၅၀ ခန့်ကို AA ဖမ်းဆီး၊ Ayeyarwaddy Times (၂၀၂၅၊ မေလ၊ ၂၅ ရက်နေ့)

<sup>7</sup> ထန်းကြီးရွာအခွန်ကောက်ခံရမှု ဆန္ဒပြခံရမှု ရွာပကဖဒေသခံနဲ့ PDF တွေကြား ဘာတွေဖြစ်ခဲ့လဲ၊ မြတ်၊ ကျော်စွာ၊ Myaelatt Athan (၂၀၂၅၊ စက်တင်ဘာလ၊ ၁၄ ရက်နေ့)

(Figure 5) Revolutionary forces responsible for violent crackdowns on nonviolent public protests and related incidents

No.	Causes	Responsible Organization	Crackdown Methods and Subsequent Developments
1.	<p>Incident involving the arrest of Inn Dein villagers who protested the construction of a new Suu Pon Chaung – Inn Dein road that cut through five acres of local farmland</p>	<p>PDF (NUG)</p>	<p>Three farmers who participated in the protest were arrested and subsequently subjected to detention in shackles and physical abuse, including beatings.</p>
2.	<p>Another protest opposing rare earth mining in the Hpa Re area of Chipwi Township, Kachin State</p>	<p>KIA</p>	<p>Gunshots fired at protestors</p>
3.	<p>Incident involving a protest against the People’s Security Force (Pa La Pha) in Salingyi Township, Sagaing Region, calling for the release of more than 40 detained local residents</p>	<p>PDF (NUG)</p>	<p>A female protest leader from Sarr Htone Village was arrested at her home after being questioned and handcuffed. She was struck with a rifle butt. During a scuffle with a female Pa La Pha officer, armed men in police uniforms and camouflage fired shots.</p>

4.	<p>Incident involving villagers in Kutkai Township, northern Shan State, who went to protest against a gold mining project</p>	<p>MNDAA</p>	<p>The Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) shot with guns on the protesters, killing at least six civilians.</p>
5.	<p>Protest in Taungop township against the Conscription Law by Arakan Army</p>	<p>AA</p>	<p>50 protestors were arrested</p>
6.	<p>Incident involving protests near Htan Gyi Village, Wetlet Township, Sagaing Region, over fee collection at a People’s Defence Forces (PDF) checkpoint on the Shwebo–Mandalay road, which escalated into mutual physical clashes and exchanges of gunfire between local residents, village defense groups, and the PDF</p>	<p>PDF (NUG)</p>	<p>Clashes between protesters and PDF soldiers at the checkpoint escalated into mutual beatings and exchanges of gunfire, resulting in injuries on both sides.</p>
7.	<p>Incident involving protests in Mingin Township, Kale District, Upper Chindwin, Sagaing Region, opposing a gold mining project led by members of People Defense Forces</p>	<p>Local PDF</p>	<p>Organizers involved in the protest were arrested at their homes.</p>

8.	<p>Incident involving protests in Laung Pyae Village, Mingin Township, over the approval of a gold mining project without the consent of local residents</p>	PDF (NUG)	<p>Arrests were carried out through forced nighttime house raids</p>
9.	<p>Incident involving the arrest of some villagers in Mansai Village Tract, Lashio Township, Shan State, for protesting against gold mining</p>	MNDAA	<p>Arrest and tortures including beatings</p>
10.	<p>Incidents involving four protest leaders arrested by the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP) for protesting against a large-scale lead mining project in Myintmahti Mountain area, Pekhoh Township, southern Shan State, planned in cooperation with a Chinese company</p>	KNLP	<p>Arrested under the pretext of holding discussions.</p>

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## 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that freedom of expression and assembly in areas under the control of revolutionary forces remains partially restricted. While only 10 incidents (approximately 20 percent) involved violent crackdowns, such responses still carry significant risks of undermining the image of the revolution and public trust. Sociological analyses by Rodríguez and White suggest that protests are manifestations of underlying social tensions. Responding to these tensions with force or arrests is unlikely to resolve them; instead, it may intensify grievances and further provoke unrest.<sup>8</sup> Such responses therefore require careful consideration, as they may negatively affect the revolution's credibility, as well as public trust, respect, and legitimacy.

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<sup>8</sup> An analysis of protesting activity and trauma through mathematical and statistical models, Rodríguez and White Crime Science (2023)

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## 5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to support the success of the revolution and the future establishment of a federal democratic union.

- Revolutionary organizations should not view nonviolent public movements as adversaries, but rather engage them in dialogue and through constructive means.
- Instead of violent crackdowns or intimidation, fair and transparent mechanisms should be established to build public trust in the justice system.
- Amid intensifying armed conflict, revolutionary forces should collectively safeguard and preserve the role and culture of nonviolent movements to ensure they are not eroded.
- In disputes related to natural resource management and governance, transparent and inclusive dialogue that listens to public voices should be pursued rather than resorting to power.
- Maintaining public participation in the revolution requires revolutionary organizations to respect the will of the people and to lead by example in upholding human rights and democratic standards.

1.	PDF-NUG	People Defence Force (PDF- NUG)
2.	KIO	Kachin Independence Organizations (KIO)
3.	MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)
4.	LPDF	Local People Defence Force (LPDF)
5.	KNLP	Kayan New Land Party (KNLP)
6.	AA	Arkan Army (AA)

## References

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