Athan
Freedom of Expression Activist Organization

Research Report

Silenced Voices under Turmoil:

Assessing Freedom of Expression and Accountability of Revolutionary Authorities and Resistance Forces







Field Observations, Findings, and Policy Recommendations

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04 Field Observations | 06 Interviews | 23 Policy Recommendations

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Background of Athan – Freedom of Expression Activist Organization

Athan, the Freedom of Expression Activist Organization, was founded on 15 January 2018 by a group of young people committed to ensuring freedom of expression throughout society. The organization was formed by merging the Research Team for Telecommunications Law and We Support Journalists, with the aim of advancing freedom of expression in a more systematic and far-reaching way.

Athan is a research-based activist organization that promotes freedom of expression through three core areas of work: research, advocacy, and education. As a research-driven organization, Athan continuously studies, documents, and exposes the laws, customs, practices, and incidents that obstruct freedom of expression. Based on its research findings, the organization advocates for legal reforms aligned with democratic standards and conducts broad-based advocacy and dialogue at every level and across all sectors to ensure the full realization of freedom of expression.

In December 2018, Athan and its founder, Maung Saungkha, received the Human Rights Tulip Award from the Netherlands. Athan envisions a society in which freedom of expression — a fundamental democratic standard — is fully realized.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations	Full Form
KIA / KIO	Kachin Independence Army / Kachin Independence Organization
KNU	Karen National Union
NUG	National Unity Government
MOD	Ministry of Defence, NUG
PDF	People's Defence Force
MDY–PDF	Mandalay – People’s Defense Force
AA	Arakan Army
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
ABWU	All Burma Women’s Union
UBNA	Upper Burma News Agency
BNA	Border News Agency
MFP	Mandalay Free Press
ERO	Ethnic Revolutionary Organization
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
UDHR	Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Glossary

Glossary	Definition in This Report
Resistance–Controlled Territories	Territories effectively controlled and administered by revolutionary armed groups, ethnic revolutionary organizations, or local administrative bodies affiliated with them.
Dalan (Military Informant)	A term used to accuse someone of providing information or assistance to the military or the post–coup military regime. Such accusations can lead to violence and social pressure.
Freedom of Expression	The right to express opinions and criticism; to seek, receive, and impart information (under Article 19 of the UDHR); including freedom of the press and the right to communicate in digital spaces.
Self–censorship	Restricting one's own speech or writing out of fear of facing punishment or other consequences.
Authoritarian Contagion	The process by which revolutionary armed forces unconsciously adopt the practices of the authoritarian system they are fighting against.

Executive Summary

More than five years after the 2021 military coup, revolutionary armed groups and ethnic armed organizations have gained control over many parts of Myanmar. In territories under their control, these groups have also taken on responsibilities for governance, judicial affairs, economic management, and public services. This study examines the extent to which freedom of expression can be exercised in these controlled territories, the challenges faced by critics, journalists, and those documenting human rights violations, and the degree of responsibility, accountability, and transparency among the authorities. Based on interviews with six participants and four case studies, the research does not seek to generalize its findings across all resistance-controlled territories. Rather, it aims to identify recurring patterns within the cases examined.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach. Six participants, including two journalists, one researcher specializing in freedom of expression issues, one activist, and two individuals involved in local administration (three men and three women), were interviewed securely through Zoom and Signal. The information gathered was cross-checked against policies and statements issued by local authorities, as well as media reports. In addition, four case studies were examined in detail:

- The arrest and detention by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) of local residents protesting rare earth mining in Chipwi Township, Kachin State (2024).
- The arrest of a female member of the People's Defence Force (PDF) who spoke out about gender-based violence allegedly committed by a battalion commander in Yinmabin District, Sagaing Region (2025).
- Restrictions on Starlink internet access and the imposition of fines in Singu Township, Mandalay Region (2025).
- The arrests of journalists by armed groups in Kachin State, Rakhine State, and Mandalay Region.

Key Findings

(1) Two Forms of Repression

Revolutionary armed groups have employed two forms of repression in response to criticism. The first is repression carried out through formal administrative structures, including the issuance of orders and restrictions, as well as the arrest and detention of journalists. The second involves repression outside these formal structures, including threats, online attacks, the exposure of personal information, and social pressure stemming from fears of being accused of acting as a military informant (dalan). One journalist interviewed for this study also reported experiencing severe forms of torture while in detention, including beatings and being hooded and restrained.

(2) Justifications

The most common justifications used to suppress criticism include claims that it undermines the revolution, benefits the enemy, or poses a threat to military security. Rather than examining the factual accuracy of the criticism, these justifications are used to target and attack the critics themselves.

(3) Weak Accountability

Most resistance–controlled territories still lack clear mechanisms through which residents can file complaints. Although the National Unity Government (NUG) has established a committee to receive complaints, its mechanisms have not yet reached local communities of those controlled territories. Most local administrative officials are appointed by higher authorities rather than elected by the public, contributing to a weak sense of accountability to the people they govern.

(4) Natural Resource Management

Those demanding transparency in mining activities, taxation, and the use of revenues primarily face arrests and threats. The financial needs of military operations are being prioritized over the voices of local communities.

(5) Digital Freedom

Restrictions on Starlink internet access, mandatory user registration, and fines of up to two million kyat have been imposed on security grounds. These measures affect not only local residents' right to access information but also their safety and right to life when fleeing armed conflict. Such practices also resemble the military's methods of digital surveillance and control.

Conclusion

The cases examined in this study indicate that while revolutionary groups have embraced democracy and human rights at the policy level, in practice, they have restricted people's freedom of expression on the grounds of military necessity, security, and the revolution itself. Unless this gap between policy and practice is addressed, there is a risk of authoritarian contagion, in which revolutionary forces adopt the very authoritarian practices they are fighting against. This could undermine the foundations of a future federal democratic state. These findings do not suggest that the violations committed by revolutionary forces are comparable to those committed by the military responsible for the coup, either in scale or in their systematic nature. Rather, this study seeks to emphasize that revolutionary forces have a responsibility to act in accordance with the values they seek to defend.

Key Recommendations

Introduce mandatory training on codes of conduct concerning human rights and freedom of expression for members of revolutionary armed forces and local administrative personnel.

Establish secure and anonymous complaint mechanisms for local residents and take legal action against perpetrators, regardless of their position or affiliation.

Develop systematic policies and electoral mechanisms to return local governing authority to the people.

Ensure that decisions concerning internet access and natural resource management are made through tripartite committees that include representatives of local communities.

Recognize the media's role as a watchdog and ease restrictions on access to information.

Regularly disclose revenues and expenditures from natural resources and provide legal protection for those demanding transparency.

Chapter 1

Introduction and Background

In response to the 2021 military coup and the subsequent repression by the Myanmar military, revolutionary forces, ethnic armed organizations, and political groups joined forces to resist military dictatorship. As these resistance movements gained territorial control, they began establishing various forms of public administration across different parts of Myanmar. In addition to resisting violence and repression by the Myanmar military, these administrative bodies have also taken on responsibilities for maintaining the rule of law, providing public services, managing local economies, and carrying out other administrative functions within their territories. This study primarily seeks to examine the space for freedom of expression within these governance structures and the extent to which it is permitted or restricted.

During the armed resistance against the Myanmar military's widespread repression, freedom of expression remains both an essential right and one that can easily be sidelined at any time. There have been instances in which some revolutionary leaders have suppressed criticism in the name of the revolution or unity. A central focus of this study is therefore to examine whether these administrative structures have mechanisms and provisions that allow those demanding accountability, documenting human rights violations, questioning the limits of governing authorities' powers, and other critics and journalists to carry out their work and make their voices heard.

1.1. Research Objectives and Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. During the ongoing political crisis, to what extent do responsibility, accountability, and transparency exist within revolutionary governments and resistance forces in their responses to criticism directed at them? What formal and informal forms of repression do they employ to restrict or suppress freedom of expression?

2. What justifications are used to legitimize these restrictions, and do they meet the standards of necessity and proportionality?

1.2. Scope and Definitions

This study focuses primarily on the actions of revolutionary armed groups and local authorities rather than violations committed by the military junta. The report does not dispute that the junta's violations are far greater in scale and more systematic in nature. Examining the accountability of resistance forces is not intended to equate them with the military junta, but rather to assess whether their actions align with the values they seek to defend.

For the purposes of this report, freedom of expression encompasses the right to express opinions and criticism, the right to seek, receive, and impart information, freedom of the press, and the right to communicate in digital spaces. Definitions of other terms are provided in the Glossary.

Chapter 2

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine in depth the state of freedom of expression and the extent of responsibility and accountability among authorities in resistance–controlled territories. As revolutionary forces differ in their positions and policies across regions and organizations, this approach is considered the most appropriate for identifying patterns emerging from individual cases.

2.1. Data Collection and Participant Selection

Data were collected through two methods. The first involved interviewing six participants (three men and three women) through end–to–end encrypted platforms such as Zoom and Signal. The second involved reviewing the Federal Democracy Charter, orders issued by local administrative authorities, media reports, and other relevant reports.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Snowball sampling was also used to reach individuals who were difficult to contact due to security concerns. The participants were categorized into three groups:





Journalists: Individuals who have directly experienced restrictions on press freedom and barriers to accessing information.



Activists: Individuals familiar with forms of repression carried out through administrative structures and the prevailing security conditions.



Leaders: Individuals who can represent the experiences and perspectives of local communities regarding governance and administration.

2.2. Research Framework and Analytical Approach

This study uses responsibility, accountability, and transparency as its main analytical framework. Responsibility refers to acknowledging one's obligations for decisions and actions, while accountability involves taking concrete steps to address the consequences of those actions. One of the key findings of this study is that while revolutionary authorities may acknowledge responsibility in words, this often fails to translate into accountability in practice.

The interview data were analyzed through coding and categorized into five key themes: (1) forms of repression, (2) justifications, (3) governance and accountability, (4) natural resource management, and (5) digital freedom.

Data triangulation was used to strengthen the reliability of the findings. Only information corroborated across all three participant groups was classified as a corroborated finding.

2.3. Selection of Case Studies

Four case studies were selected for this research, covering justice in natural resource management, local governance and gender-based violence, digital restrictions, and media repression. These cases were selected to illustrate that violations are not confined to a single area but occur across various sectors.

2.4. Ethical Considerations

As the research was conducted in areas affected by ongoing conflict, the "Do No Harm" principle was strictly followed. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily from all participants before conducting interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect their safety, and participants were given the right to withdraw their consent at any time.

2.5. Limitations

This study has three main limitations:

- **Sampling:** As participants were not selected randomly, the findings cannot be generalized to all resistance–controlled territories.
- **Online–only interviews:** For security reasons, interviews could only be conducted online. As a result, the perspectives of people living in areas with limited internet access may be underrepresented (sampling bias).
- **Access to local areas:** Communication blackouts, military conditions, and restrictions imposed by local authorities made it difficult to reach people in these areas.

However, the aim of this study is not to draw general conclusions about the country as a whole. Rather, it seeks to systematically identify patterns of violations occurring in resistance–controlled territories. Therefore, these limitations do not diminish the value of the findings.

Chapter 3

Case Studies and Findings

Case Selection and Background

3.1. Case Selection, Background, and Interpretation

This study selected four case studies representing four key themes to examine how revolutionary groups and ethnic armed organizations respond to criticism directed at them. Each case is not merely an isolated incident but reflects, from different perspectives, the structural forms of repression, restrictions on the flow of information, and failures of accountability currently occurring in resistance–controlled territories.

This chapter presents each case study, followed by the findings associated with it. Chapter 4 brings together the findings emerging across the cases, including the justifications used and assessments against relevant standards.

CASE (01) – 2024

Natural Resources and the Environment

Kachin - Chipwi,Hpare Village

CASE (02) – 2025

Gender-Based Violence

Sagaing - Yinmabin

CASE (03) – 2025

Digital and Internet Freedom

Mandalay - Singu

CASE (04) – 2025

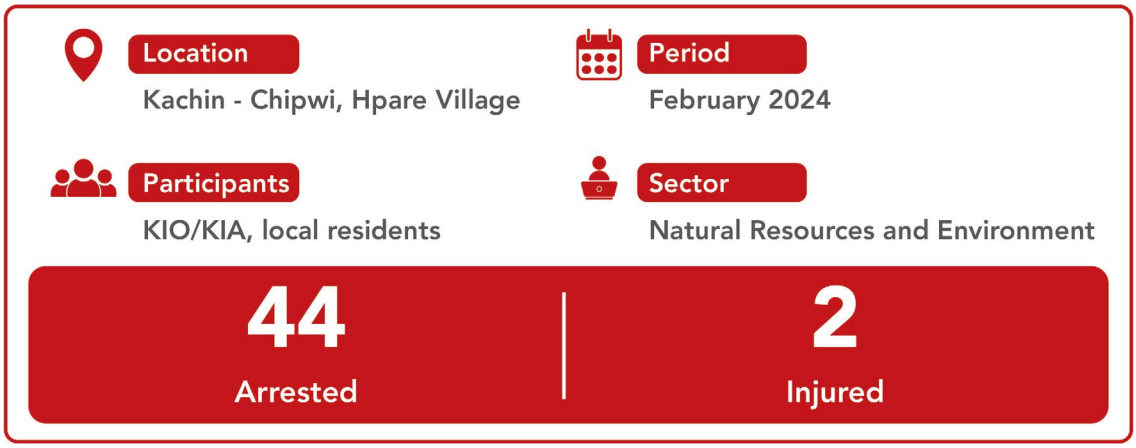
Media Repression

Madaya, Maungdaw, Hpakant

More than five years into efforts to end military dictatorship, the social contract that should exist between revolutionary forces and the public has faced significant challenges in relation to local governance and accountability mechanisms. Fighting remains intense in many areas, while revolutionary armed forces continue to prioritize gaining military advantage and maintaining territorial control.

Participants in this study expressed that they felt the space for freedom of expression in resistance-controlled territories has become increasingly restricted over time. However, this study did not collect data that would allow comparisons over time. The cases indicate that the extent to which freedom of expression is permitted varies among organizations, with local authorities imposing restrictions at their own discretion.

3.2. Case Study 1: Environmental Justice and Natural Resource Management



This case was selected to examine the conflicts between fundraising for the revolution and local communities' rights to livelihoods and survival in resource-rich areas. The case involving the Kachin Independence Army (KIA)[1] forcibly dispersing and arresting local residents protesting against rare earth mining in Hpare Village, Chipwi Township, Kachin State, illustrates how economic interests in natural resources can lead to the suppression of freedom of expression.

[1] https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/rare-earth-kachin-021420240309l7.html

Hpare Village has a population of more than 1,000, and rare earth mining operations began in the area in September 2023.[2] As the mining sites were located near mountain water sources on which local residents depend for drinking water, communities faced risks of water contamination and environmental damage. Residents reportedly submitted repeated written appeals to the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA) opposing the mining activities and held peaceful protests, but received no response.[3]

On February 5, 2024, some local residents approached Chinese business operators at rare earth mining sites to demand that they stop mining near water sources. During the confrontation, KIA soldiers reportedly fired a weapon resembling a grenade or mine to disperse the crowd, injuring two residents and arresting protest leaders.[4] In the following days, the KIA reportedly intercepted and detained 44 local men, including residents, schoolteachers, and religious leaders, who had gathered to demand the release of those arrested.

> These incidents suggest that in areas where natural resources generate significant revenue for resistance funding, local demands for environmental justice and questions about taxation have been viewed as disruptions and met with force.

Regarding the authorities' response and accountability, Colonel Naw Bu, spokesperson for the KIO/KIA, told media outlets that contacted him, "I have not yet received any information about this situation."[5] Media reports indicated that some of those detained were released on February 19 after giving undertakings.[6]

[2] https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/kio-rare-earth-06142023064627.html
[3] https://burmese.kachinnews.com/2023/10/24/ld1-76/
[4] https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/rare-earth-kachin-02142024030917.html
[5] https://www.rfa.org/burmese/news/rare-earth-kachin-02142024030917.html
[6] https://burmese.kachinnews.com/2024/02/19/ld1-119/

Similar issues involving natural resource extraction and taxation have also been reported in Magway Region, where oilfields are located in areas controlled by the National Unity Government (NUG). Local defence groups, People's Administration Teams (Pa Ah Pha), and People's Defence Teams (Pa Ka Pha) reportedly established multiple checkpoints and collected money at gunpoint from trucks transporting crude oil, refined fuel, and firewood, imposing charges under various tax categories.[7]

According to accounts from local residents and media reports, these incidents suggest that in areas where natural resources generate significant revenue for resistance funding, local demands for environmental justice and questions about taxation have been viewed as disruptions and met with force.

Findings: Natural Resource Management and Transparency

The case study of Hpare Village in Kachin State highlights significant competing interests and inequalities in natural resource management within resistance-controlled territories. An analyst specializing in freedom of expression who participated in this study observed that the financial, logistical, and ammunition needs of revolutionary armed forces sometimes take precedence over the voices and fundamental human rights of local communities. According to the analyst, revolutionary armed groups have expanded extraction activities and tax collection in resource-rich areas to sustain their military and security operations and ensure their long-term survival.[8] The researcher noted that during the early stages of the revolution, members of the public contributed funds by selling their jewelry and farmland and donating the proceeds. However, this approach was only sustainable in the short term.

A local activist interviewed for this study reported that when the financial needs of revolutionary armed forces take priority over the rights and freedom of expression of local communities, those leading protests against natural resource extraction have been specifically targeted and suppressed. The activist also noted that ordinary people could face imprisonment for transporting just one or

[7] https://burma.irrawaddy.com/article/2025/02/22/397718.html
[8] Key Informant, Freedom of Expression Analyst

two logs, while individuals connected to the authorities could transport timber by the truckload with impunity. As a result, a growing number of people remain silent despite being aware of these injustices, fearing arrest.[9]

> *"I think more and more people are choosing to turn a blind eye to what is happening. Even though they know they are being unfairly oppressed, they remain silent. I see this becoming increasingly common in the current situation,"* the activist said.

A local journalist interviewed for this study reported being struck from behind by a car and sustaining minor injuries after publishing a report on how compensation rates were determined for the relocation of a village in a gemstone–mining area. The journalist did not identify who was responsible for the incident. The journalist also reported that a young local resident who posted on Facebook about gemstone cutting was detained for two days, beaten, and forced to delete the post.[10]

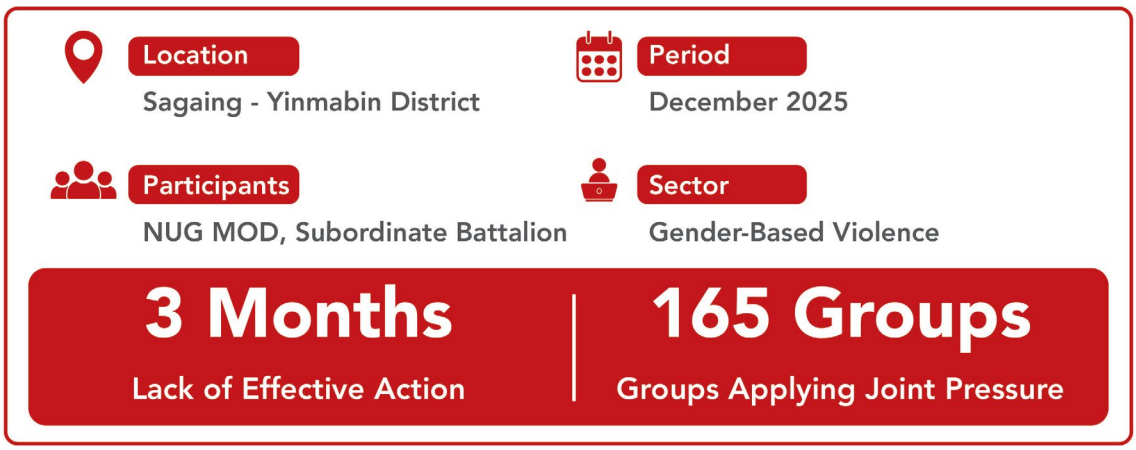
> *"There are certain things related to mineral extraction in this area that you just can't interfere with. When it comes to local administration, you can criticize things at the lower levels to some extent. But when the issues become even slightly bigger, there are things they simply won't tolerate. You just can't touch them. 'Stay out of trouble. Don't you want to be alive to wash your face tomorrow morning?' We receive threats like this quite often. Even now, people say things like, 'Are you missing detention already? Do you want to go back?' or 'It seems you're tired of living.' These are the kinds of threats we face."* [11]

In areas rich in mineral resources, this wealth itself has contributed to greater corruption and abuse of power in matters related to conflict and governance. Although natural resource management plays an important role for revolutionary armed forces, the lack of transparency among authorities, disregard for public voices, threats, and weak responsibility and accountability could undermine trust between local communities and governing authorities.

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[9] Key Informant, Grassroots Activist
[10] Key Informant, Local Journalist
[11] Key Informant, Local Journalist

3.3. Case Study 2: Local Governance, Human Rights, and Gender–Based Violence



Abuse of power by armed actors, gender–based violence, and impunity have also emerged as serious concerns in areas where revolutionary forces have gained territorial control following the military coup.

A female member of the People's Defence Force (PDF), serving in a battalion under the Ministry of Defence (MOD) of the National Unity Government (NUG) in Yinmabin District, was arrested and detained in late December 2025 after seeking donations to meet the needs of her unit. According to media reports, she was subjected to severe physical torture and sexual violence while in detention. For ethical reasons and to protect her safety, this report omits details of the abuse and any information that could reveal her identity.

Reports indicate that the female PDF member and her family initially sought assistance from nearby armed groups and People's Defence Force units.[12] However, fearing the influence of the battalion commander accused in the case and possible retaliation, no one dared to intervene, turning a blind eye to the situation. When she spoke to the media about the abuse, the accused battalion commander reportedly responded by posting threats on social media.

[12] https://www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/czx42g2kyz6o

Furthermore, members of the accused commander's battalion reportedly monitored the villages where her family was hiding, forcing the entire family, including a young child, to repeatedly relocate and seek refuge in forests and mountainous areas. Not only was no immediate action taken against the accused commander, but the female PDF member and her husband, who were in hiding due to threats to their lives, were also pressured to report to the battalion from wherever they were. This drew criticism for disregarding the safety of the complainant.

BBC and The Irrawaddy investigated and reported on the female PDF member's account, the threats to her family's lives, and discrimination and repression against minorities in resistance–controlled territories.[13] Sixteen women's organizations, including the All Burma Women's Union (ABWU), and 149 civil society organizations issued an open letter strongly calling for an end to impunity, the suspension and investigation of the battalion commander, and a face–to–face meeting with the NUG Ministry of Defence (MOD).[14]

> The failure to independently investigate allegations against armed personnel and take appropriate action may undermine the core values of the revolution, particularly justice and human dignity.

In the case involving Battalion 20 in Yinmabin District, no effective action had been taken nearly three months after the incident. It was only after civil society organizations issued an open letter and public pressure intensified that the NUG's Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence announced they were conducting a joint investigation and had detained the suspect.[15] However, the accused battalion commander reportedly continued to have access to a phone and was able to issue threats freely through social media even while the investigation was ongoing, drawing criticism of the NUG's judicial process

[13] https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18YvQ42yhc/
[14] https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1D7n6YwJeM/
[15] https://www.facebook.com/share/p/15189fXAvHq/

and its handling of the case. An official from the Mandalay Interim Administration Council interviewed for this study also commented on the case, saying, "It has been more than six months, and the truth about the case still hasn't come out." The official further noted that those who spoke out about the injustice would face serious threats to their lives if they remained in the area.[16]

This case illustrates how the failure to independently investigate allegations against armed personnel and take appropriate action may undermine the core values of the revolution, particularly justice and human dignity. In this case, the study found no evidence of a witness protection mechanism for those who spoke out and the journalists involved. The case also demonstrates that, when local administrative mechanisms fail, accountability mechanisms begin to function only through efforts to expose wrongdoing, including investigative reporting by the media and coordinated pressure from civil society organizations.

3.4. Case Study 3: Digital Freedom and Restrictions Related to Territorial Control



In Singu Township, Mandalay Region, the Singu Township Emergency Administration Committee, jointly formed by the People's Defence Force (Mandalay) (MDY-PDF), the Singu Township People's Defence Team (Pa Ka Pha), and the People's Security Team (Pa La Pha), has imposed restrictions on Starlink internet access, citing the need to prevent military airstrikes and security breaches. At approximately 3 p.m. on October 11, 2025, an argument broke out between members of a joint enforcement team and a family in a village when the team visited their home to inspect and take action over the installation and use of Starlink, which they alleged violated local regulations.[17]

[16] Key Informant, Representative from the Mandalay Interim Administrative Council
[17] https://bit.ly/4ypMSIt

Authorities permit Starlink internet access for private household use only, prohibiting the provision of paid internet services to the public and the sharing of internet connections.[18] Those wishing to provide paid internet access to the public must apply to the authorities and obtain prior approval. These measures could effectively place the right to access information and the flow of information to the outside world in conflict-affected areas under the control of local administrative authorities.[19]

Regulations require that the names, National Registration Card (NRC) numbers, and full residential addresses of all individuals using the internet for financial transactions and emergency healthcare purposes be recorded and made available to inspection teams upon request. Rather than protecting users' personal information, the authorities have adopted a policy that allows extensive surveillance and monitoring. The regulations also hold the Starlink device owner solely responsible for any security breaches arising from internet use.[19]

The regulations impose strict penalties for violations, including a fine of one million kyat for the first offence, two million kyat for the second offence, and confiscation of the equipment for four months for a third offence. During on-site inspections, armed personnel reportedly acted impulsively and engaged in confrontations while asserting their authority, threatening not only people's access to technology but also their ability to live safely.

The Emergency Administration Committee stated that the internet restrictions were imposed to prevent security breaches and address the threat of daily airstrikes by the Myanmar military.[20] Following the dispute, the committee issued a statement announcing that appropriate action would be taken against both those who installed Starlink devices in violation of the regulations and members of revolutionary forces who breached codes of conduct while enforcing them.

According to a statement bearing the NUG logo, five security personnel initially visited the village but were unsuccessful. A second team of 12 personnel, including PDF members, subsequently returned,

18 https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/68605/
19 https://myaelattathan.com/news/15738/
20 https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-resistances-restriction-of-starlink-access-draws-backlash-from-civilians/

confiscated the device, and summoned the person responsible for questioning.[21] An official from the NUG's now–disbanded Ministry of Human Rights also cited the MDY–PDF incident as an example, stating that members of revolutionary forces who violate disciplinary rules in their dealings with civilians are generally subject to disciplinary action by their own forces. However, this study has not been able to verify whether such disciplinary action was actually taken in this case.

This incident illustrates how revolutionary forces, as they gain territorial control, have begun adopting practices of restricting people's right to access information and digital freedom through official orders and directives, citing military security concerns. Similar incidents have occurred in Karenni areas, parts of central Myanmar under direct NUG control, Rakhine State under the control of the Arakan Army (AA), and areas controlled by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)[22] during Operation 1027. Requiring permits for internet access and collecting users' personal information could contribute to the emergence of authoritarian practices that threaten freedom of expression and communication in digital spaces.

Findings: Digital and Internet Freedom

Digital freedom and the flow of information face significant challenges in resistance–controlled territories. In areas experiencing intense fighting, internet access is directly linked not only to people's right to access information but also to their safety and access to life–saving information. For example, early warnings of airstrikes and ground offensives, information needed to find safe locations, and communication channels used to check on the safety of family members all depend heavily on internet connectivity.

According to a freelance female journalist interviewed for this study, the impact of Starlink shutdowns depends on their duration. Shutdowns lasting one or two months have serious consequences, while those lasting only a few days are somewhat more manageable.

[21] https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-resistances-restriction-of-starlink-access-draws-backlash-from-civilians/
[22] https://www.myanmarinternet.info/post/quarterly_may_july_2026

> *"Shutting down Starlink and things like that does have an impact. I'm not sure whether to call it freedom of expression, but it also affects people's daily activities and their access to information. However, it depends on how long the shutdown lasts. Shutting it down for one or two months is definitely not good. In some places, they shut it down for a long time. In others, it's only for a few days, which is a little more bearable."* [23]

The consequences experienced by local communities go beyond disruptions to the flow of information, affecting economic activities, education, healthcare, and other aspects of social life.[24] The study found that authorities in some resistance–controlled territories frequently restrict internet access, citing military and security concerns. A freedom of expression researcher interviewed for this study suggested that increasing taxes on Starlink access could also be viewed as a means of exerting control.

> *"We can see this as undermining a right that should be easily accessible to the public. … These are attempts to restrict freedom of expression using military and security concerns as justifications. On the one hand, we recognize that there may be genuine security risks and dangers to the public. But we believe these restrictions go too far. They also seem to be attempts to control other aspects of civilian life and assert authority. Instead of investigating and examining what is actually causing these security concerns, the authorities simply resort to imposing restrictions. I see this as another clear example of what I was talking about earlier."* [25]

An interview participant noted that although local authorities may face genuine security threats when restricting digital and internet freedom on military and security grounds, they may also be using these restrictions to consolidate their authority and generate tax revenue. Restrictions on digital and internet freedom affect not only local communities' right to access information but also their safety and

[23] Key Informant, Representative, Former Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government
[24] ONLY IN MYANMAR – Made by Junta၊ Athan (November 2025)
[25] Key Informant, Freedom of Expression Analyst

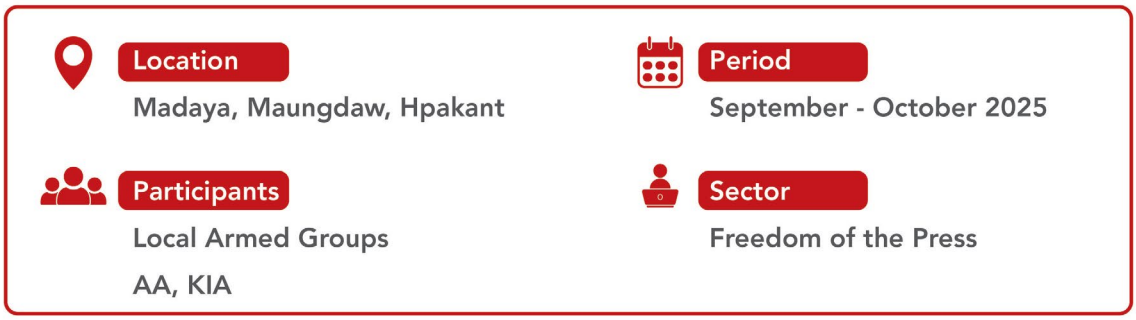
lives. It is therefore necessary to question whether such restrictions go beyond what is necessary and proportionate.

However, the authorities' explanations must also be taken into account. An official from the NUG's former Ministry of Human Rights explained that Starlink restrictions were imposed not only to protect the security of administrative offices but also to protect entire communities, as villages where these offices are located could become targets of military attacks. “There have been many cases where office locations were exposed and subsequently bombed from the air, with some places hit directly. These incidents are not widely known simply because they have not been publicly reported.” The official also stated that restrictions are generally announced for specific periods in individual townships and that confiscated devices are usually returned after a certain period.[26]

On the other hand, a local journalist interviewed for this study said that Starlink shutdowns had not yet occurred in their area. The journalist warned that such restrictions would prevent villagers from sharing information about the movements and locations of military columns, stating, “If Starlink Wi–Fi is shut down and people have no idea where soldiers are or what is happening, it could be almost like killing the entire civilian population.”[27] Meanwhile, a local activist cited an incident in which residents were prohibited from using Starlink after revolutionary forces captured a town in Sagaing Region, stating, “Situations like this are not authoritarian acts.” [28] Therefore, when restrictions are imposed on security grounds, it is necessary to distinguish between legitimate restrictions and those that go beyond what is justified.

[26] Key Informant, Representative, Former Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government
[27] Key Informant, Grassroots Activist
[28] Key Informant, Grassroots Activist

3.5. Case Study 4: Media Repression and the Safety of Journalists



In the first week of October 2025, U Toe Gyi, the Madaya Township correspondent in charge of local news coverage for the Upper Burma News Agency (UBNA), was arrested and detained by two local armed groups in Madaya Township, Mandalay Region. U Toe Gyi is a local journalist who operates a Telegram channel called "People's Information Force," where he reports on repression by the military regime in the area. He also provides local news and information to media outlets such as Mandalay Free Press (MFP) and the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB).[29]

The arrest of journalists in resistance–controlled territories and conflict–affected areas is not limited to Madaya Township. On September 2, 2025, members of the Arakan Army (AA)'s intelligence unit arrested Ma Mudra, a journalist with Border News Agency (BNA), at her home in Maungdaw, Rakhine State.[30] There have also been cases in which a freelance journalist based in Hpakant, Kachin State, was repeatedly summoned for questioning by the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).[31]

The armed groups cited the alleged leaking of military information as the reason for arrest–ing leaking of military information as the reason for arresting journalist U Toe Gyi.[32] They treated the reporting of basic information that local communities have a right to know, such as civilian casual–ties, battlefield developments, and airstrikes, as a breach of military secrecy, leading to arrests and detention.

[29] https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1HfEhhA5W5/
[30] https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/67965/
[31] https://www.facebook.com/reel/845904014463041
[32] https://myanmar-now.org/mm/news/73431/
[33] Key Informant, Local Journalist

No official announcement was made identifying which group had arrested U Toe Gyi, where he was being held, or under which law he had been detained. Information about his whereabouts, health condition, and whether he was still alive was withheld, leaving his family and media organization unable to verify his situation. This constitutes an arbitrary arrest and a serious threat to press freedom.

A local journalist who had previously been detained for nearly a month described the lasting effects of detention: “By detaining us, they effectively silenced others as well. People no longer dare to speak out much about other issues. You start thinking that if you criticize them again, you'll face the consequences.” [33]

Findings: Media Repression and the Safety of Journalists

Since the 2021 military coup, journalists have faced targeted killings and arrests by the military regime. As they increasingly face arrests and repression by revolutionary armed forces as well, journalists have found themselves in a situation where they fear both sides. Journalists working on the ground face growing insecurity, making them more reluctant to report on the realities of conflict-affected areas and potentially leading to increased self-censorship. The arrest and detention of journalists based on allegations, without proper legal proceedings or due process, raises serious concerns about the rule of law and impunity in resistance-controlled territories.

Chapter (4)

Findings

This chapter brings together findings from the four case studies and research interviews, organized into three sections: forms of repression, the justifications provided by authorities, and the extent of accountability in practice.

4.1. Forms of Repression and Responses

This study found that revolutionary armed forces use two different approaches simultaneously when responding to criticism: repression authorized through administrative mechanisms and repression carried out outside the formal administrative framework.

Forms of repression authorized through administrative mechanisms include human rights violations committed through the exercise of administrative authority, arrests and detention, and the issuance of orders restricting freedom of expression and press freedom. For example, the Karen National Union (KNU), a revolutionary armed organization, has issued formal policies requiring journalists to seek permission [34] from relevant authorities when gathering information in its controlled territories, allowing the organization to regulate the flow of information.[35] News reports criticizing the decisions and actions of revolutionary forces are often accused of spreading misinformation, sometimes leading to the arrest and detention of those responsible for the reporting. Such practices constitute officially sanctioned pressure and intimidation against press freedom.

In Kachin State, an area under the control of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), a journalist was arrested twice after reporting on injustices committed by local administrative authorities. The

34 နယ်မြေအတွင်း သတင်းရယူခြင်းဆိုင်ရာ စည်းကမ်းချက်များ KNU ထုတ်ပြန်၊ Karen Information Center (ဧပြီလ ၂၀၂၄)
35 ကရင်နှင့် ကရင်နီပြည်နယ်တွင်း သတင်းရယူမှုကိုကန့်သတ်၊ DVB (ဧပြီလ ၂၀၂၄)

journalist was accused of spreading misinformation and publishing reports that caused divisions among revolutionary forces. The journalist was detained for 28 days during the first arrest and for 24 hours during the second. The first arrest was made on allegations that the journalist's reporting had caused divisions between the KIA and other armed groups. The journalist said that during the 28–day detention, they were held in a barracks rather than a detention cell, under armed guard, and subjected to physical and psychological torture throughout the period.

> *"Sometimes the guards watching over me would drink and get drunk. When they were drunk, they would say they were going to interrogate me and force me to kneel on stones placed under my knees. They blindfolded me with a piece of cloth and wrapped several layers of tape over it. Sometimes they handcuffed my hands behind my back, and sometimes in front of me. They would only move the handcuffs to the front after I repeatedly pleaded with them. Whenever they were unhappy with me, they would handcuff my hands behind my back again. Having to sleep with my hands cuffed behind my back was unbearable."* [36]

The study found no transparent procedures specifying who determines whether reporting constitutes misinformation or causes divisions among revolutionary forces, what standards are applied, or what processes are followed in making such decisions. Therefore, these actions can be viewed as unilateral decisions by the authorities rather than judicial rulings. Furthermore, such strict restrictions appear to push journalists towards becoming propaganda tools for revolutionary forces rather than serving as independent watchdogs. Another form of officially sanctioned repression through technology was observed in Singu Township, Mandalay Region, in 2025, where Starlink device owners were required to register their National Registration Card (NRC) numbers and residential addresses. This constitutes a form of official digital surveillance and control, reflecting an approach similar to the military's digital surveillance mechanisms.[37] (See Section 3.4 for details.)

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[36] Key Informant, Local Journalist

[37] Starlink ကိစ္စနဲ့ ပြဿနာဖြစ်ပွားခဲ့တဲ့ PDF တပ်ဖွဲ့ဝင်တွေကို အရေးယူသွားမှာဖြစ်သလို ဆိုင်ဖွင့်သူတွေကို Starlink စည်းမျဉ်းစည်းကမ်းနဲ့အရေးယူမည်၊ မြေလတ်အသံ (အောက်တိုဘာလ ၂၀၂၅)

On the other hand, research interviewees reported that death threats targeting activists and journalists, demands by local authorities to remove news reports they disapprove of, and online attacks have become increasingly widespread. When threats are made through fake online accounts or unidentified phone numbers, it is extremely difficult to identify those responsible. According to a freelance female journalist interviewed for this study, one of her colleagues received online threats over their reporting and was pressured to stop publishing negative stories about revolutionary forces and instead report only on abuses committed by the military. As a result, journalists have increasingly resorted to publishing news under pseudonyms or through fake social media accounts due to concerns for their personal safety, leading to greater self-censorship.[38]

Journalists have increasingly resorted to publishing news under pseudonyms or through fake social media accounts due to concerns for their personal safety, leading to greater self-censorship.

Research participants also reported social pressure in resistance-controlled or liberated territories, where people fear being accused of being dalan (military informants).

In conclusion, the study found that both formal and informal forms of repression described above serve the same purpose of suppressing and restricting people's freedom of expression. As a result, freedom of expression and press freedom in resistance-controlled territories have become increasingly restricted, with local communities and media outlets gradually resorting to self-censorship.

However, these forms of repression are not uniform across all regions. An official from the Mandalay Interim Administration Council interviewed for this study noted that, in another township in Sagaing Region, the three local administrative and security bodies (Pa Thone Lone) and a battalion had

[38] Key Informant, Independent Woman Journalist

provided security for a protest, although such incidents were rare. The official explained that freedom of expression exists to some extent in townships where armed groups are disciplined, comply with their codes of conduct (COC), and operate under people–centered governance. In areas where these conditions are absent, however, freedom of expression is also absent, and people face threats. Assessing the overall situation, the official offered a personal estimate: "I would say it doesn't even reach 30 out of 100."[39] This suggests that the problem may arise less from policies shared by all revolutionary groups than from differences in practices across regions, organizations, and their leadership. Furthermore, a local journalist stated, "One good thing, I suppose, is that it hasn't reached the point of killings like those committed by the military. But there are still reasons to be concerned."[40] Similarly, a freelance female journalist said, "It's not as bad as the military junta yet. Rather than outright control, there are still restrictions."[41] These statements indicate that the participants themselves recognize a difference in the extent of repression compared with that of the military regime.

4.2. Justifications Used by Revolutionary Armed Forces

The study found that revolutionary organizations tend to use similar justifications to restrict or suppress criticism. The main narratives and justifications are that criticism harms the revolution or benefits the enemy (the military). Rather than examining the substance of criticism, these justifications involve making assumptions about the intentions of those expressing it. Whether the criticism is accurate or not becomes less important than the act of criticizing members of revolutionary forces itself, creating a narrative that such criticism is inappropriate during the ongoing revolution. A female journalist interviewed for this study explained:

> *"After the coup, what happened with the media was that they started seeing it only in terms of its role in supporting the revolution. Because the media reported on the military and the repression of civilians, that perception continued over time. They came to believe*

[39] Key Informant, Representative from the Mandalay Interim Administrative Council
[40] Key Informant, Local Journalist
[41] Key Informant, Independent Woman Journalist

that the media should serve the revolution. As a result, they lost sight of how the media should operate and what its actual role is. The main justifications are military and security concerns. Sometimes, rather than telling journalists not to report certain things, they simply refuse to provide information at all. There are situations like that too. Rather than explicitly restricting what can be reported, they mostly cite security concerns, such as the risk of airstrikes or threats to military operations. Another justification is protecting the revolution. They say things like, 'Please don't talk about this yet because it could harm the revolution,' or 'We'll resolve this among ourselves,' or 'We need to settle this internally first because it could discourage the public.' These are the kinds of justifications they use." [42]

A freedom of expression researcher interviewed for this study also explained how prioritizing military advantage can restrict the public's freedom of expression.

"We can clearly see that the authorities concerned prioritize their own security and military interests. When these priorities come into conflict with freedom of expression, they disregard freedom of expression, arguing that this is a time of revolution and that the revolution is more important. There is also a widespread belief that freedom of expression and other rights should only be addressed after the revolution succeeds. In short, in some areas, there is almost no respect for freedom of expression. In other areas, they know about and understand these rights, but as I mentioned earlier, they still want to place them second to military priorities." [43]

He also pointed out the gap between official statements and actual practices. "This is something that exists only on paper. We cannot be satisfied with that," he said. He acknowledged that there are groups in Karenni, Karen, and parts of Sagaing Region that understand freedom of expression. Therefore, these justifications can be understood not as a common policy shared by all armed groups, but rather as choices to place freedom of expression as a secondary priority under military pressure. The

[42] Key Informant, Independent Woman Journalist
[43] Key Informant, Freedom of Expression Analyst

NUG Ministry of Human Rights, however, stated that the NUG has no policy prohibiting criticism of the government.[44]

> Even in emergency situations, any restriction must meet the standards of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality. Fundamental rights and protections, including the prohibition of torture, cannot be violated or disregarded on the grounds of military pressure.

Revolutionary armed forces face severe military pressure on a daily basis, including threats to their lives and the risk of losing territorial control, as they confront relentless airstrikes and ground offensives by the military junta. However, even in emergency situations, any restriction must meet the standards of legality, legitimate aim, necessity, and proportionality. Fundamental rights and protections, including the prohibition of torture, cannot be violated or disregarded on the grounds of military pressure.

These justifications and narratives do not represent a common position agreed upon by all organizations and armed forces involved in the revolution. Rather, the study found that they reflect gaps between policy and practice, arising from differences in how ethical standards and codes of conduct are implemented among different organizations and at the central and local levels.

[44] Informant, Representative, Former Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government

4.3. Accountability in Practice and the Governance Crisis

According to the findings of this study, the rule of law and accountability mechanisms in resistance-controlled territories remain weak, even more than five years into the revolution. Although the essence of democracy lies in the ability to criticize governing authorities, criticism is currently viewed as a threat to local stability rather than being accepted and discussed as constructive feedback.

25-30%

Manageable Cases

Evaluation by a Former Mandalay Administrative Council Official

Under 30%

Level of Freedom of Expression

Official's Personal View (4.1)

56%

NUG Claims Successful Resolution Last Year

Not Yet Verified

A local journalist interviewed for this study stated:

> *"Sometimes, it's difficult even to find a place to file a complaint. You don't know where to go or whom to report it to."* [45]

Although the National Unity Government (NUG) has a Central Complaints Committee involving multiple ministries, it is not easily accessible to the public, according to an official from the NUG's former Ministry of Human Rights.[46] The official explained that people wishing to file complaints can do so through various ministries, a pinned Facebook post, Telegram, Viber, websites, and township-level human rights officers. The ministries then submit these complaints to the committee, which follows up on cases according to delays of three months and more than six months. The official claimed that more than 56% of complaints had been resolved in the previous year. However, this study has not been able to independently verify that figure.

[45] Key Informant, Local Journalist

[46] Key Informant, Representative, Former Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government

> *"One issue is that people believe, and genuinely feel from their own experiences, that filing a complaint leads nowhere and nothing changes. However, even if we are unable to take action on all the complaints received under the current circumstances, these complaints, injustices, and human rights violations will not simply disappear. They are being systematically documented. When the time comes when we are able to address these cases, there will be an opportunity to pursue justice for each of them."* [47]

Considering the accounts provided by research interviewees, including a local journalist who reported the absence of a dedicated complaints mechanism, an official from the Mandalay Interim Administration Council who noted that mechanisms exist within the NUG but public awareness at the grassroots level remains weak, and officials from the NUG's former Ministry of Human Rights, the study found that although complaints mechanisms exist at the institutional level, they remain largely inaccessible to local communities at the grassroots level. An official from the Mandalay Interim Administration Council acknowledged, "We have not done enough to raise awareness among people at the grassroots level that these mechanisms exist." The official also estimated, "In my view, only about 25 to 30 out of every 100 cases are actually addressed and resolved."

This is a clear example of the gap between official policies, legal provisions, and their implementation on the ground in resistance-controlled territories. With the exception of some ward and village-level administrations, most officials responsible for administrative and related functions in NUG-controlled territories are not elected by local communities but are directly appointed by the National Unity Government (NUG).[48] A member of the Mandalay Interim Administration Council shared her view that, as the revolution continues, this situation has led to growing tensions and disagreements between local communities and governing authorities.

[47] Key Informant, Representative, Former Ministry of Human Rights, National Unity Government

[48] https://ggr.hias.hit-u.ac.jp/en/2026/06/12/the-state-of-local-governance-in-nug-controlled-sagaing/

"In some townships, people elect their representatives at the ward and village levels. However, most officials at the township, district, and regional levels are not elected by the public. They are selected and directly appointed by the NUG from above. During the previous democratic period, administrative positions had fixed terms. When those terms ended, people could elect their representatives again. But now, apart from some ward and village–level positions, these officials are not elected by the people, so they seem to have forgotten their role. They forget that they are supposed to serve the public, and authoritarian practices begin to emerge. I also think the absence of elections in the administrative system makes the situation worse because their authority has no limits. There is no fixed term, such as having to leave office after five years. Without such limits, they can remain in power for many years. Over time, they begin to think that these positions belong to them and that the seats they occupy are theirs to keep permanently."[49]

The study found that when the perpetrator of a crime or a party responsible for a dispute is a member of the local authorities, an armed unit, or someone with close connections to these groups, while the victim is a local civilian, the authorities often handle such cases with bias and a lack of fairness.

She explained that when the perpetrator is part of the administrative authorities, there are cases in which victims are pressured not to file complaints and instead settle the matter through financial compensation. "When the victim is a civilian, in some cases, it gets so bad that they are told, 'Please don't file a complaint. Let's settle this with a certain amount of money. If this case becomes widely known, people will lose faith in the revolution. If the public hears about these incidents, they may become disappointed with the revolution and stop participating. That would only make the military happy. So let's not post these stories online."[50] A local activist also reported that complainants face

[49] Key Informant, Representative from the Mandalay Interim Administrative Council
[50] Key Informant, Representative from the Mandalay Interim Administrative Council
[51] Key Informant, Grassroots Activist

threats and that cases involving members of revolutionary armed forces are often overlooked or treated with leniency.[51]

> *"Their view is that these abuses are not important during this period. They are not a priority. Another reason is that the perpetrator is a revolutionary fighter serving the country and someone their unit relies on. Because of that, they believe these matters can be dealt with later. To me, this shows a lack of respect."*

The activist also described facing pressure to accept an approach in which "a rape case can simply be settled with afine, and that's the end of it."

Therefore, in cases of gender-based violence, the justification that a perpetrator is needed for the revolution appears to be used as a reason to delay accountability.

4.4. Assessment Against International Standards and Considerations of Proportionality

4.4.1. Applicable Standards and Their Relevance to Revolutionary Forces

Myanmar has not yet ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). However, Article 19 of the ICCPR and the United Nations Human Rights Committee's General Comment No. 34 (2011) are among the most widely used international standards for assessing restrictions on freedom of expression.

There are three reasons for applying these standards to revolutionary forces in this study.

Governing Authority. United Nations mechanisms have repeatedly affirmed that non-state armed groups exercising effective control over territory and populations, and performing government-like functions such as administration, judicial proceedings, and taxation, must respect the human rights of the populations under their control.

Voluntary Commitments. The National Unity Government (NUG) and revolutionary forces have themselves committed to upholding international human rights standards.

International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Myanmar is a party to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Common Article 3 of these Conventions is directly binding on all parties to an armed conflict, including non-state armed groups. It requires the humane treatment of detainees and prohibits torture, cruel treatment, and outrages upon personal dignity. Furthermore, under Rule 34 of customary IHL, civilian journalists engaged in professional activities in conflict-affected areas must be respected and protected.

4.4.2. Article 19 of the ICCPR and Rules Governing Restrictions

Under Article 19(1) of the ICCPR, everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference. Article 19(2) guarantees the right to seek, receive, and impart information through any media, including the internet.

The Three-Part Test. Under Article 19(3), freedom of expression may be subject to restrictions, but every restriction must meet all three of the following criteria. The burden of demonstrating that a restriction meets these requirements rests with the authorities.

> **Provided by law.** Restrictions must be established by laws or regulations that are publicly accessible. They must be sufficiently clear and precise to allow individuals to regulate their conduct and must not grant unrestricted discretion to those responsible for their enforcement (GC34, Paragraph 25).

> **Legitimate aim.** Restrictions must serve one of the following purposes: respecting the rights or reputations of others, or protecting national security, public order, public health, or morals. This list is exhaustive and does not include purposes such as "protecting the image of the revolution" or "maintaining unity."

> **Necessity and proportionality.** Restrictions must be genuinely necessary to achieve their intended purpose and must be the least intrusive measure among the available options (GC34, Paragraph 34). When national security is invoked as a justification, the authorities must demonstrate the specific nature of the threat and establish a direct connection between the expression being restricted and that threat (GC34, Paragraph 35).

Acts That Cannot Be Justified Under Any Circumstances. According to General Comment No. 34, the following acts violate Article 19 and cannot be justified under the three–part test.

- ❌ Arbitrarily arresting, torturing, threatening to kill, or killing individuals for exercising their freedom of expression. Journalists are frequently subjected to such attacks, which must be promptly investigated (Paragraph 23).
- ❌ Penalizing media outlets or journalists for criticizing the government (Paragraph 42).
- ❌ Using national security laws to withhold information of public interest that does not harm national security, or to prosecute journalists who disseminate such information (Paragraph 30).
- ❌ Imposing general registration or licensing requirements on journalists (Paragraph 44).

States of Emergency. Under Article 4 of the ICCPR, certain rights may be temporarily derogated from during a public emergency, but only to the extent strictly required by the circumstances. The right to be free from torture (Article 7) is non–derogable under all circumstances. Arbitrary detention also cannot be justified on the grounds of a state of emergency (General Comment No. 29).

Internet and Personal Data. Restrictions on websites and communication networks must be specific to particular content, while blanket restrictions are incompatible with Article 19(3) (GC34, Paragraph 43). United Nations Human Rights Council Resolution 32/13 (2016) strongly condemns measures that intentionally prevent or disrupt access to information online. Furthermore, collecting users' names, identification numbers, and residential addresses affects the right to privacy (Article 17 of the ICCPR). Such measures must therefore comply with the law and meet the requirements of necessity and proportionality.

4.4.3. Application of International Standards to the Case Studies

Case Study 1: Hpare Village, Chipwi Township (Section 3.2). Local residents peacefully demanded the protection of their drinking water sources. The study found no publicly available law or regulation authorizing the use of explosive weapons to disperse the protesters or the arrest of 44 individuals who participated in the protest. The purpose of these actions may have been to protect funding or economic interests, neither of which constitutes a legitimate aim under Article 19(3). Dispersing a peaceful protest through the use of weapons exceeds the requirements of proportionality.

Case Study 2: Yinmabin (Section 3.3). Threatening an individual through social media for speaking out and monitoring their family are actions carried out outside formal administrative mechanisms and without any legal basis. Under Paragraph 23 of General Comment No. 34, threats made against individuals for exercising their freedom of expression violate Article 19 under any circumstances. Furthermore, allowing the accused to continue issuing threats even while in detention represents a failure to fulfil the obligation to effectively investigate and take action against such attacks. The allegations of torture during detention concern acts that are absolutely prohibited under Article 7 of the ICCPR and Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions and therefore require an independent investigation.

Case Study 3: Singu Starlink Restrictions (Section 3.4). Although the committee had established regulations in this case, it remains unclear at what administrative level these regulations were enacted and how they were publicly announced. The stated aim of preventing airstrikes could constitute a

legitimate purpose under national security or public order. However, three questions arise regarding proportionality.

1. Collecting the personal information of every internet user is a blanket surveillance measure targeting the general population rather than only those users directly linked to security threats.

2. It is necessary to question whether fines of up to two million kyat and the confiscation of equipment constitute the least intrusive measures available.

3. As Starlink also provides access to life-saving information, such as airstrike warnings, the restrictions could undermine the very security they are intended to protect.

Furthermore, the authorities have not clearly demonstrated to the public how these restrictions would specifically reduce military threats (GC34, Paragraph 35).

Case Study 4: Arrest of Journalists (Section 3.5). No information was released about the legal basis for U Toe Gyi's arrest, and his family was not informed of his whereabouts or the conditions of his detention. This fails to meet even the first requirement of the three-part test, that restrictions must be provided by law. Although the justification of "leaking military information" could constitute a legitimate aim under national security, reports of civilian casualties and airstrikes are matters of public interest that people have a right to know about. Arresting journalists for reporting such information is inconsistent with Paragraph 30 of General Comment No. 34. The blindfolding and beating of a journalist, forcing him to kneel on stones, and confining him in an underground room while in KIA detention constitute violations of Article 7 of the ICCPR and Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, without even requiring assessment under the three-part test.

Policy-Level Restrictions (Section 4.1). The policy requiring prior permission to gather news and information in KNU-controlled territories may be inconsistent with Paragraph 44 of General Comment

No. 34, as it establishes a general authorization system for journalists, even if it has been formally issued through laws or policies. Where restrictions are necessary for military security, a more appropriate approach would be to define narrowly and precisely the specific categories of information that cannot be disclosed.

Table 1 provides a preliminary assessment of the cases examined in this study against the three-part test under Article 19(3) of the ICCPR.

Table: Assessment of the Cases Against International Standards

Cases	Prescribed by Law or Regulation	Legitimate Aim	Necessity and Proportionality	Applicable Standards
3.2 Chipwi township, Hpare township	No legal basis identified	Funding or economic interests (not included under Article 19 (3))	Dispersal using weapons and mass arrests are disproportionate	Right to peaceful assembly (ICCPR Article 21)
3.3 Yinmabin	No legal basis (outside formal administrative mechanisms)	None identified	Not subject to assessment under the three-part test	GC34, Paragraph 23: ICCPR Article 7: Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions
3.4 Starlink	Committee regulations exist (level of enactment and method of publication unclear)	Protection against airstrikes (potentially legitimate)	Blanket collection of personal data, fines, and equipment confiscation may be disproportionate	GC34, Paragraph 43; ICCPR Article 17; HRC Resolution 32/13

3.5 Arrest of Journalists	No publicly stated legal basis	Military security (potentially legitimate, but categories of information not specified)	Restricting information of public interest is disproportionate	GC34, Paragraph 23, 30 and 42; ICCPR Articles 7 and 9; Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions; IHL Rule 34
4.1 KNU policy	Policy formally issued	Military security (potentially legitimate)	General prior authorization requirements may be disproportionate	GC34, Paragraph 44

This analysis indicates that although security and military concerns may constitute legitimate justifications in the cases examined, there are shortcomings in establishing clear legal bases for the restrictions and ensuring that they meet the requirements of necessity and proportionality. Furthermore, these cases also involve acts that cannot be justified under any circumstances, such as threats and torture carried out outside formal administrative mechanisms.

A Note on Relative Scale. These findings do not suggest that the violations committed by revolutionary forces are equivalent to those of the Myanmar military in terms of scale or systematic nature. This report's analysis is based on the principle that revolutionary forces have a responsibility to respect in practice the values they seek to defend, including freedom of expression, justice, and human dignity. The purpose is not to “benefit the enemy,” but to protect the goals of the revolution.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The main finding of this study is that although revolutionary armed groups and local authorities have embraced democracy and human rights at the policy level, in practice, they continue to restrict people's freedom of expression, citing military, security, or revolutionary interests as justifications. A significant gap remains between official policies and statements and their implementation on the ground. This gap clearly illustrates the contradiction between an understanding of human rights and gender equality and the extent to which these principles are respected in practice.

> Although revolutionary armed groups and local authorities have embraced democracy and human rights at the policy level, in practice, they continue to restrict people's freedom of expression, citing military, security, or revolutionary interests as justifications.

Some members of revolutionary groups examined in this study understand human rights at a theoretical level. However, when they gain authority on the ground, abuses of power, threats, and gender–based violence occur. Such incidents are often addressed through financial compensation or denial of the facts, citing concerns that exposing them could damage the image of the revolution. The five areas examined in this study, namely forms of repression, justifications, governance weaknesses, natural resource management, and digital freedom, may appear different on the surface, but the findings indicate that they operate through a common underlying mechanism.

In examining forms of repression and responses to criticism, the study found that critics and those who raise questions face physical forms of repression, including arrests and threats. In terms of justifications, violations are legitimized through narratives such as “for the revolution” and “military and security concerns.” Furthermore, the findings on accountability in practice and the governance crisis indicate that bribery, extortion, and abuse of power by members of armed groups are not effectively addressed due to weak accountability mechanisms.

Similar patterns of repression were also found in the areas of natural resource management and digital freedom. Rather than responding constructively to criticism, authorities in resistance–controlled territories have increasingly adopted an “us versus the enemy” mentality. As a result, local communities and media outlets have increasingly resorted to self–censorship, while trust between local communities and governing authorities has declined.

The most significant finding of this study is that the problem in resistance–controlled territories is not the absence of policies, but the gap between policies and their implementation in practice. The cases examined in this study reveal signs of authoritarian contagion, in which members of revolutionary groups, after gaining territorial control, begin adopting the same authoritarian practices used by the regime they are fighting against. These practices could affect not only the current transitional period but also the foundations of the future federal democratic state in the following ways.

(1) Undermining Electoral Democracy. The practice of directly appointing local administrators from above, rather than allowing people to elect their representatives, could eventually lead to the postponement of elections or the refusal to return governing authority to the people.

(2) Undermining Federalism. The essence of federalism lies in respecting the rule of law, granting regions the right to self–determination, and protecting the fundamental human rights of local communities. If local authorities continue to impose arbitrary restrictions despite the existence of formal policies, trust between states and regions could

deteriorate in the future. This could transform the federal union into a country made up of local authoritarian territories sustained by armed force.

(3) Weakening the Separation of Powers. The separation of powers depends on checks and balances. However, criticism is currently being restricted, while accountability mechanisms remain weak. These weaknesses could prevent the establishment of a healthy separation of powers in the future, creating opportunities for leaders to monopolize power and for authoritarianism to take root once again.

The practices being adopted during the current revolutionary period are shaping the governance structures and political culture of the future state. Therefore, revolutionary forces urgently need to take bold steps to reform these systemic weaknesses.

Chapter (6)

Recommendations

Based on the case studies and findings presented above, this study offers the following recommendations to relevant organizations to protect freedom of expression and establish accountable local governance mechanisms in resistance–controlled territories. The relevant case study or finding is identified under each recommendation.

6.1. To the National Unity Government (NUG)

1. Make Complaint Mechanisms Accessible at the Grassroots Level

Raise awareness among local communities about the Central Complaints Committee under the relevant ministry through information campaigns in local languages. Establish secure channels for submitting complaints anonymously, including secure messaging platforms, telephone hotlines, and township–level contact persons. Regularly publish the number of complaints received and resolved without disclosing any information that could identify complainants.

Related finding: Section 4.3 (Complaint mechanisms exist at the institutional level but remain inaccessible to local communities at the grassroots level).

2. Bring the Yinmabin Case to a Transparent Conclusion

Complete the joint investigation by the Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence within a specified timeframe and publicly release the findings. Suspend the accused from their position during the investigation and prevent them from issuing threats through phone calls or social media. Ensure the safety of the female PDF member who spoke out and her family, stop pressuring them to report to the battalion, and provide appropriate remedies.

Related case: Section 3.3.

3. Establish a Gender-Based Violence Reporting Mechanism within the People's Defence Forces

Establish a dedicated reporting channel that allows complaints to be submitted directly, outside the military chain of command. Ensure that women officials and women's organizations are involved in the mechanism and that complaints are handled through a survivor-centered approach. Adopt a zero-tolerance policy on gender-based violence and communicate it to all members of the armed forces.

Related case: Section 3.3.

4. Gradually Return Local Governing Authority to the People

Establish fixed terms of office for appointed local administrative officials. Publish a timetable for elections, beginning at the ward and village levels where security conditions permit. In areas where elections cannot yet be held, conduct regular direct consultations with local communities.

Related finding: Section 4.3.

5. Issue Directives on the Arrest and Detention of Journalists

Issue a directive prohibiting any armed unit under the Ministry of Defence (MOD) from arresting journalists solely for their reporting. Require that all cases of detention be reported to the relevant ministry within a specified timeframe and that the detainees' families be notified.

Related finding: Sections 3.5 and 4.1.

6.2. To Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations and Revolutionary Armed Forces

6. Release Journalists Detained for Their Reporting

Immediately release journalists who have been detained solely for their reporting. If U Toe Gyi remains in detention, immediately inform his family which organization is holding him, where he is being held, the charges against him, and his health condition.

Related case: Section 3.5.

7. End Torture and Conduct Investigations

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) should conduct an independent investigation into allegations that a journalist detained in Kachin State was blindfolded, beaten, forced to kneel on stones, and confined in an underground room, and hold those responsible accountable. Ensure that all detainees are informed of the charges against them, have access to their families and legal counsel, and are held only in publicly known detention facilities. Allow independent monitors access to detention facilities.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.5 and 4.4.

8. Ensure Accountability for the Hpare Village Incident and Review Mining Activities

Release any local residents who remain in detention. Investigate the incident in which explosive weapons were used to disperse peaceful protesters, injuring two local residents. Suspend mining activities near water sources until environmental impact assessments have been completed, and obtain the prior consent of local communities before undertaking new mining projects.

Related case: Section 3.2.

9. Revise Media Policies

Replace general prior authorization requirements for journalists with narrowly and clearly defined categories of military information that cannot be disclosed, such as troop locations and details of ongoing military operations, and make these restrictions publicly available. Refrain from using broad accusations such as “causing divisions” as grounds for arrest. Establish a spokesperson system to ensure timely responses to media inquiries.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.2, 3.5, and 4.1 (KNU Policy).

10. Make Human Rights and Codes of Conduct Mandatory Components of Training

Make human rights, freedom of expression, the role of journalists, and codes of conduct for the treatment of civilians mandatory subjects in military training, staff training, and refresher courses. Prioritize training for personnel involved in on–site inspections.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.4 (impulsive conduct during Starlink inspections) and 4.2.

6.3. To Local Administrative Bodies

11. Review Starlink Regulations

Local administrative bodies, including the Singu Township Emergency Administration Committee, should take the following measures:

- Stop requiring all internet users to register. Where registration is necessary, require only public internet service providers to register, ensure that personal data is stored securely, and delete it after a specified retention period.
- Reduce fines and equipment confiscation penalties to proportionate levels.
- Set a time limit for every restriction and clearly explain its justification to the public.
- Guarantee internet access for airstrike warnings, healthcare, and emergency communications.
- Take appropriate action against armed personnel who acted improperly towards civilians during the October 11, 2025 incident, just as penalties were imposed on civilians who were fined, and publicly disclose the outcome.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.4 and 4.4.

12. Establish a Tripartite Joint Committee

Establish a joint committee comprising representatives of local authorities, armed group leaders, and local civil society organizations to make decisions on internet freedom, natural resource extraction, and taxation, and obtain the consent of local communities.

Related cases: Sections 3.2 and 3.4.

13. Ensure Transparency in Taxation and Natural Resource Revenue

Regularly disclose tax rates, the locations of authorized checkpoints, revenue collected, and expenditures. Close unauthorized checkpoints. Protect local residents and journalists who demand transparency from arrest and intimidation.

Related case: Section 3.2 (Oilfield checkpoints in Magway Region).

14. Establish an Impartial Complaint and Accountability Mechanism

Ensure that perpetrators are held accountable under the law without bias, regardless of whether they are members of local authorities or armed forces. Prohibit pressuring victims to settle cases through financial compensation. Any settlement must be based on the victim's free and voluntary consent.

Related finding: Section 4.3.

6.4. To Civil Society Organizations and Media Organizations

15. Systematically Document Violations by All Parties

Document violations of freedom of expression committed not only by the Myanmar military but also by revolutionary forces, without bias. Establish common verification standards among organizations and develop a secure system for storing and sharing documentation. Such documentation will support future efforts to achieve justice in cases recorded by the NUG's Central Complaints Committee.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.2 to 3.5 and 4.3.

16. Establish a Permanent Mechanism for Coordinated Advocacy and Pressure

In the Yinmabin case, the NUG initiated an investigation only after 16 women's organizations and 149 civil society organizations issued a joint open letter. Therefore, establish a standing Rapid Response Coalition capable of responding promptly when violations occur. Go beyond issuing statements by continuing to monitor cases and advocate for accountability until they are resolved.

Related case: Section 3.3.

17. Protect Journalists and Those Who Speak Out

Provide emergency funds, assistance with relocation to safe locations, legal assistance, and digital security training for journalists, individuals who speak out, and their families who face threats. Provide psychological support to victims of torture and survivors of gender-based violence.

Related cases: Sections 3.3 and 3.5.

18. Act as Intermediaries Between Local Communities and Complaint Mechanisms

Raise awareness among local communities about their human rights and available complaint mechanisms. Safely submit complaints on behalf of local residents who fear retaliation and continue monitoring how these complaints are addressed and resolved.

Related finding: Section 4.3.

19. Engage in Constructive Dialogue with Revolutionary Authorities

Hold regular discussions with revolutionary authorities to provide recommendations on draft policies, such as internet regulations and media policies. Participate in tripartite joint committees and monitor whether the commitments outlined in the Federal Democracy Charter are being implemented in practice.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.4 and 4.2.

20. Challenge the Narrative That Criticism Harms the Revolution

Conduct public awareness campaigns to demonstrate that constructive criticism strengthens rather than weakens the revolution. Stand in solidarity with individuals who face accusations of being dalan (military informants) and online threats.

Related findings: Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

21. Media Organizations' Responsibilities Toward Freelance Journalists

Establish safety protocols for freelance journalists and correspondents reporting from the ground. If they are arrested, issue joint statements and continue monitoring their cases and advocating on their behalf. Editorial teams should avoid pressuring journalists on the ground to engage in self-censorship and ensure the protection of their sources.

Related cases and findings: Sections 3.5 (UBNA, BNA, and the Hpakant-based freelance journalist) and 4.1.

6.5. To International Organizations and Donors

22. Incorporate Human Rights Standards into Funding and Support

When providing support to revolutionary governance mechanisms, include commitments to human rights and freedom of expression as fundamental criteria. Raise questions about the Yinmabin case and the arrests of journalists during discussions with the NUG and revolutionary groups.

Related cases: Sections 3.3 and 3.5.

23. Provide Long-Term Support to Local Media and Civil Society Organizations

Provide long-term support to independent local media outlets, human rights documentation initiatives, journalist protection funds, and digital security programs. Support efforts to document violations committed by all parties to the conflict, including not only the military but also revolutionary forces.

Related cases: Sections 3.2 to 3.5.



Research Report

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