

# The Arakan Army, Rakhine State and the Promise of Arakan's Independence

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In Myanmar's Rakhine State, control over more than 60 per cent of the territory has slipped from the hands of the state into those of the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed organisation, as a result of fierce fighting since 2015. Following an informal ceasefire in November 2020, the AA secured its military gains and seeks to "capture the existing administrative structure" from bottom up.<sup>1</sup> The military coup of 1 February 2021 has accelerated the loss of state authority.<sup>2</sup> The AA can rely on the support of most of Rakhine State's Buddhist population. Together with its allies, it is not just a powerful military actor in Myanmar, but with its political branch, the United League of Arakan ('ULA'), the AA is the most significant political force in Rakhine State.

The rise of the AA has been described as an "unusually serious phenomenon, even in a country plagued by armed groups",<sup>3</sup> and the war it waged since 2015 as "the most serious insurgency the Burmese military has faced since independence".<sup>4</sup> *The Economist* described it squarely as a "war of independence".<sup>5</sup> For several years, the AA's leadership, when prompted, referred to the Wa Self-Administered Division in northern Myanmar and its novel concept of a "confederation" to describe its goals. But recently, General Twan Mrat Naing made clear that "we certainly want independence, ultimately, but that calls for many steps at first. It is all a matter of time".<sup>6</sup> The AA's current grip on power has maintained regional stability while Myanmar has stumbled into civil war. The AA claims to give a voice to the grievances and aspirations of Rakhine State's Buddhist majority passed over by the globalized narratives on the geopolitics of the Bay

<sup>1</sup> Author's conversation with a United League of Arakan cadre, 14 August 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Usage of 'Rakhine' or 'Arakan-Arakanese' floats. 'Rakhine State' is an official designation for an administrative division of Myanmar. In 1974, it replaced the older term 'Arakan' found in many Western languages. The ethnonym 'Arakanese' is used in this brief to denote the Buddhist majority population.

<sup>3</sup> NAKANISHI Yoshihiro and Antonio Angotti, "The Arakan Army: Violence in Rakhine State in Myanmar", Policy Brief Series No. 107 (2020), Torkel Opsahl Academic EPublisher ('TOAEP'), Brussels, 2020 (<http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/107-nakanishi-angotti/>).

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Davis quoted in "Guerrillas with attitude: An ethnic militia with daring tactics is humiliating Myanmar's army", *The Economist*, 18 April 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Nan Lwin Hnint Pwint, "Confederation the Only Option for Arakanese People, AA Chief Says", *The Irrawaddy*, 11 January 2019; Nan Lwin Hnint Pwint, "Arakan Army Chief Promises Myanmar Military, Govt Eye for an Eye", *The Irrawaddy*, 17 January 2019; Altaf Parvez, Shafiqul Alam and Ashfaque Ronnie, "'We recognise the human rights and citizen rights of the Rohingyas': Interview with Arakan Army chief Twan Mrat Naing", *Prothomalo*, 2 January 2022.

of Bengal and Myanmar's Rohingya crisis. The following sections review key developments of the last decade and sketch the drivers and the ideological framework underpinning the AA's strength. This brief adds to insights of a previous brief in this series on the AA.<sup>7</sup>

## 1. Arakan Army's Growth as an Ethnic Armed Organisation

For a decade, the AA's leadership followed a clear-cut strategy which built on sheltered military preparation, guerrilla warfare, and mass recruitment to gain sufficient territorial control and expand into administrative tasks. Regional alliances and the tacit recognition it got from China were crucially important, as was popular support.

Founded in April 2009 in Myanmar's northern Kachin State, the AA's origins go back years earlier when a group of disgruntled young men found each other in Yangon and resolved to liberate the "fatherland". Until 2017, the AA counted a few hundred men and was described as an obscure, drug- and arms-dealing outfit created by the Kachin Independence Army ('KIA'). In 2018, it boasted 8,000 fighters. In early 2022, its commander indicated a total of 30,000 soldiers trained since the AA's foundation. Between 5,000 and 6,000 are currently deployed in the north of Myanmar.<sup>8</sup>

The AA's organisational history has unfolded in two very different settings. On the one hand, the AA developed as an armed force with its headquarter in Laiza on the border with China, acting in co-ordination with allied ethnic armed organisations ('EAOs') such as the KIA, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army ('MNDAA') from Kokang region, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army ('TNLA') from northern Shan State, and the United Wa State Army ('UWSA').<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the AA took root in Rakhine State, situated on the border with Bangladesh and close to India.

Originally trained at KIA facilities, AA soldiers joined the KIA in June 2011 when it resumed war against the Myanmar military. Closer to its home turf, the AA clashed for the first time with Myanmar troops in the Upper Kaladan Valley (Chin State) in March 2015. In October 2013, the AA had joined the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team ('NCCT') founded by 17 EAOs to negotiate with President Thein Sein's Union Peace-making Work Committee ('UPWC') for the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement. But the UPWC rejected the AA's inclusion in the process, arguing that it had only been founded in 2009 and was based outside Rakhine State. In 2015, the government blocked the AA, MNDAA and TNLA from signing the National Ceasefire Agreement ('NCA') because they had not

<sup>7</sup> See *supra* note 3.

<sup>8</sup> See *supra* note 6; Bertil Lintner, "Rebel yell: Arakan Army leader speaks to Asia Times", *Asia Times*, 18 January 2022.

<sup>9</sup> SUN Yun, "China and Myanmar's Peace Process", Special Report No. 401, United States Institute of Peace, 9 March 2017.

concluded individual bilateral agreements and refused disarmament. The NCCT failed to maintain a united position and only eight EAOs signed the NCA on 15 October 2015. Despite the rebuttal, the AA, MNDAA and TNLA showed their willingness to negotiate and called for a political dialogue. When State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi launched a new round of peace talks (the ‘2nd Panglong Conference’) in mid-2016, she promised more inclusiveness. But the AA and its allies were shunned again.<sup>10</sup> They formed the Northern Brotherhood Alliance (‘NBA’) in November 2016 with KIA’s brigades 4 and 6, and engaged in heavy attacks against army positions in Northern Shan State.<sup>11</sup> But China wanted to stop fighting along the Sino-Myanmar border and pressured the Myanmar government to accept also the EAOs *opposed* to the NCA peace process at the second session of the conference (May 2017). As a member of the newly formed Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (‘FPNCC’), a group of seven EAOs led by the UWSA, the AA attended reluctantly. While politically fruitless, its attendance gave the AA recognition at a time when the army publicly vowed to wipe it out. Meanwhile, the FPNCC defended its political dialogue-approach at the third session in July 2018, but to little avail. Relations soured and FPNCC members were not invited to the fourth session (August 2020). By then, the AA had officially been declared a terrorist organisation, civil war in Rakhine State was in full swing, while AA recruitment went up. The AA’s membership in the NBA and its participation at the FPNCC provided political visibility, a shield of diplomatic protection, organisational stability and tangible security for the AA’s headquarter and training grounds in Laiza.

The AA’s efforts to infiltrate Rakhine State became publicly known when its men first overran army positions near Kyauktaw and Paletwa in late March 2015. They seized weapons and retreated to the jungle eschewing detection while cells of their soldiers were said to spread throughout village tracts in central and northern Rakhine State. These versatile tactics worked well. More serious engagements broke out after the November 2015 elections and in March-April 2016. While the army promised annihilation, the AA started efficient public relations campaigns on social media highlighting its military preparedness. Over the next years, its troops expanded from north to south, down the strategic fluvial artery of the Kaladan, pushing the army back, village by village, relentlessly attacking and clearing outposts. By 2021 their presence was felt – strongly or at least to some degree – in 16 of Rakhine State’s 17 townships. The AA’s early gains did not make headlines. In 2017-2018, battles took place in the shadow of tragic events triggered by lethal attacks against Myanmar border posts by Harakah al-Yaqin (later renamed Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (‘ARSA’)) in October 2016. The army’s ruthless clearance operations culminated in the mass flight of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya Muslims into Bangladesh, notably in August-September 2017.<sup>12</sup>

Simultaneously, the army’s response to the AA’s bold attacks intensified. In January 2018, tensions were at their peak when the police shot several young people who had protested the cancellation of a patriotic event in Mrauk U. Since 2015, hundreds had been arrested under suspicion of collusion with the AA.<sup>13</sup> Clashes took also place along the India-Myanmar border and the AA was accused of trying to disrupt India’s Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project.<sup>14</sup> The

years 2019-2020 saw nearly uninterrupted fighting. Despite its superior air power, the army failed to dislodge or even stop the AA, and its casualties were allegedly heavy.<sup>15</sup> From June 2019 to October 2020, the number of internally displaced civilians went from an estimated 46,000 to 220,000 and vast swathes of land could not be cultivated. In 2019, Arakanese village administrators caught between the fronts resigned *en masse*. The suspension of internet services had a punishing impact, notably when Covid-19 hit in 2020. When the authorities cancelled the parliamentary elections of 8 November 2020 in areas deemed insecure, the AA declared a unilateral ceasefire and called for elections to be held in those areas by the end of the year. Unlike the government, the army, visibly exhausted, welcomed the proposal and eased conditions for the return of internally displaced persons and the conclusion of an informal ceasefire. The ceasefire outlived the latest military coup, but in Rakhine State there were few sympathies for either the army or the overthrown government. Initially, the AA hedged its bets. Its current active support for the ‘People’s Democratic Forces’ fighting the junta stands in line with the position of its northern allies.

Rakhine State’s relative stability in 2021 enabled the AA to pursue its nation-building project. The AA’s political arm, the United League of Arakan, had been founded in 2015. To set up taxation on the territory under its control, the AA formed the Rakhine People’s Authority in December 2019.<sup>16</sup> On 1 August 2021, the ULA announced the creation of its own judiciary in rural areas. The AA enforced a strict observation of Covid-19 restrictions and fought the abuse of alcohol. A dedicated Health Committee was formed in August 2021. Training courses to churn out much needed public administrators were also launched. Nonetheless, AA governance was also met with criticism from civil society when due process lacked. Contested land-ownership issues were particularly sensitive. Buddhist-Muslim relations reportedly improved since 2019. Eager to show social inclusiveness, the AA vaccinated Muslim villagers and hinted at training Muslim policemen.

## 2. Frustration, Humiliation and the Hope for Change

The decision to set up the AA did not spring from a history seminar on the bygone Mrauk U kingdom, but from a collective sense of frustration and humiliation. The exasperation of the Arakanese about their subjection and economic hardship has a long history going back to colonial rule, the aftermath of World War II, and dereliction under Burma’s military dictatorship. But several of the reasons explaining the AA’s rapid growth are related to the context of the last decades. A 2015 assessment of Rakhine State’s needs listed major challenges: “experiencing high levels of poverty [...] inadequate access to livelihoods, food, and quality health and education services, [...] compounded by historic underspending on infrastructure and human capital”.<sup>17</sup> Buddhists and Muslims alike blamed the state for this situation. The conditions deteriorated after Myanmar’s opening in 2011. Trawlers from overseas depleted Rakhine State’s fishing grounds, and profits from the exploitation of natural gas deposits did not benefit the state’s development. At the same time, the region’s strategic importance for China grew with the construction of oil and gas pipelines linking the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan. The project of Chinese investors for a special economic zone in Kyauk Phyu was locally viewed with suspicion. Tens of thousands of impoverished Arakanese moved to Yangon Division or toiled in the jade mines of Kachin State or

Vision and Reality”, Policy Brief Series No. 106 (2020), TOAEP, Brussels, 2020 (<http://www.toaep.org/pbs-pdf/106-bhaumik/>).

<sup>15</sup> Arakan Information Centre (Selangor, Malaysia), “Report of Myanmar troops and battalions’ recent operating in Rakhine and Chin States”, 5 July 2020.

<sup>16</sup> *Radio Free Asia*, 20 July 2020 quoted by Jack Broome, “The Arakan dream: The search for peace in Myanmar’s Rakhine State on the verge of civil war”, in *Terrorism Monitor*, 2021, vol. 19, no. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Center for Diversity and National Harmony, “Rakhine State Needs Assessment”, Yangon, 2015, p. iii (‘Rakhine State Needs Assessment’).

<sup>10</sup> Aye Nai, “Suu Kyi, NCA groups agree to start ‘Second Panglong’ in August”, *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 28 June 2016.

<sup>11</sup> More military clashes taking place in the north and interlocked with the political contest cannot be discussed here for reasons of space.

<sup>12</sup> International Crisis Group, “Myanmar’s Rohingya Crisis Enters a Dangerous New Phase”, Asia Report No. 292, 7 December 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Arrests under Article 50(a)(i) of the Counter-Terrorism Law, 4 June 2014 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/930dc8/>), multiplied when the AA was declared a terrorist organisation on 23 March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Subir Bhaumik, “India’s Rakhine dilemma”, *Burma News International*, 22 April 2020; Subir Bhaumik, “The India-Myanmar Kaladan Project:

factories in China, Thailand and Malaysia. But remittances did not lift their families out of poverty. Migrant labour became an important pool for the recruitment of AA's troops.

Their mistrust of outsiders earned the Arakanese a reputation of xenophobia. Occasional demonstrations of blatant racism and Rohingya-phobia compounded the negative portrayal. As a result, the Arakanese found themselves marginalised by the international community which foregrounded the disenfranchisement of Rohingyas in northern Rakhine State. Suspicion arose first in the late 1990s when humanitarian international non-governmental organisations working with the United Nations ('UN') High Commissioner for Refugees prioritized, in line with rules on humanitarian aid, the needs of poor Muslims (often repatriates from an earlier mass flight) and allegedly neglected their similarly poor Buddhists neighbours. Resentment flared in 2012. In 2013 and 2014, the Arakanese were wrapped up with the perpetrators of Islamophobic violence in Myanmar. The media rarely made the difference between Arakanese and Burmese as both groups were perceived as Buddhists sharing a similar culture. In 2014, in an outburst of localized violence, UN offices in Sittway were attacked. Arakanese nationalists felt that it was the authoritarian Burmese state which had, time and again, exploited the communal frictions to perpetuate mutual distrust. Outside Myanmar, the Rohingya plight was inscribed as a morally sanctioned global concern following the 2017 Rohingya mass flight and genocide accusations; Arakanese complaints seemed a lesser concern. After the 2012 riots, both communities worried most about insecurity.<sup>18</sup> They felt that they had no one to turn to because the security forces failed to protect them. For many Arakanese with no lobby abroad, the AA's promise of defending the people responded to their anguish.

Arakanese bitterness continued to grow after the much-vaunted democratization failed their hopes for change. Overcoming regional differences, southern and northern politicians had joined forces and united in the Arakan National Party ('ANP') in 2014. But ANP's electoral success at the regional level (November 2015) did not lead to a power shift. In 2016, the government under Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy ('National League for Democracy') appointed one of its own as Chief Minister of Rakhine State. When Dr. Aye Maung, ANP's former chairman, declared that "Burmese people consider Rakhine people as slaves and do not give [them] equal rights" and defended armed struggle, he was jailed and sentenced to 22 years for high treason and criminal incitement (March 2018). As a result, the AA continued to gain the hearts and minds of disaffected Arakanese.

The military and the government's condescension towards the AA from 2013 to 2020 was also a source of frustration. Their eagerness to cut off the AA from its allies verged on the ridiculous. President Thein Sein's government had refused to include the AA in the ceasefire negotiations in 2013 because it was based in Laiza, not in Rakhine State. In 2016, the army vowed to exterminate the AA. Having failed to do so, it asked the AA in July 2019 to move *back* to Laiza saying that its troops in Rakhine State were merely "insurgents" suspected of collaborating with ARSA's Muslim "terrorists". When the government branded the AA itself as a terrorist group in March 2020, the army wanted the KIA to *expel* the AA from Laiza. Surprisingly, two months later, the NLD government offered to *collaborate* with the AA on Covid-19 prevention in Rakhine State. A tacit recognition of the AA's standing as a legitimate political and military force came about a year later when both the army and the deposed NLD government rescinded the "terrorist" appellation after the coup in February 2021.

### 3. Arakan Army's Ideological Cornerstones

The AA did not issue a charter providing historical references or the ideational background of its struggle. However, the interviews and speeches of its leader throw light on its "action-oriented ideas [...]"

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

seeking to achieve public influence and control".<sup>19</sup> The AA sees itself as the spearhead of a national movement which posits independence as a desirable goal for the majority population of *Rakhine Pray*, the Land of Arakan, if "our rightful political status which we desire is not accommodated within this union".<sup>20</sup> Its nationalism is ethnic inasmuch as it derives its legitimacy from the existence of a historical Arakan nation and the cultural legacy of the Arakanese people. The AA's anti-colonial rhetoric has deep roots in revolts against Burmese, British and Japanese rulers. As a military organisation created to hand control of Arakan back to the Arakanese people, the AA wants to revert a process of what it calls "Burmanization". Burmanization denotes the destruction of Arakanese selfhood by the Burmese state via social and linguistic standardization and the eradication of Arakan's historical legacy.<sup>21</sup> The AA holds that "the fatherland" has been under a "yoke of enslavement" since the Burmese conquest (1784), and sees itself as a revolutionary organisation fighting for freedom. The nationalist reading of Rakhine State's modern history turns colonial and Myanmar national historiography upside down. It views the social and cultural entanglements negatively and discards the notion that Arakan once conquered, was irreversibly integrated into Myanmar's geobody. In Myanmar, Arakanese grievances over Burmese domination have been either belittled or suppressed and, even today, the Burmese seem to dismiss them as "feelings of paranoia and threatened identity".<sup>22</sup>

The AA's leadership has referred to its revolution as a "people's war" and a "national liberation struggle" whose success depends on a "well-trained army". In August 2021, the AA's commander made clear that the revolution had reached its third stage ("the period of rivalry"), the fourth and last one being "the conquest of the Arakan State".<sup>23</sup> Peace is second to self-determination.<sup>24</sup> After it had established itself in northern Rakhine State, the AA communicated its political goals in social media campaigns as the "Arakan Dream" and the "Way of Rakkhita". These slogans highlighted the aspirations of the Rakhine people for a better future and the right to choose their own way. At the same time, the messages stressed the need for a "spirit of sacrifice" and leaders alluded to the "tons of challenges, difficulties and obstacles, as well as opposition everywhere and at every stage" the AA had faced.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the pugnacious rhetoric, the AA's brand of ethnonationalism flags a sense of moderation in regard of intercommunal relations. As General Twan Mrat Naing put it: "All peoples in Arakan, without any discrimination, shall be equally treated [...] with full human dignity because we are fighting for freedom, democracy, social justice and welfare, and human dignity for all inhabitants in Arakan irrespective of religion, race or sex".<sup>26</sup> The AA's understanding of the state is secular. Not religious belonging, but ethnicity, culture, language and history define identity. Muslims should not be discriminated but play their role in public administration and security. The AA's categorization as "Buddhist rebels" by Western journalists was disliked by its

<sup>19</sup> I borrow Freeden and Stears' description of the role of ideologies, see Michael Freeden and Mark Stears (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> See *supra* note 6.

<sup>21</sup> Quotes draw variously on speeches and interviews given by General Twan Mrat Naing and AA's deputy chief Dr. Nyo Twan Awng between 2015 and 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Rakhine State Needs Assessment, p. 5, see *supra* note 17.

<sup>23</sup> "AA chief holds forth on state of Arakan", *Arakkha Media*, 15 August 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Chan Thar, "Autonomy must come before peace, Arakan Army leader says", *Myanmar Times*, 22 April 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Myanmar News Agency, "So long as the Burmese Military tries to annihilate us, clashes will continue", *Burma News International*, 25 April 2017.

<sup>26</sup> AA, "Speech by the Commander-In-Chief at the 11th anniversary day of Arakan Army", 10 April 2020 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/d11tfb/>).

supporters.<sup>27</sup> The AA welcomed the cases brought against the Burmese military at the ICJ and ICC in November 2019 alleging crimes against the 1948 Genocide Convention, but the joint statement of the Northern Brotherhood Alliance used the term “Bengali” rather than “Rohingya”. While the AA’s leadership stands apart from Arakanese chauvinists, it considers nonetheless the Muslims in the border townships of Maungdaw and Buthidaung as descendants of the Bengali migrant community settling under British rule and repudiates the claim that they are an ancient indigenous community.<sup>28</sup> It rejects the name ‘Rohingya’ and looks upon its use as a recent phenomenon.

Pace the features the AA inherited from an earlier tradition of militant left, yet conservative Arakanese nationalism, the AA’s rise marks a generational shift. In a country moving out of years of isolation, the AA is led by a young charismatic leader who comes across as outgoing and resolutely modern. In the past, haughty nationalist politicians from Arakan were often members of a tiny social elite and tended to self-isolate with their uncompromising resolutions. Former armed groups were minuscule and divisive. Diminished by harsh conditions, they were crushed or kept in check by the army. The AA took a radically different path, bonding with northern groups, liaising with friendly EAOs throughout the country, and generously putting its own troops at their service. However, unlike Rohingya political activists, the AA did never internationalize its cause. It does still not have an international network, unlike most ethnic groups which associate their political messages with a human rights agenda and calls for humanitarian aid.

#### 4. Dual Role and the Rise of New Challenges

In the volatile context of Myanmar’s civil war and the risk of a failing state, the AA’s nation-building agenda faces challenges that stretch beyond issues of domestic governance and poverty eradication. The AA-ULA must still assert itself on its own ground because it has not substituted the state and its administrative structures. The Myanmar military enjoys aerial and naval superiority. Recent skirmishes with troops in northern Arakan demonstrate that the continuance of the informal 2020 ceasefire is precarious. On the other hand, supporting the democratic forces fighting the junta creates opportunities for the AA and its allies to gain wider recognition in the country. To rebuild society at home, the AA-ULA must contain nationalist bigotry and lower the anxieties of the minority people, Muslim communities as much as smaller groups like the Daingnet, Mro, Khumi or Chin. The AA’s takeover surely raises the risk that long-subdued territorial and political conflicts will be reignited. It would be naïve not to see that danger. However, the AA’s “conflict resolution mechanism” to defuse interreligious tensions offers hope for mediation at the grassroots level.<sup>29</sup> But mainly inclusiveness must begin with the Arakanese themselves. Their internal divisions due to geography, party allegiance and divergent historical experiences are rarely discussed. Tensions between urban-liberal and rural-conservative Arakanese underpin these differences. While migrant labour may come home with high

<sup>27</sup> Moe Myint, “International Media Injecting Religion into Rakhine Armed Conflict”, *The Irrawaddy*, 8 January 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Cowley, “Tour guide turned Arakan Army commander sees nationhood in victory”, *Coconuts*, 23 June 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Htet Paing Oo, “Local and International actors influencing inter-communal relations in Rakhine State”, *E-International Relations*, 22 May 2021.

hopes, it is less likely that the AA’s takeover will trigger the return of many urban, middle-class Arakanese from Yangon or abroad. Making the AA’s Arakan dream a reality will ultimately depend on economic progress. Understandably, the AA has not questioned Indian and Chinese infrastructure projects because Arakan needs foreign investment.

If from an inside perspective, the AA’s nation-building plans stand in the first row, from an outside perspective, one may wonder how international stakeholders will react to the AA’s two-fold role in Myanmar politics and respond to Arakan’s needs. Many identify Rakhine State exclusively with the plight of the Rohingyas or link it to China’s strategic footprint in the Bay of Bengal. The AA will try to add the concerns of its constituency. As its rise reshapes the regional context, the AA hopes to influence international perceptions of Rakhine State-related issues.

Assessments of the AA’s emerging foreign relations must necessarily be tentative. The AA did not concentrate on building foreign contacts in the past, except for China where it has built strong relations. Its earlier portrayal as a shadowy, drug-dealing group dependent on China’s whims has lapsed. The allegation that the AA was stoking instability and impeding the peace process is outdated, too.<sup>30</sup> Since it is no longer dependent on “the patronage of larger groups”, said political analyst SUN Yun in 2020, the AA has become “ineliminable” and “increasingly impervious” to China’s pressure. Following other EAOs, the AA will need to enlarge its network and explain its policies to the international community. It surely wishes for more robust relations with India and Bangladesh.<sup>31</sup> Independence is a lofty goal but, needless to say, India and China see secession as a wrong signal encouraging centrifugal forces in their own countries. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (‘ASEAN’), a regional bloc, and its member states may dislike it, too.

Challenges ahead are daunting. For many analysts, the AA’s ambitions may seem altogether unrealistic. But that is what most people would have believed when the organisation was founded 13 years ago.

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<sup>30</sup> David S. Mathieson, “Myanmar’s Rakhine torched anew by insurgent fire”, *The Irrawaddy*, 3 January 2019.

<sup>31</sup> AA’s homage to Bangladesh’s language-martyrs testifies to its recent diplomatic boldness, United League of Arakan, “Statement of Solidarity”, 22 February 2022 (<https://www.legal-tools.org/doc/d53m8z/>).



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