

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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MEDIA MYSTERY SURROUNDS ISLAMIC STATE CONQUESTS IN MOZAMBIQUE

Jacob Zenn

On March 25, the Islamic State in Central African Province (ISCAP)'s Mozambique branch raided the town of Palma in northeastern Mozambique and was reported to have slaughtered civilians and killed several dozens of soldiers. The attack would not have been unprecedented for ISCAP, which has consistently captured towns along Mozambique's northern Swahili Coast since 2018 and has even ventured into Tanzania for attacks ([Terrorism Monitor](#), December 3, 2020). What was unprecedented, however, was ISCAP's continuing from Palma toward the lodge where international employees of Total's liquefied natural gas (LNG) site were located and attacking the employees' escape convoy. Altogether, 21 Mozambican soldiers and 40 civilians were killed during the Palma raid, and several international workers remain missing and were possibly beheaded ([timeslive.co.za](#), March 29).

IS-affiliated Amaq news agency claimed the Palma raid and released a photo of several dozen ISCAP fighters convening in what appeared to be a pre-combat meeting ([news24.com](#), March 29). However, street signs in the photo indicated the fighters were in Mocímboa da Praia, not Palma, and almost certainly at a date much earlier than the attack on Palma. The subsequent IS *al-Naba* weekly newsletter also included details on the ISCAP's latest assault ([Twitter/@unofficialmossad](#), April 2). However, it was generic and did not include any unique insider information about the raid. Further, IS released an Amaq video of ISCAP fighters after the attack. The video did not appear to be from the Palma incident, however ([news24.com](#), March 29). It was likely video footage from sometime before the raid, and IS was re-viving it to take advantage of the international media focus on the attack.

Considering that IS had not released any claims of ISCAP attacks since October 2020, until its claim of the Palma raid, and IS did not provide any clear proof of communications with ISCAP after the attack, there is reason to believe IS and ISCAP have broken their line of communications. This could have occurred either be-

cause key media leaders on either side, but more likely ISCAP's, have been killed and contacts were lost. Alternatively, ISCAP and IS may have strategically sought to reduce public evidence of their relationship to prevent greater international counter-terrorism pressure on the organization, especially after U.S. Green Berets were reportedly deployed to Mozambique and the U.S. designated ISCAP's Mozambique and Congo branch leaders as terrorists (dailymaverick.co.za, March 17). If the latter is correct, however, it would seem inconsistent that IS would claim the Palma raid, rather than allow it to occur, but remain silent. The IS claim only served to bolster the narrative that IS itself was behind the Palma raid and that international counter-terrorism forces would be justified to attack ISCAP on the grounds that it was operating on behalf of IS.

While the exact nature of IS' relationship with ISCAP's Mozambique branch can only be considered somewhat mysterious at this point, the same cannot be said of IS' relationship with ISCAP's Congo branch. IS has continued releasing evidence, such as photos, from the Congo branch's attacks, including in *al-Naba* weekly newsletter ([Twitter/@CalibreObscura](https://twitter.com/CalibreObscura), April 2). Clearly, no cut in communications between the Congo branch and IS has taken place.

ISCAP's Mozambique branch, or al-Shabaab or Ahl as-Sunna wal-Jamaa as it is locally known, is no less lethal and tactically effective as a result of the apparent communications break with IS. At the same time, Mozambique's army has proven to be woefully unprepared for combatting ISCAP, let alone protecting the Total LNG site, which has only facilitated the militant group's consistent conquests. The follow-up attack on the LNG site on April 2 further demonstrated the Mozambican army's complete unpreparedness and ISCAP's growing confidence (dailymaverick.co.za, April 2).

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

INDONESIAN FEMAL 'INGHIMASI' ATTACKER CONTINUES SOUTHEAST ASIAN JIHADIST TRENDS

Jacob Zenn

On March 31, a woman wearing black Islamic women's clothing entered the national police headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia and began shooting at police officers. After firing six shots, the police returned fire and killed her. Video clips of the back-and-forth gunfire were later featured on social media (jakartapost.com, March 31). It turned out that she had posted the image of an Islamic State (IS) flag on her Instagram account and left a will and Whatsapp messages for her family (straitstimes.com, March 31). She, therefore, fits the mold of an IS "inghimasi" (immersion by death) attacker, rather than a "suicide attacker."

This attacker, who was 25-years old, continues a relatively unique trend of IS-influenced Indonesian female attackers. Only several months earlier, in October 2020, the Philippines also arrested an Indonesian woman planning a suicide attack in the southern Philippines (abc.net.au, October 10, 2020). That arrest also came after two other women, including one Filipino and one Indonesian, conducted a double-suicide bombing at a Jolo, southern Philippines church that killed 14 people and was attributed to Abu Sayyaf (aljazeera.com, August 25). More recently, in February, the Philippines announced that it arrested nine women who were preparing to conduct suicide bombings. Moreover, three of them were daughters of an Abu Sayyaf leader, Hatib Hajan Sawadjaan, and two others were widows of an Abu Sayyaf member (inquirer.net, February 23).

Abu Sayyaf as an organization has largely dissolved and has become IS's Southeast Asian branch, and Sawadjaan himself is considered to be a leading IS representative in the Philippines. The trend of Indonesian and Filipino female suicide bombers also appears to be related to their being wives, or more specifically widows, or daughters of IS members and partaking in "family radicalization." This latter phenomenon also occurred in Surabaya, Indonesia in 2018 when a husband, wife, and four children in one family carried out attacks on churches and, ultimately, a suicide attack bombing with two other families, killing 12 other people. The children had been home-schooled in order to allow the parents to

influence them without any outside interference ([Jakarta Post](#), May 15, 2018).

Although IS in Syria and Iraq was hesitant to employ women in attacks, the group and its supporters have praised women attackers elsewhere, including in Mombasa, Kenya in 2018 and, most recently, in Jakarta at the national police headquarters ([africanews.com](#), September 11, 2016). This distinguishes IS “provinces”, or branches, abroad, from the “core,” but, as evidenced by the Jakarta attacker, there is a shared ideology. At the same time, the employment of widows and daughters in attacks does not necessarily indicate IS’ strength in Indonesia and the Philippines. After taking over the city of Marawi in the southern Philippines in 2017, there has been no similar revival by IS in the country, and the attempt by Santoso (known by only one name) to establish a formidable IS presence in Sulawesi, Indonesia was thwarted. Santoso was killed in 2018 ([jakartapost.com](#), December 29, 2016). Therefore, resorting to widows or daughters could indicate an overall lack of fighters to conduct attacks for these IS-loyal jihadist groups, which is also why there have been few attacks generally in Indonesia or the Philippines aside for sporadic incidents in recent years.

The latest attack in Jakarta, however, appears unique because the attacker is not reported to have had familial ties to any jihadists. She even left behind a note to her family requesting forgiveness for her actions and urging her relatives to pray, wear the hijab, and remember that God comes before anything else. In contrast to other female suicide bombers, who were part of “jihadist families,” this “inghimasi” attacker was instead mostly self-radicalized.

Jacob Zenn is the editor of Terrorism Monitor.

Islamic State’s Easter Sunday Attacks in Sri Lanka: Assessing the Government’s Response Two Years On

Animesh Roul

Two years ago, on April 21, 2019, eight suicide bombers affiliated with the Islamic State (IS)-linked local jihadist groups National Towheed Jamaat (NTJ) and Jammiyat-ul Millathu Ibrahim (JMI) carried out deadly terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka, targeting luxury hotels and Catholic churches. The synchronized attacks on that fateful Easter Sunday killed or injured over 750 people. Responsibility for the coordinated bombings was claimed by IS on April 23, 2019, through official news outlet Amaq News Agency, which released a video showing the attackers led by Zaharan Hasim, pledging allegiance to the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi ([Ada Derana](#), April 23, 2019).

Two years after this violence, the clamor for decisive action has risen across Sri Lanka. Amid growing dissent against delays in bringing the perpetrators to justice, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa assured the nation in this year’s Easter message that he would ensure national security and prevent a recurrence of such terrorism in the country ([Ceylon Today](#), April 3). The most vehement criticism against the government sluggishness has come from the Archbishop of Colombo and head of Sri Lanka’s Catholic church, Cardinal Malcolm Ranjith, who called for a ‘Black Sunday’ protest to express dissent against delays in implementing the Presidential Commission of Inquiry (PCoI)’s recommendations. ([Daily Mirror](#), March 8). The PCoI was appointed by former President Maithripala Sirisena on September 22, 2019 to investigate the Easter Sunday attacks and empowered the Commission to recommend necessary actions.

The political and religious tensions escalated amid the government’s inability to take decisive action against the groups and individuals named in the PCoI report submitted to the President on February 1, 2021. The PCoI, which was headed by a Supreme Court judge and included five other members, operated for 18 months,

and recording the statements of 457 witnesses. The final report that was submitted comprised 472 pages, 215 attachments, and six volumes ([Daily News](#), February 2). Through its investigations into the Easter Sunday violence, the Sri Lankan police have identified nearly 290 suspects.

Easter Sunday Attack Findings and Faultlines

After reviewing the PCOI report, the Minister of Public Security, Sarath Weerasekara, on April 6, 2021 stated that Muhammed Naufer (a.k.a. Naufer Moulavi), who is in custody, was the mastermind of the Easter Sunday Attacks. His co-conspirator was named as Hajj-ul Akbar ([Daily News](#), April 06). [1] Although the PCOI's report has not been made public, select details have been mentioned in the media through official statements and press releases ([President Office](#) [Sri Lanka], March 7). While emphasizing the lack of government prioritization of terrorism and national security issues, the Commission's report stated there were hundreds of IS supporters in Sri Lanka. The Commission found that Zahran Hashim had volunteered to lead the suicide mission at a meeting on March 27, 2019, at Panadura in Kalutara District of Sri Lanka's Western Province.

During its investigations, the Commission also found that Zahran Hashim took inspiration from the leader of IS in Bangladesh, which is locally known as Neo-Jamaat ul-Mujahideen (Neo-JMB), Tamim Ahmed Chowdhury (a.k.a. Abu Dujana al-Bengali). Chowdhury was the mastermind of the July 2016 Holey Artisan Café violence in Dhaka ([Daily Star](#), November 28, 2016).

Zahran Hashim, along with his two brothers, Rilwan Hashim and Zainee Hashim, Ibrahim Ilham, Muhammadu Hasthun, Ahmed Muath, Naufer Maulavi, Ahmed Milhan and several others, were directly linked to terrorist activities. Their group held several training camps and seminars between November 2017 and December 2018. The first one was in Thoppur in Trincomalee of Eastern Province, whereas the last one was at Hingula in Mawanella of Sabaragamuwa Province ([Ceylon Today](#), March 23).

Following the April 2019 attacks, the Sri Lankan government had admitted its failure to act on multiple warnings from international intelligence agencies, such as India and the United States. However, the blame game

reached a new low with the PCOI report's findings, which named several officials for criminal negligence. The whole discourse on the Easter Sunday jihadist conspiracy has shifted from targeting existing extremist networks that espouse jihadist ideals to settling political vendettas and encouraging polarization. The shift is apparent with the growing demand for criminal proceedings against political figures, such as former President Maithripala Sirisena, former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and several senior police and intelligence officials, such as former Police Chief Pujith Jayasundera, and former Chief of National Intelligence Sisira Mendia. It is alleged that they were negligent and intentionally overlooked the impending threat of Islamist extremism in the country ([Colombo Page](#), October 15, 2020; [News First](#), February 23).

Instead of taking direct counter-terrorism measures to bring the culprits to justice or initiating a crackdown on Islamist ideologies and networks across the country identified as responsible for the attacks (e.g. Wahhabist and Thowheed groups, IS-inspired groups and individuals, and Sri Lanka Jamaat-e-Islami and its Student Movement, among others), the present government in Sri Lanka is being criticized for making plans to rehabilitate and reintegrate violent extremist elements into society, under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). [2] The government has also faced flak for its proposed "anti-Muslim measures," such as banning the Islamic face veil (burqa) and the closure of over 1,000 Islamic madrasas (seminaries) on the grounds of national security. However, the Rajapaksa administration has asserted that it would implement these measures soon after holding consultations with Muslim groups and leaders and reaching a consensus ([The Hindu](#) March 13; [The Morning](#), March 17).

Islamic State's Persistent Interest in Sri Lanka

While the wounds of the April 2019 Easter Sunday violence are still fresh in Sri Lankans' minds, police have only arrested several individuals linked with transnational jihadist groups in the intervening months. Most recently, the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID) apprehended two individuals from Matale and Kattankudy for allegedly promoting extremist ideologies on social media, fundraising for extremist activities, and justifying the

2019 Easter Sunday violence. One of them is a close associate of Zahran Hashim, and another had been recently deported from the United Arab Emirates ([Daily News](#), March 26).

IS-linked magazines, such as *Sawt al-Hind* (Voice of Hind), meanwhile, regularly cite the Sri Lanka attacks to attract foot soldiers and incite violence in the region. In Issue 4 of the magazine, for example, IS boasted about how Sri Lankan militants “have ignited the flames of jihad by inflicting the carnage upon the Crusaders” ([Sawt al-Hind](#), No.4, May 2020). The IS media releases often portray the Sri Lankan violence as revenge for the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque violence of March 15, 2019. The magazine’s April 2020 issue (No.3) used similar language of “revenge against Crusaders” and directly linked Easter Sunday violence to the New Zealand attack by saying, “when the Crusaders attacked the Masjid (Mosque) in New Zealand nobody would have thought its retaliation would come from Sri Lanka” ([Sawt al-Hind](#), No. 3, April 2020).

Although the Sri Lankan government has been sluggish in its approach to dealing with jihadist terrorism, it has promised to take legal action against the perpetrators of the 2019 Easter Sunday carnage. The country’s court will determine the nature of punishments according to the local laws. However, the persisting threat from extremists linked with IS in Sri Lanka can be discerned from the fact that there are hundreds of such elements and networks who were involved in the April 2019 Easter bombings that have not yet been fully identified or neutralized. Perhaps even worse, jihadist propaganda units are still harnessing the coordinated Easter Sunday violence to their advantage.

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Notes

[1] For a detailed profile of Naufar Maulvi’s role in the Easter Sunday violence, see: Animesh Roul, “Mentor, Provocateur or Mastermind? Understanding Naufar Moulavi’s Role in Sri Lanka’s Easter Sunday Attack,” *Militant Leadership Monitor*, Vol. 12 (1), January 2021.

[2] See: Prevention of Terrorism (De-radicalization from holding violent extremist religious ideology) Regulations No. 01 of 2021, Colombo, March 9, 2021. http://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2021/3/2218-68_E.pdf

Target Maiduguri: How Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP)'s Ramadan Offensive Will Counter Operation Tura Takai Bango

Jacob Zenn

The start of 2021 was marked by Nigerian military offensives against Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jamaat Ahl al-Sunna li-Dawa wal-Jihad (JASDJ), which are collectively known as “Boko Haram.” The military offensives codenamed Operation Tura Takai Bango were launched on January 3 and were intended to be “theater-wide,” but with an emphasis on preventing ISWAP from erecting checkpoints on the road from Yobe State’s capital, Damatru, to Borno State’s capital, Maiduguri, where ISWAP consistently abducted and stole from passengers (sunnewsonline.com, January 15). ISWAP was already threatening to cut Maiduguri off from the rest of Borno through roadway ambushes. However, obstructing the Damatru-Maiduguri roadway was additionally strategic for ISWAP because it would essentially cut Borno itself off from the rest of Nigeria.

One flashpoint to emerge from Operation Tura Takai Bango was Alagarno Forest, which straddles areas from Damboa in southwest Borno toward Goniri in eastern Yobe. Goniri is also located just south of the Damatru-Maiduguri roadway. Early in Operation Tura Takai Bango, on January 6, the Nigerian military reported it “took out” a compound hosting “high-profile” ISWAP leaders in Damboa. At the same time, it also “inflicted heavy casualties” in other air strikes on JASDJ hideouts in Sambisa Forest, which is near Borno’s eastern border with Cameroon (guardian.ng, January 15). However, as is typical in any state-insurgent information war, ISWAP released its own claims backed by photographic and video evidence of counter-attacks against the Nigerian military in and around Alagarno Forest, especially Gorgi, Goniri, and Kafa, including:

- January 18 photos in Gorgi, with two ISWAP fighters wearing black uniforms and standing on top an

armed personnel carrier (APC) in distinct Islamic State choreographic style;

- January 21 photos in Kafa and Gorgi, with an ISWAP fighter on top of a destroyed APC and a child soldier beside another APC;
- February 7 photos in Goniri and Gorgi showing several Nigerian soldiers killed, destroyed vehicles and equipment for constructing a military post, and a captured APC and weapons stash;
- February 12 photos in Kafa and Gorgi, with several Nigerian soldiers killed and fire set to Nigerian military vehicles, which were also seen in February 10 video footage released by IS of those same attacks;
- A February 22 video in Goniri, with a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) attack on Nigerian troops;
- March 12 photos in Goniri and Gorgi, showing several Nigerian soldiers killed and captured APCs and other military vehicles and weapons stashes;
- March 14 photos in Alagarno, with an ISWAP fighter wearing a Nigerian army uniform showing a captured Nigerian soldier whose legs were lost in an improvised explosion device (IED) explosion. Other destroyed APCs were also shown, including one with an ISWAP fighter standing on top of it; and
- March 21 photos in Goniri, with two military vehicles captured and a local church set on fire. [1]

Amid these attacks around Alagarno Forest, an article in IS’ weekly *al-Naba* newsletter on March 11 was published and attributed to a commander of ISWAP’s “Faruq division.” Faruq is a term which the group has long used to refer to the Yobe-Borno border (al-Naba, March 11). The ISWAP commander asserted that the group conducted 30 bombings and destroyed 37 military vehicles in Kafa alone and killed or wounded 200 soldiers overall. The result, according to the commander, was that the Nigerian army’s attempt to build a road between Damboa and Goniri to become a military supply line was thwarted, soldiers became confined to their posts for fear of entering ISWAP’s “minefield,” and ISWAP launched counter-attacks into areas, such as Askira, outside the main battle zone, where the Nigerian

army had not expected them. Indeed, ISWAP released a video on February 12 showing several dozen fighters in captured military vehicles and an APC entering Askira and maneuvering through the town. [2] It has also been through Askira that ISWAP's Alagarno Forest-based fighters have attacked as far south as Adamawa State, where the fighters have destroyed churches (punch.ng, February 23, 2020).

ISWAP also killed around 70 Nigerian soldiers in Goniri in March 2020, which, as usual, the group photographed and video-recorded and later released through IS media channels (thecable.ng, March 24, 2020). The Goniri attack preceded a Nigerian military offensive in the areas around Alagarno Forest. However, as evidenced by ISWAP's continued attacks in recent weeks, the offensive did not have a lasting effect.

At that same time in March 2020, Chad launched an offensive around Lake Chad, which was in response to a local JASDJ faction, referred to as the Bakura faction attack that killed 92 Chadian soldiers (africanews.com, March 25, 2020). The Chadian offensive was largely successful in reducing the Bakura faction's threat, as no similar repeat of JASDJ attacks have occurred in Chad since then. The Chadian offensive did not differentiate between JASDJ and its ISWAP rivals and also targeted ISWAP bases, at least on the Chadian side of Lake Chad, and reduced, but did not eliminate, the ISWAP threat in Chad (Terrorism Monitor, May 1, 2020).

After the series of ISWAP attacks around in Alagarno Forest in March, clashes have since abated, indicating Operation Tura Takai Bango's incursion has been mostly halted and resulted in at least a stalemate. However, ISWAP's Lake Chad-based fighters have since been escalating attacks around Lake Chad in Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, while the Alagarno Forest-based fighters regroup. ISWAP's claimed attacks around Lake Chad have been on:

- March 24 between Bosso, Niger and Mallam Fatori, Nigeria, injuring and killing several soldiers;
- March 24 in Baragarom, Chad;
- March 29 in Dabanga, Cameroon;
- April 2 between Bosso, Niger and Mallam Fatori, Nigeria, killing six soldiers in an IED attack;

- April 2 in Maine-Soroa, killing Nigerien soldiers and destroying an APC with an IED;
- April 2 in Gagamari, pilfering Nigerien military supplies;
- April 4 in Diffa, killing five Nigerien soldiers;
- April 4 in Soueram, killing five Cameroonian soldiers; and
- April 4 in N'gagam, killing five Nigerien soldiers, capturing six military vehicles, and detonating an IED, some of which were revealed in an ISWAP photo release ([Twitter.com/TomaszRolbiecki](https://twitter.com/TomaszRolbiecki), April 2021).

ISWAP has also increased operations around Maiduguri, having cut off electricity to the city (Agence France-Presse, March 25). JASDJ, for its part, has also assaulted Maiduguri, albeit not necessarily in coordination with ISWAP and coming from the direction of Sambisa Forest, to the city's south (Telegram, February 25). With Ramadan beginning on April 13, ISWAP maybe planning a new offensive on Maiduguri, while the attacks around the Lake are intended to keep those three countries' armies busy. This may also deter those three armies from supporting Nigeria in case ISWAP's "Ramadan Offensive" succeeds and the organization begins to seriously threaten Maiduguri or capture new territories elsewhere in Borno. Such an operation would serve as a warning that if Chad and Niger support Nigeria, ISWAP is still more than capable of making them pay a price.

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Notes:

[1] These photos can be seen on the author's personal website unmaskingbokoharam.com: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/08/06/iswap-photostreams-2015-onwards/>

[2] The video can be seen on the author's personal website unmaskingbokoharam.com: <https://unmaskingbokoharam.com/2019/04/11/iswap-amaq-video-of-liquidation-of-supporters-of-nigeria-april-2-2019/>

The Arakan Dream: The Search for Peace in Myanmar's Rakhine State on the Verge of Civil War

Jack Broome

On March 23, the Arakan Army (AA)—an ethnic armed organization (EAO) based largely in Myanmar's Rakhine State—finally released a statement condemning the military's seizure of power in the February 1 coup. AA spokesperson, Khine Thu Kha, said that the AA was “together...with the people” and would “continue to go forward for the oppressed Rakhine people” ([Dhaka Star](#), March 23).

Up until this point, the AA had held back from issuing any kind of response to the coup, despite an increasing number of EAOs having already declared their support for the civil disobedience movement (CDM). Some groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which is one of the AA's alliance partners, have even begun to carry out attacks against the military in retaliation ([Kachin News](#), March 12). Similarly, when the State Administrative Council (SAC), Myanmar's new military government, announced on March 10 that it had removed the AA from the list of terrorist organizations, the rebel group made no formal acknowledgement of the move ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 11).

What explains the AA's initial silence, and more importantly, its sudden decision to speak out against the coup? The answer to both these questions lies in the AA's struggle to achieve self-determination for ethnic Rakhine and the restoration of an “Arakan” state, something which the AA commander-in chief, General Twan Myat Naing, previously termed “Arakan Dream 2020” ([Development Media Group](#), December 14, 2019; [BNI Multimedia Group](#), June 4, 2019).

Arakan Dream 2020

In early 2019, the conflict between the AA and the Tatmadaw, as Myanmar's military is known, reached a new level of intensity following a coordinated series of attacks by hundreds of AA soldiers on military border outposts ([The Irrawaddy](#), January 4, 2019). Aside from be-

ing a way to mark the tenth anniversary of the group's formation, it also signaled a new chapter in the AA's “Way of Rakhita” campaign, which seeks to ignite an Arakan nationalist movement by drawing on sentiments associated with the historical Kingdom of Mrauk-U ([Asia Times](#), February 28, 2019). For over 350 years, the once-powerful Arakan kingdom ruled over much of what is now modern-day Rakhine State, as well as parts of Chittagong Division in neighboring Bangladesh, until its conquest in 1785 by the Burmese.

In preparation for the realization of its “Arakan Dream 2020,” in December 2019 the AA announced the formation of the Rakhine People's Authority—a proto-state which would be used to levy taxes on businesses to fund the rebel army's operations and that of its political wing, the United League of Arakan ([Radio Free Asia](#), July 20, 2020). During the first few months of 2020, the AA focused its attention on establishing control over the ancient city of Mrauk-U, which was the capital of the Kingdom of Mrauk-U. In late March, the climax of a battle that had been raging for 40 days occurred when a force of over 3,000 AA soldiers attempted to take a strategic hilltop overlooking the Kaladan River on the border between Rakhine and Chin states and were only repelled after a joint counter-offensive involving the army, navy and air force ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 25, 2020).

It was around this time that the previous government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), first declared the AA a terrorist organization ([Myanmar Times](#), March 23, 2020). The degree of influence the Tatmadaw had over the decision remains unclear. However, a military spokesperson was quick to make a statement confirming the military's support for the designation, while remarking that the AA now had “very little chance of participating in the peace process” ([Radio Free Asia](#), March 26, 2020).

The military further pressed this point when in May 2020, in response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it announced a nearly four-month-long ceasefire covering the entire country, with the exception of areas in which the AA operates ([Myanmar Times](#), May 9, 2020). When the Brotherhood Alliance, which includes the AA, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MN-DAA), proposed its own ceasefire in June 2020, the military proved equally uncompromising ([Radio Free Asia](#), June 2, 2020). And when the date for the “Union Peace

Conference - 21st Century Panglong,” in which the military plays a central role, came round in August 2020, the government declared that the AA would not be invited ([The Irrawaddy](#), August 6, 2020).

Despite both the Tatmadaw and the NLD clearly having little appetite for engagement, the AA made repeated attempts to force negotiations on the exchange of captured combatants and the release of political prisoners. For instance, in September 2020, a video was released by AA showing three soldiers it was holding captive, and then in October the AA confirmed that it had abducted three NLD election candidates ([Radio Free Asia](#), September 23, 2020; [The Irrawaddy](#), October 20, 2020).

With political channels clearly cut-off, the AA continued to mount attacks against the military. This pressure was sustained right up until the election on November 8, 2020, with particularly fierce clashes occurring around Rathedaung Township, which is close to Sittwe, the Rakhine state capital, and quite some distance from the AA's stronghold in Northern Rakhine on the border with Chin State ([The Irrawaddy](#), October 7, 2020). Given the extent of the fighting, the Union Election Commission (UEC) decided to suspend polling in areas affected by unrest and conflict. This, however, included most of Northern Rakhine and caused anger among the approximately 200,000 people—73 percent of Rakhine's registered voters—that were denied the right to vote ([Frontier Myanmar](#), October 28, 2020).

A Fragile Peace

The day after the election, as it became clear that the NLD had won by an even larger margin than in 2015, and ethnic parties had performed much worse than expected, the Tatmadaw announced the formation of a new peace talks committee. Interestingly, the committee was not only intended for negotiations with signatories of the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), but non-signatories too, which caught the attention of the AA ([Radio Free Asia](#), November 10, 2020).

On November 12, the AA made a request to authorities for by-elections to be held by December 3 for the areas in which voting was previously suspended ([Radio Free Asia](#), November 10, 2020). When the military responded positively, an informal truce was established, which then paved the way for online discussions on November 25 ([The Irrawaddy](#), November 16, 2020; [Myanmar Now](#),

December 3, 2020). This eventually led to a face-to-face meeting on December 10 at the headquarters of the United Wa State Army (UWSA) in the self-administered Wa region in Shan State to discuss a formal ceasefire agreement ([Myanmar Times](#), December 22, 2020). The meeting was said to have gone well and further talks were planned, until the military deposed the elected government on February 1.

Although initially hesitant, in the proceeding days and weeks, an increasing number of EAOs released statements condemning the coup. But while the AA sought to maintain an air of ambiguity publicly, it continued to quietly communicate with the military. On the same day as the SAC's announcement of the AA's removal from the list of terrorist organizations, it was reported that the AA and the Tatmadaw were negotiating over the clearance of landmines ([Development Media Group](#), March 10). The subject was first broached in January 2021, when the two sides were set to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the deployment of troops in Rakhine State, and therefore seemed to suggest that negotiations were continuing from where they had left off prior to the coup ([BNI Multimedia Group](#), January 19).

It is notable that despite the relative success it was having in achieving its goals militarily, the AA has consistently shown an interest in a political settlement, as can be seen by its repeated attempts to initiate talks on prisoner exchanges. The difference before the coup was that, as the NLD refused to engage with the AA, there was a limit to what the Tatmadaw could offer beyond a ceasefire, which meant it had little option but to support the NLD's hostile stance. Interestingly just before the coup, as a gesture of goodwill, the AA released the three NLD members it had captured in October 2020 ([Myanmar Times](#), January 4, 2021). While this prompted Major General Zaw Min Tun to say he was “optimistic about the future of the negotiations,” the NLD's only response was to reject the AA's calls to reciprocate the move ([Myanmar Times](#), January 4, 2021).

In this context, it is understandable why, in the immediate aftermath of the coup, the AA was unwilling to declare support for the civil disobedience movement (CDM) and a return to the status quo under the previous NLD government. Instead, the AA was presumably hoping to take advantage of the Tatmadaw's new approach

to the peace process, as well as the SAC's need for support, to push for a federal solution in Rakhine.

Mounting Opposition in Rakhine

Any chance for a political settlement was quickly dispelled though, when on March 23, the AA finally joined other EAOs in condemning the coup and the military's crackdown against protesters. The most likely explanation for this can be found in the mounting opposition to the reality of the coup in Rakhine State. Initially, while protests were raging in other parts of the country, in northern Rakhine there were none. Residents of the war-torn region either cited fear, ambivalence, or in some cases, support for the new regime as their reason for not taking to the streets ([Radio Free Asia](#), February 24). However, in southern Rakhine, protests soon gathered pace and have continued to grow ([The Irrawaddy](#), February 10). In the refugee camps across the border in Bangladesh, Rohingya have also made sure to voice their opposition to coup ([Benar News](#), March 5; [South-east Asia Globe](#), February 2).

While it is tempting to dismiss the possibility of the AA being influenced by Rohingya attitudes towards the coup, the AA has recognized that its vision for an Arakan State necessarily includes the Rohingya. Prior to the coup there were emerging signs of a possible path to reconciliation between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya and since the military takeover sympathy towards the plight of ethnic minorities has increased in general ([Rohingya Today](#), January 18, 2021; [The Straits Times](#), March 29, 2021).

Meanwhile, the Arakan National Party (ANP), which was given a seat on the SAC, has been facing rising dissent. The ANP's decision to join the military junta government was not well supported from the start, with opposition reaching as high as the party's Central Executive Committee. The tipping-point proved to be the approval of a meeting with the regime's newly-formed Union Election Commission (UEC), which resulted in a number of the party's lawmakers resigning en masse and joining the Arakan Front Party (AFP).

On February 9, 47 Rakhine-based civil society organizations (CSOs) jointly called on the ANP to step down from the SAC ([The Irrawaddy](#), February 9). Then, on March 21, another statement was released, this time by 77 CSOs, denouncing the military government and de-

manding the release of detained protesters. In the statement, 11 Arakan student unions, also condemned any attempt to seek gains via cooperation with the SAC as "abhorrent" ([BNI Multimedia Group](#), March 24).

The ANP has since begun backtracking from its decision to join the SAC and appears to be laying ground for an off-ramp. First, ANP spokesperson U Pe Than stated the party may leave the SAC if the government fails to meet its seven-point list of demands. These include the appointment of the ANP's candidate for Chair of the Rakhine State Administration Council, provision of assistance to internally displaced people (IDPs), and reconstruction of houses looted during the war in Rakhine ([BNI Multimedia Group](#), March 17). With such an uncompromising list of demands, the ANP only appears to be setting the SAC up for failure.

Most recently, the ANP expressed concern over the SAC's violent crackdown against "innocent citizens protesting freely for democracy" and reaffirmed its commitment to "working with any organization that recognizes and values the interests of the Arakanese people in order to have the right to self-determination and self-administration" ([BNI Multimedia Group](#), March 25, 2021).

Pressure from the Arakan Army's Alliance Partners

On February 17, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), which is a fellow member of the Northern Alliance along with the AA, came forward to denounce the coup after people in Kachin State had begun to question its silence ([The Diplomat](#), February 11, 2021). Although relations between the AA and the KIA are said to have deteriorated in recent years, the KIA is still able to exert influence over the AA, not only due to its status as one of Myanmar's largest EAOs, but also because the AA was founded with assistance from the KIA and continues to benefit from training, ammunition and food supplies from the KIA, as well use the KIA's headquarters as its own ([The Irrawaddy](#), March 25, 2020). Importantly, the KIA became the first EAO to take military action against the Tatmadaw in response to violence committed against unarmed civilians when it destroyed a Tatmadaw camp on March 11 ([Kachin News](#), March 12). The KIA has since conducted several follow-up attacks against both the military and the police ([Myanmar Now](#), March 13; [Myanmar Now](#), March 28; [BNI Multimedia Group](#), March 29).

In a similar fashion to the AA, the MNDAA and the TNLA, also members of the Northern Alliance, chose not make any sort of statement on the coup at first, albeit with the exception of a photograph in which TNLA generals displayed the 3-finger salute associated with anti-government protesters ([Twitter.com/MattWalsh](https://twitter.com/MattWalsh), February 10). The MNDAA was involved in a clash with Tatmadaw soldiers travelling with authorities from the Kokang Self-Administered Zone on February 5 ([Twitter.com/MattyWalsh](https://twitter.com/MattyWalsh), February 6). However, it is unclear whether this was motivated by the coup.

This changed on March 30 when the AA, MNDAA and the TNLA released a joint statement under the Brotherhood Alliance calling on the military to immediately stop "the violent shootings and killings of peacefully protesting citizens" and move "quickly to resolve the political problems" ([Twitter.com/NimrodAndrew](https://twitter.com/NimrodAndrew), March 30). The Brotherhood also threatened to support ethnic peoples fighting in the 'Spring Revolution' if the military failed to comply.

Perhaps sensing its vulnerability, two days later the military declared a nationwide 30-day ceasefire in order to further the peace process with the EAOs and peacefully celebrate the Buddhist festival of Thingyan from April 13-16, which culminates on Lunar New Year Day ([Anadolu Agency](https://www.anadoluagency.com), April 1). The AA was not included in the military's previous nationwide ceasefires due to its designation as a terrorist organization, and seeing as the current truce between the two sides has yet to be formalized, it will be interesting to see how the AA reacts. It is clear though that, for now, the people in Rakhine will not support a path to an Arakan State if it entails cooperation with the military.

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