

Center for Arakan Studies (CAS)

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Key Remarks

- ❖ The Arakan/Rakhine's political climate in January, 2023 showed the signs and calamity of the post-conflict period. The two parties, such as the ULA and junta authorities, attempted to extract the political profits as far as possible on account of the ceasefire. Yet, Rakhine electoral political parties are not on the united ground for the coming election. And the ULA/AA, a kingmaker of the state, remains silent on the question of election.
- ❖ The relaxation of trade and transportation in the post-conflict scenario brought some progress and hope for the local business community, especially in the areas of border trade with Bangladesh. However, as the negative consequences of the political instability and economic hardship affected the livelihoods of the local population in Rakhine, the amount of emigration, especially leaving foreign countries like Thailand and Malaysia, is still a significant symptom of harsh economic conditions in Rakhine.
- ❖ Although the temporary truce is in place, the threat of landmine danger toward rural community security remains active. The local news expressed the explosion of the mine and, consequently, killing some local residents, including the youths and students. Next, the Rohingya students studying at the universities in urban Sittwe areas also still face educational discrimination when it comes to the right to choice of subjects and degrees.
- ❖ In the humanitarian sector, the current ceasefire brought some degree of openness and hope for both humanitarian agencies and the IDP. Yet, the liberalization of the restrictions by the junta authorities is still limited, meaning that the INGO/NGO communities cannot still freely perform their activities, especially for the IDP camps in the rural areas (possibly under the ULA control). This issue still shows a sign of the district and state of the current ceasefire in Rakhine State. Humanitarian preparation for the return of another war is critical.

1. Arakan Politics at the Move

In the first month of 2023, the political news in Rakhine-based media coverage is mostly occupied by the situations related to the current ceasefire, election, local administration, political demands and freedom, the assassination of the ALP commander in chief and members, and junta leaders' visit to the beach town of Ngapali in Rakhine State.

Starting with the news related to the ceasefire introduced just in late November 2022, the junta authority announced their unilateral ceasefire nationwide especially intended for the ethnic armed groups, on January 1, 2023. But, political analysts saw the move as unrealistic because the announcement excluded the PDF forces while the military reinforcement continued in many areas. On the other hand, the ULA/AA and junta engaged at least two times in prisoner exchange on January 5 and 16, respectively. But, the two groups [were also about to break out in unexpected armed clashes](#) at the entrance gate of Maungdaw town, the northernmost township of Rakhine State.

When it comes to the election news, it was visibly covered that the junta authority has conducted the process of population census as a step for the preparation of the coming election designated in August. But, the local people lack confidence in the process and credibility of the election under the regime. On the other hand, the chief of the Arakan Front Party (AFP) confirmed their political will to participate in the coming election as a part of a political solution to the current crisis. Other political parties like ALD and ANP are in a mixed situation where the more pro-democracy ALD expressed their strong distrust and boycotted the election. On January 24, the junta Chief said [they were going to hold a free and fair election](#) as far as possible.

Next, much of the other political news was concerned with the state of political demand and restrictions on political freedom within the region. Only a handful of political prisoners were released by the junta. Still, many local residents and family members demanded the release and postponement for others due to the current ceasefire, especially for those arrested on account of having links with the AA/ULA. Next, the prison term of the former NLD-appointed Rakhine chief minister was reduced by the junta authority. Still, an activist from Thandwe who participated in the anti-military coup movement was [punished by severe imprisonment](#) on January 14.

Besides, the political assassination of the ALP chief and members took place on January 4, and the ULA/AA was accused of the crime but denied it. Consequently, on January 7, the ALP troops, in collaboration with the junta forces, staged a search operation in Sittwe township. Next, in the local administration, the administrators retook the office at the request of the ULA, and it was also welcomed by the junta. But, [around 20 village administrators wanted to discontinue](#) the duty, the news said on January 11. The rest of the news related to Arakan politics was covered by the visit of the junta chief, the clash of two Rohingya armed groups, the pro-junta protest and the meeting of the ULA secretary with the CDM medical family.

2. Relaxing Economic Livelihoods

The first month of the new year 2023 seems to be resuming economic activities to some extent after the lifting up of travel restrictions in the previous month. The trade sector is the most prominent among these issues. For the first time since 2012, salt produced locally in Rakhine State will be exported to Bangladesh this year, said to the Arakan State Salt Farmers Association. The locals working in that sector are excited by this news, saying that “If the government allows the direct export of salt to the Bangladesh market, the people of Arakan will also benefit,” U Maung Tun Win, a local salt farmer from Shwenyoma Village, Kyaukphyu Township, [told Narinjara](#) in January 11.

Moreover, 2,500 tons in a total of rice from the Rakhine State were exported to Bangladesh on January 9, according to the junta-controlled Myanmar Alinn newspaper. A farmer from Pyaungseik Village said that since rice can be directly exported from Arakan State to Bangladesh, it is a sign of good prices for [rice products](#). However, the farmers need to expand the cultivation of the summer paddy in order to cover the trade surplus and domestic food security. Still, it requires the technical and financial support of government agencies. A local farmer from Purein Village in Mrauk-U Township [pointed out](#) that “Farmers always need electricity when they grow summer paddy with a river water pumping system. Now that we don’t have regular electricity, farmers are having trouble growing summer paddy”.

In regard to the special economic project, Sittwe Port, invested by the Indian government in the designation of the international port, is said to be ready to launch. Still, the exact date of the opening ceremony has not yet been determined, according to the social media post on U Hla Thein, Rakhine State Government spokesperson. Furthermore, through the Myanmar-China natural gas pipeline in the Shwe Natural gas project in Rakhine offshore, the military council [exported and sold US\\$1.43 billion worth](#) of natural gas from Rakhine to China in 2022.

In contrast to those, the coup’s triggered exodus has been the prevailing biggest issue. The Chairman of the Arakan National Network recorded the highest number of people from the state going abroad in 2022 due to instability, war and scarcity of jobs. Both the men and women population constituted the migrant population. Data from the passport office said that the number of women leaving Arakan State is higher than men. But, [other sources said](#) women migration could be more than what the office has counted. In addition to it, a large number of youths living in IDP camps also choose to go abroad while they barely live in the camp under limited assistance and jobs. The key targeted places for these migrants are Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and China, and arrests, disappearances, and even death are [not uncommon for those illegal migrants](#). Those illegal migrants are more likely to be the victims of human trafficking. However, the official complaints received by the Anti-Trafficking Task Force are relatively low, accounting for one complaint within 2022, [said](#) Police Major Myo Lwin.

Despite the legal relaxation by the junta authority, there are still some difficulties in transporting medicines along the road. Some military checkpoints are [demanding money](#) from motorists and extorting money from motorists by delaying their time. Moreover, it has been [reported](#) that money is being forcefully collected from businessmen in Ponnagyun township to purchase medicine for the junta military mobile medical team. Similarly, the municipality, police and fire brigade seized petrol from the small bakery and betel shops selling petrol in [Bu May Ward in Sittwe](#) and in Maungdaw; the municipal representatives are charging much more than the [regular tax to the vendors](#) in the market. Furthermore, the junta officials and administrators in Tauggup township are working cooperatively [with the gambling rounds](#) by collecting money.

3. Challenging Social Security

Regarding social affairs, the conflicted townships of Minbya, Mrauk-U, and Buthidaung are still in a state of community insecurity, especially due to the threat of mine explosion. In one month, two men died due to mine encounters, and one man was seriously injured in these townships. According to the Narinjara News Agency, 71 civilians died, and 150 were injured due to the landmine explosions across Rakhine State from the start of the armed clashes in 2018 till the end of the previous year, 2022.

Moreover, it is reported that more than two thousand people were suffering from dengue fever in Rakhine State in 2022, said Dr Zaw Zaw Aung, Deputy Health Director. That number has increased almost five times compared to that in 2021, according to [the list of the State Public Health Department](#). Related to Covid-19 news, more than 66 per cent of students at basic education schools in Rakhine State have received booster doses of the Covid-19 vaccination, according to [data from the State education office](#).

Under the topic of education, prominent news could be found related to Sittwe University. The Rohingya students [are still not allowed to choose](#) their preferred majors and attend the master's degree at the Technological University (Sittwe). In secondary education, the Sittwe Township Basic Education Students' Union, the first in Rakhine State, was formed on 2nd July last year and has asked for official recognition by authorities. The formation [is not much welcomed](#) by the teacher community though the students seem quite decisive about their rights.

Referencing the news on 31st January, the Department of Rural Development [disclosed](#) that buildings would be delivered free of charge to the villagers in Zawmadat and Myitnar villages in Sittwe, affected by natural disasters, and the poor people will be in priority. As for environmental conservation, an international level Ramsar wetland in the Mayu Delta, Nantha island, becomes a concern for marine life and rare bird species. "Currently, rare bird species and sea turtles that visit the island for the winter are dying every day due to bird hunting and netting in the Nantha Island area. There are also losses of coral reefs and island areas due to heavy machinery ships and sand mining," [said](#) Ko Yan Naung Soe, president of Rakhine State Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association.

4. Humanitarian State After the Ceasefire

According to the UNOCHA, in the second week of January, transportation of goods and freedom of movement for the civilian population were restored along the main roads and rivers in the state. However, the road from the town of Rathedaung to Ponnagyun townships is still closed, and checkpoints from both sides remain in place. The delivery of food, nutrition, health, protection, education, WASH and other humanitarian assistance to affected and displaced people have also gradually been resumed with the certificate of TA (Travel Allowance). However, access to eight restricted townships is only available for the urban areas, and the INGOs [are not allowed](#) to visit rural areas.

In the second week, the UNHCR and partner organisations [are able to resume humanitarian assistance programs](#) in the northern part of the state. However, there are still various limitations for the local NGOs, allowing only two weeks per TA and assistance for only healthcare services. In Myebon and Pauktaw townships, the World Food Programme (WFP), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Save the Children and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) have been providing support to the Rohingya Camps. Still, [their reach is limited](#) by what the regime is willing to allow.

According to a survey of 58 local CSOs, 17.6 million people in Myanmar are in need of livelihood assistance, better access to food and greater security, said in the January 15 UNOCHA (Myanmar) statement. Among them, 1.7 million people from Arakan [are in need of livelihood and education support](#). In addition, more than 200 displaced children from Myeikwa village in Paletwa Township, Chin State, who are taking refuge in Mizoram state, India, are also being deprived of their right to education, according to aid workers. “I have sold my gold jewellery to continue my children’s education. Some children drop out of school to help their parents,” [said](#) Daw Cho Oo May, the mother of an IDP student.

Furthermore, more than 600 IDPs who returned home at the arrangement of the military council (Rakhine State) after an informal ceasefire on humanitarian grounds in late November are reportedly facing livelihood hardships. The returnees are [about 200 IDPs from Dar Let Chaung Village tract](#) in Ann Township and over 400 IDPs from Abaung Thar Village in Chin State’s Paletwa Township. The same goes [for more than 20 displacement camps](#) in Sittwe, forcibly returned to their homes by the junta.