

# Rakhine's Changing Political Order and the Future of Rohingya Citizenship

## Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the evolving political landscape in Rakhine State following the 2021 military coup and the consolidation of de facto authority by the Arakan Army (AA). While the emergence of a new substate governance system has reshaped power relations in the region, it has not resolved Rohingya statelessness. Instead, it has generated new and compounded vulnerabilities linked to legal exclusion, identity denial, and constrained political participation, alongside the persistence and in some areas intensification of long-standing discriminatory practices. In practice, these dynamics translate into severe barriers to legal personhood, restrictions on mobility, coercive taxation, and escalating violence driven by both the State Administration Council (SAC) and the Arakan Army (AA). Although limited political openings have emerged, particularly through village level committees and newly formed Rohingya representative bodies, these spaces remain fragile and uneven and are shaped largely by strategic and security considerations rather than a substantive commitment to inclusive governance. This brief analyses the implications of these dynamics for Rohingya citizenship and outlines urgent policy considerations for external governments and humanitarian actors operating within Myanmar's rapidly shifting political environment.

- The Arakan Army has consolidated control over most of Rakhine State and established a parallel proto state with its own administrative, judicial and security structures that now govern daily life for many communities.
- Rohingya communities face overlapping SAC and AA taxation, restricted mobility, marginalisation in local governance, and, since 2024, escalating violence fuelled by the military's manipulation of ethnic tensions, forced recruitment and coercive practices by both the SAC and AA, which have deepened displacement, insecurity and intercommunal mistrust.
- Despite its de facto authority, the AA/ULA has no legal power to grant citizenship or issue recognised identity documents. It does not operate a civil registry, leaving Rohingya under AA/ULA rule entirely undocumented and outside any formal system of legal personhood.

- The AA/ULA also reproduces identity-based exclusion, rejecting Rohingya as a recognised ethnic group and using terminology that denies their indigeneity, blocking any future citizenship framework grounded in belonging or recognition.
- A few constrained political openings exist through local committees and emerging Rohingya representative bodies. Though limited, these openings offer small but meaningful opportunities for engagement that, if expanded, could support a more inclusive governance framework in the future.

### **Policy Implications**

- External governments and international organisations should recognise that the AA/ULA is the de facto authority in much of Rakhine State and ensure that humanitarian and protection engagement includes AA/ULA-controlled areas. This does not imply political endorsement but is essential to secure access, protect civilians and reduce harm for Rohingya and other minorities communities living under dual authorities.
- External governments should encourage the SAC to recognise civil documents issued by the AA/ULA, particularly records of births, deaths and household registration. Such recognition would help ensure that future generations retain access to basic documentary evidence and reduce the long-term, cascading harms associated with lack of legal documentation.
- External governments should emphasise that any future governance framework in Rakhine must include mechanisms for civil documentation, birth registration and legal personhood for Rohingya. While the legal dimension of citizenship offers some potential for future reform, identity-based recognition remains largely closed. Advocacy should therefore prioritise interim documentation measures in AA/ULA-controlled areas to prevent another generation of undocumented children.
- External governments should support constructive dialogue between emerging Rohingya representative bodies and Rakhine stakeholders. Creating structured spaces for dialogue on rights, citizenship and shared governance can help widen the narrow political openings that currently exist and contribute to more inclusive future arrangements.

## A. Rohingya in the current Rakhine State context

### *Arakan Army's Proto-State and limited inclusion*

The Arakan Army (AA), founded in 2009 to advance Rakhine self-determination, has become the most powerful armed and political force in post-coup Rakhine State.<sup>1</sup> Between 2015 and 2020, the rise of the AA and its political wing, the United League of Arakan (ULA), reshaped territorial and military dynamics, particularly in the context of the Rohingya conflict. Of the 18 townships along the Arakan military front, 15 are now under AA control, including Paletwa in Chin State.<sup>2</sup> In late 2019, the AA/ULA announced the establishment of the Arakan People's Authority (APA), initiating civil administration, policing, judicial functions, humanitarian and development coordination office and tax collection by 2020.<sup>3</sup> Following an informal ceasefire with the Tatmadaw in October 2020, the AA publicly condemned the 2021 military coup but discouraged local anti-junta protests, citing its own struggle against the central state.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, the AA/ULA have steadily built a parallel governance system across much of Rakhine State. This emerging proto-state, framed as the effort of the "Arakan Dream," comprises administrative, judicial, and security structures grounded in Rakhine nationalism and resistance to Burman domination.<sup>5</sup> The system has gained significant local support, particularly among Rakhine Buddhists, due to perceived improvements in law and order and the weakening presence of the junta.<sup>6</sup>

Between 2021 and early 2023, the AA/ULA initiated positive engagement with Rohingya communities under its control. In some areas, it relaxed longstanding movement restrictions and

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<sup>1</sup> Leider, J.P. (2023), "Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March", Policy Brief Series No. 144,

<sup>2</sup> Naing Lin, (2025) "The Arakan Army's Struggle for Regional Sovereignty": Imagining A New Future Union

<sup>3</sup> Ware and Laoutides, (2023) Arakan Army State-Building and Its Implications for Rohingya and Aid,

<sup>4</sup> International Crisis Group, "Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine's State

<sup>5</sup> Kyaw Lynn, (2022), The Dynamics of Arakan Politics and the Possibility of Another War

<sup>6</sup> Khaing Min Thant, 2025, "Can the Arakan Army Win Recognition for Its Rule Over Rakhine State?,"

encouraged interaction with Rakhine communities.<sup>7</sup> These changes allowed greater social contact and improved access to services for Rohingya communities.<sup>8</sup> The AA/ULA also appointed some Rohingya to village-level administrative roles, providing a level of representation largely absent under both military and NLD-led governments.<sup>9</sup>

Each township under AA/ULA control has a Muslim Affairs Committee made up of religious leaders, village leaders, and educated youth. Three such committees currently operate, managing religious affairs, social issues, taxation, and land matters within their communities. Criminal cases are referred to the ULA/AA justice department. Committee members also maintain tax records and report household-level changes such as home repairs, renovations, land sales, or changes in land use.<sup>10</sup>

Villagers must obtain permission from AA/ULA authorities for these activities, and in some areas, from both AA/ULA and SAC authorities. This dual system, combined with overlapping tax demands, places a heavy financial burden on Rohingya families.<sup>11</sup> Every household is expected to contribute to the AA/ULA, either in cash or in rice, in addition to SAC taxes. Many residents face threats from SAC forces for engaging with the AA/ULA while also feeling obligated to meet the AA/ULA's tax demands.<sup>12</sup>

The ULA promoted social harmony activities such as football tournaments where Rohingya were invited to participate both as organizers and attendees, presenting these events as efforts to foster social cohesion. Although largely symbolic, these signals help position the AA/ULA as a more pluralistic political actor.<sup>13</sup> AA/ULA officials have also discouraged the use

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<sup>7</sup> Ware and Laoutides, (2023) Arkan Army State-Building and Its Implications for Rohingya and Aid

<sup>8</sup> Kyaw Lynn, (2022), The Dynamics of Arakan Politics and the Possibility of Another War

<sup>9</sup> Center for Arakan Studies, Addressing the Questions of Socio- Political Cohesion in Arakan

<sup>10</sup> Burma News International – Burmese News, “ရခိုင်ပြည်အတွင်းက မွတ်ဆလင်ရေးရာကော်မတီရုံးတွေအကြောင်းကိုလည်း တင်ဆက်ပေးသွားမှာဖြစ်ပါတယ်။”

<sup>11</sup> International Crisis Group, “Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine’s State

<sup>12</sup> DMG Newsroom, ‘Myanmar tells Muslim administrators in Kyauktaw not to accept AA administrative outreach’, September 7, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Kyaw Lynn, (2022), The Dynamics of Arakan Politics and the Possibility of Another War

of the term “Bengali,” instead encouraging the use of “Muslim” as a more neutral identifier to reduce ethnic stigmatization.<sup>14</sup>

These initiatives seek to improve intercommunal relations and expand Rohingya participation in local governance. This contrast to the more segregated and hostile environments in SAC-controlled areas, where interactions between Rohingya and Rakhine remain limited. In AA/ULA control areas, by comparison, social contact was notably more frequent and generally more positive.<sup>15</sup> Rohingyas responded with cautious optimism, while others reported continued mistreatment by AA officials.<sup>16</sup> For example, in 2022, local Rohingya community testified that the AA was able to restore trust between Rakhine and Muslims communities, and they can freely travel to different villages after years of segregation.<sup>17</sup>

Despite some visible engagement, the AA/ULA’s approach to Rohingya inclusion remains cautious, tightly controlled, and largely symbolic. Participation is mostly confined to lower-level administrative roles or public activities intended to signal ethnic harmony, while key decision-making bodies remain dominated by Rakhine figures.<sup>18</sup> Rohingya leaders report minimal influence over governance priorities, and their involvement is often driven by the AA/ULA’s practical need for cooperation in tax collection, administrative management, and basic service delivery.<sup>19</sup>

This instrumental rather than transformative inclusion leaves many Rohingya facing persistent challenges such as double taxation and limited political agency. Public messaging emphasises unity and pluralism, yet in practice, structural exclusion from meaningful participation and recognition continues. These dynamics highlight a critical tension within the AA/ULA’s proto-state project. The governance structures aim to build local legitimacy and differentiate the AA/ULA from the junta. However, without addressing deep-rooted power imbalances and

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<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, “Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine’s State

<sup>15</sup> Kyaw Lynn, (2022), *The Dynamics of Arakan Politics and the Possibility of Another War*

<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, *War in Western Myanmar: Avoiding a Rakhine-Rohingya Conflict*

<sup>17</sup> *The Irrawaddy*, Rohingya Look on Arakan Amry as Saviours in Fight with Myanmar’s Junta, October 25, 2022

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Rohingya civil society leaders, conducted in online, Myanmar, August 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Rohingya leaders, conducted in online, Myanmar, August, 2024.

extending genuine political inclusion to all ethnic communities, such efforts risk reproducing the same patterns of marginalisation that have long characterized governance in Rakhine State.

### *Military Exploitation and Rising Ethnic Tensions*

The conflict between the AA and the military resumed in mid-2022 in Rakhine State.<sup>20</sup> Amid renewed fighting, the military has increasingly exploited ethnic divisions between the Rakhine Buddhist majority and Rohingya Muslim communities to weaken the AA and regain control. In late March 2024, the military reportedly coerced Rohingya residents in Buthidaung and Sittwe townships to join anti-AA protests by threatening to burn homes, shell villages, or detain those who refused.<sup>21</sup> These protests were deliberately staged to inflame communal tensions and destabilize the region according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>22</sup>

Further, to counter the AA's territorial gains, the junta has forcibly recruited Rohingya including through night raids, coercion, and false promises of citizenship.<sup>23</sup> Recruitment efforts have targeted Rohingya-majority areas such as Buthidaung and camps in Kyaukphyu Township<sup>24</sup>, with some individuals volunteering under pressure or in exchange for material incentives.<sup>25</sup> The promise of citizenship has been particularly persuasive in a community long denied legal status. For many, even temporary documentation offers a sense of recognition and protection. Since April 2024, rising fears of AA retaliation have further driven enlistment. In some areas, Rohingya community leaders with ties to the military have encouraged youth to join, framing the AA as a violent threat.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Leider, (2023), Recent Steps in Rakhine's State March, Policy Brief Series No.144

<sup>21</sup> Myanmar Now News, Myanmar's Junta forces Rohingyas to take part in anti-AA protests, March 21, 2024

<sup>22</sup> United Nation Human Right Report, Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (A/HRC/56/23)

<sup>23</sup> International Crisis Group, "Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine's State", Asia Report No.339, 27 August 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Radio Free Asia, Junta Recruits another 300 Rohingya in new round of conscription, April 25, 2024

<sup>25</sup> International Crisis Group, "Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine's State", Asia Report No.339, 27 August 2024.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group, War in Western Myanmar: Avoiding Rakhine- Rohingya conflict, May 10,2024

In mid-April 2024, military forces and Rohingya armed groups reportedly looted and burned ethnic Rakhine areas in and around Buthidaung.<sup>27</sup> These incidents have triggered new displacement, particularly among Rakhine and Hindu communities, many of whom have sought refuge in AA/ULA-controlled areas. These developments signal a breakdown in intercommunal relations. The military's instrumentalization of Rohingya grievances has deepened ethnic divisions and undone fragile gains toward coexistence. At the same time, it has weakened the fragile coexistence between Rakhine and Rohingya communities in northern Rakhine and heightened tensions between them.

### *AA's Retaliatory Shift and Escalating Violence*

Since early 2024, the AA has adopted a more aggressive position toward the Rohingya population, marking a significant departure from its earlier, more cautious engagement. This shift has been evident both in the group's rhetoric and its actions on the ground. The AA leadership has increasingly referred to the Rohingya as "Bengali" a term widely understood as a slur that denies their indigeneity identity and reinforces narratives of foreignness.<sup>28</sup> In March 2024, the AA stated that any Rohingya cooperating with the Myanmar military would be treated as enemy combatants.<sup>29</sup> This statement framed such cooperation as a collective betrayal of Rakhine nationalist aspirations and laid the ideological groundwork for a retaliatory campaign that has had devastating consequences for Rohingya civilians.

In addition to rhetorical attack, the AA has been accused of committing serious human rights violations, including widespread violence, forced displacement, and the systematic destruction of Rohingya villages, particularly in Buthidaung Township. Between April 24 and May 21, over 40 Rohingya villages and hamlets were partially or completely destroyed by fire, suggesting deliberate targeting and coordinated destruction.<sup>30</sup> Thousands of structures were reduced to ashes and entire communities were forcibly displaced, with survivors reporting arbitrary evictions, threats, and assaults. Fortify Rights has documented war crimes committed by the AA,

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<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine: Killings of Civilians, Mass Arson, Unlawful Recruitment in Rakhine State, August 12, 2024

<sup>28</sup> Ware, A., Ware, V.-A., & Kelly, L. M. (2022). Strengthening everyday peace formation after ethnic cleansing: Operationalising a framework in Myanmar's Rohingya conflict

<sup>29</sup> Statement, United League of Arakan, 24 March 2024.

<sup>30</sup> Human Rights Watch, Myanmar: Armies Target Ethnic Rohingya, Rakhine, August 12, 2024

including the massacre of Rohingya civilians near the Naf River in Maungdaw on August 5, 2024, and an arson attack on Rohingya homes in May 2024.<sup>31</sup>

This escalation of violence has been accompanied by increasing restrictions on Rohingya communities living under AA-controlled areas. In townships such as Minbya, Kyauktaw, and Pauktaw, the AA/ULA has reportedly imposed curfews, restricted access to fishing areas and phone lines, and enforced travel permissions through ULA-appointed village administrators.<sup>32</sup> Rohingya required permission to travel for work or medical care and that failure to comply could result in detention.

Alongside these administrative restrictions, the AA has also been accused of forcibly recruiting Rohingya for military training.<sup>33</sup> In Kyauktaw, Minbya, and Pauktaw, ULA officials reportedly held meetings with community leaders and instructed them to organize the recruitment of 20 to 40 individuals per village. In displacement camps and conflict-affected areas, the AA has also attempted to recruit displaced Rohingya, exacerbating their vulnerability and deepening militarization.<sup>34</sup> Recruits were allegedly transported to unknown locations without informing their families. While the overall scale of recruitment remains smaller than that of the military, these practices reflect the AA's increasingly coercive governance and its exploitation of communities under its control.

Tensions have been further heightened by the AA's public warnings to Rohingya villagers not to support or assist Rohingya armed groups particularly the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.<sup>35</sup> These statements signal the AA's uncompromising stance on any perceived collaboration with rival armed groups.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, ARSA and other Rohingya armed groups have

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<sup>31</sup> Fortify Rights, Myanmar: Arakan Amry Admits to Executing Prisoners of War, January 24, 2025

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch, Myanmar: Arakan Army Oppresses Rohingya Muslims, July 28, 2025

<sup>33</sup> United Nation Human Right Report, Situation of Human Rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, (A/HRC/56/23)

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Rohingya civil society leader, conducted online, Rakhine State Myanmar, October 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Narinjara News, မောင်တောရှိ ဗွတ်ဆလင်များအား ARSA နှင့် မပူးပေါင်းရန် ULA/AA ညွှန်ကြားထား, April 2025

<sup>36</sup> Narinjara News, မောင်တောရှိ ဗွတ်ဆလင်များအား ARSA နှင့် မပူးပေါင်းရန် ULA/AA ညွှန်ကြားထား, April 2025

resumed clashes with the AA in northern Rakhine State after previously aligning with the Myanmar military in 2024. The ongoing fighting, together with the AA's forced recruitment of Rohingya civilians, has inflamed communal tensions between Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

In May 2025, the AA issued the National Defense Emergency Provision<sup>37</sup>, formalizing its recruitment efforts and expanding its security apparatus across newly consolidated areas of control. This directive reflects the AA's evolving model of governance, increasingly defined by militarization, authoritarian control, and the repression of dissent. However, its human right violations against civilians, use of dehumanizing rhetoric, and coercive governance practices mark a significant regression from earlier coexistence efforts. These developments raise urgent concerns about the future of Rohingya safety, rights, and inclusion under emerging substate governance in Rakhine State.

## **B. Implications for Rohingya Citizenship under AA's rule**

### **Introduction**

The question of citizenship for the Rohingya in Rakhine State is a multidimensional challenge that intertwines legal exclusion, identity denial, and constrained political openings. Under both the SAC and the AA/ULA, the Rohingya remain excluded from the legal frameworks that confer rights, denied recognition of their ethnic identity, and granted only limited, strategically motivated opportunities for political participation. This section provides these three interconnected dimensions of legal, identity, and political to show how exclusion is reproduced under different authorities and where limited political openings for change may exist.

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<sup>37</sup> Narinjara News, Hundreds join military training supporting the Arakan Army's National Defense Emergency Provision, July 9, 2025

### *Legal Dimension of Citizenship*

Citizenship is a legal status that grants individuals civil, political, and social rights within a political community. It defines who is entitled to legal protection, access to public services, and the ability to seek justice through formal institutions. Citizenship is usually formalised through identity documents, legal recognition, and access to the courts.<sup>38</sup> For the Rohingya in Rakhine State, however, this legal foundation remains entirely inaccessible. Both the SAC and AA/ULA, deny the Rohingya legal recognition, maintaining their statelessness and exclusion from rights and protections.

The SAC maintains and enforces Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law, which defines citizenship based on *taingyintha* or indigenous ethnicity status.<sup>39</sup> For over three decades, this law has provided the basis for excluding the Rohingya, with the claim that they are not officially recognized as one of the Myanmar's national races. As a result, Rohingya are denied access to national identification cards and civil registration systems.

Myanmar's civil documentation system centres on the household registration list, which records permanent residency, marital status, and family members. This document is required to begin the application process for citizenship scrutiny cards (CSCs), the national identity cards that serve as formal proof of citizenship.<sup>40</sup> For Rohingya, however, household lists are easily invalidated during routine immigration checks. Individuals who are absent during house-to-house inspections are often removed from the lists and reclassified as "illegal immigrants," losing their only remaining proof of legal residence.

Since the coup, these practices have intensified. In 2021, the SAC issued a directive labelling Bengalis, a term used to deny Rohingya identity, as threats to local security, authorizing

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<sup>38</sup> Isin, E., & Turner, B. (2002). *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*.

<sup>39</sup> Cheesman, N. (2017). How in Myanmar "National Races" Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47(3), 461–483.

<sup>40</sup> Rhoads et al. (2025) Modalities of Bureaucratic Violence: Bordering via Civil Documentation in Myanmar, *Journal of Borderlands studies*.

arrest for anyone travelling outside their township without permission.<sup>41</sup> Following this, the SAC launched the Pann Kinn mobile registration initiative to provide documentation across the country, but it explicitly excluded Rohingya and other unrecognized ethnic groups. Rohingya families face growing difficulty in registering children born since the coup, raising fears that a new generation will be completely removed from legal records.<sup>42</sup>

In parallel, the AA/ULA have established a proto-state governance system across parts of Rakhine State, yet it fails to provide any form of legal recognition to the Rohingya. The AA/ULA's legal system draws on a mix of Myanmar law, British colonial statutes, and post-independence legislation, applied depending on the context. Legal cases handle under the Penal Code, military law, or civil law.<sup>43</sup> However, this system does not include legal mechanisms that extend formal protections or status to the Rohingya. While the system includes village-level and regional courts, in many cases involving Rohingya, judicial matters are delegated to community leaders rather than addressed through formal legal channels.

The AA/ULA lacks the institutional authority to confer citizenship under Myanmar's legal system or international law. While it exercises *de facto* control in parts of Rakhine, it does not operate a civil registry or provide any recognized legal documentation such as birth certificates, identity cards, or residency permits. As a result, Rohingya under AA/ULA rule remains entirely undocumented and excluded from the legal frameworks that define citizenship. The AA/ULA has not attempted to challenge the 1982 Citizenship Law, nor has it proposed any legal reforms or alternative citizenship frameworks for stateless communities. It has avoided engagement with international legal standards related to statelessness, minority protection, or inclusive governance. In failing to develop legal mechanisms for political inclusion, the AA/ULA has maintained and legitimized the same structures of exclusion institutionalized by the Myanmar state.

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<sup>41</sup> Myo Tun, 'Rohingya in Buthidaung hit with even tougher travel restrictions', (2021) Myanmar Now

<sup>42</sup> The Institute on Stateless and Inclusion, "Dangerous Journeys through Myanmar: Insecurities and immobilities for Rohingya and Muslims women in post-coup Myanmar, March 2022,

<sup>43</sup> Center for Arakan Studies, *Alternative Justice: Analyzing the ULA's Legal System in Arakan*, October 2024

Rohingya also lack access to impartial or independent judicial mechanisms. In many cases, legal disputes are handled informally by community leaders rather than through codified procedures or accessible courts.<sup>44</sup> This results in a system where legal personhood is effectively denied, and justice remains inaccessible. Rohingya communities face systemic bias, lack of transparency, and procedural exclusion. With Rakhine judges dominating the system, access to impartial justice is highly limited, and legal protections remain inaccessible.

Legal exclusion has direct consequences. Without documentation or legal personhood, the Rohingya are denied access to public services, freedom of movement, and property rights. For example, to travel between villages under AA/ULA control, Rohingya must obtain one-day permits costing between 3,000 and 5,000 kyat, with approval required from both a local Muslim administrator and AA/ULA representatives.<sup>45</sup> These restrictions demonstrate how a fundamental right like movement is reduced to a controlled privilege, reinforcing the Rohingya's dependency and vulnerability.

Although some Rohingya are included in local governance structures under the AA/ULA, this participation is purely administrative. It does not translate into legal rights or recognition. Rather than representing a transformation toward inclusive governance, these roles serve to manage local affairs without conferring political membership or legal protections. They offer no challenge to the structures of exclusion and are best understood as instrumental rather than transformative.

The absence of codified legal status not only reinforces the Rohingya's marginalisation but also sustains a governance structure that operates without granting recognition. This dynamic reflects not a break from Myanmar's exclusionary frameworks but their continuation under a different authority, maintaining systems of legal exclusion and statelessness while sidestepping responsibility for rights-based inclusion. This legal exclusion directly shapes the identity dimension, where recognition of belonging is as critical as formal rights.

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<sup>44</sup> Center for Arakan Studies, *Alternative Justice: Analyzing the ULA's Legal System in Arakan*, October 2024

<sup>45</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Myanmar: Arakan Army Oppresses Rohingya Muslims*, July 28, 2025

### *Identity Dimension*

The AA/ULA refusal to recognise the Rohingya as a legitimate ethnic group is the most significant barrier to their inclusion in any future citizenship framework. Citizenship is not only a matter of legal status or political rights. It is also about recognition, being accepted as a legitimate member of a political community. The identity dimension of citizenship underscores that inclusion depends as much on belonging and symbolic recognition as on formal legal entitlements.<sup>46</sup> Without this recognition, full citizenship cannot exist.

For several years, the AA appeared to moderate its language, avoiding the term “Bengali,” which the Rohingya consider a slur because it implies, they are recent immigrants from Bangladesh and undermines their claim to citizenship.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the AA used the term “Muslims.” This changed in 2024 when AA Commander-in-Chief Twan Mrat Naing publicly defended the use of “Bengali,” claiming that nothing is wrong with calling Bengalis “Bengalis.”<sup>48</sup> The shift caused anger among Rohingya communities in Myanmar and the diaspora, as well as concern from the Bangladeshi government. Soon after, the AA began referring to Rohingya armed groups as “Bengali Muslim terrorist groups,” echoing the rhetoric used by the Myanmar military to justify the 2017 atrocities. This denial of recognition operates as a form of symbolic violence, excluding the Rohingya from the imagined political community of “Arakan.”<sup>49</sup>

From the AA/ULA’s perspective, recognition of Rohingya identity is incompatible with its ethnonationalist vision of liberation. The AA’s leader has stated in media interviews that the Rakhine community does not accept the identity of “Rohingya” and finds the term offensive.<sup>50</sup> Rakhine civil society and political actors share this view, portraying “Rohingya” as a political project aimed at erasing historical evidence of colonial-era migration and undermining the

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<sup>46</sup> Purvis, Trevor, & Hunt, Alan. (1999). Identity versus citizenship: transformations in the discourses and practices of citizenship. *Social & Legal Studies*, 8(4), 457-482.

<sup>47</sup> International Crisis Group, “Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine’s State”, Asia Report No.339, 27 August 2024.

<sup>48</sup> International Crisis Group, “Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine’s State”, Asia Report No.339, 27 August 2024.

<sup>49</sup> International Crisis Group, “Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar Rakhine’s State”, Asia Report No.339, 27 August 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Asia Times, ‘Rebel Yell: Arakan Army Leader speaks to ‘Asia Times’ (2022)

integrity of Rakhine's ancestral history.<sup>51</sup> Some AA/ULA leaders have described the adoption of the name "Rohingya" as dishonest, while maintaining that current Muslim residents of Arakan, regardless of descent from colonial or post-colonial migrants, should have the right to citizenship.<sup>52</sup> However, this position stops short of recognising Rohingya identity and instead makes belonging conditional on abandoning what the AA/ULA views as politically motivated historical claims.

For the Rohingya, as survivors of systematic persecution, the restitution of citizenship is inseparable from the acceptance and recognition of their ethnic identity as a group belonging to Rakhine State.<sup>53</sup> This fundamental gap between the Rohingya's demand for recognition and the AA/ULA's rejection of their identity ensures that even where limited administrative roles are allowed, they remain symbolically excluded. In some AA-controlled villages in Maungdaw Township, household registration lists reportedly record Rohingya residents as "Muslim" rather than "Rohingya," further institutionalising this erasure.<sup>54</sup>

These dynamics show that formal rights mean little when identity is denied. The AA/ULA's rejection of Rohingya identity directly undermines its claims to inclusive governance. Although it positions itself as an alternative to Myanmar's military regime, the AA/ULA reproduces the same exclusionary identity politics, perpetuating the structural marginalisation entrenched in the state system.

The implications are serious. Without recognition of identity, there is no pathway to inclusive citizenship for the Rohingya in AA/ULA-controlled areas. Legal or political participation, however limited, cannot substitute for belonging. Addressing identity politics is therefore essential for any governance or peacebuilding initiative to be genuinely inclusive. However, whether identity-based citizenship will materialise under AA/ULA governance remains uncertain.

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<sup>51</sup> Interviews with Rakhine political leaders and civil society leaders, Mae Sot conducted in Mae Sot, Thailand-Myanmar Border, August 2023.

<sup>52</sup> The New Humanitarian, The Arakan Army responds to Rohingya abuse accusations in Myanmar, 29 May 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Rohingya leaders, conducted online, Myanmar, August 2023.

<sup>54</sup> The Arakan Express News, ထိန်းချုပ်ထားတဲ့ နယ်မြေတွေထဲ လူမျိုးအမည် "ရိုဟင်ဂျာ" သုံးစွဲမှုကို ပိတ်ပင်ထားပြီး မလိုက်နာသူတွေ ပြင်းပြင်းထန်ထန် အရေးယူခံရမယ်လို့ ဆိုနေ, March 8, 2025

### *Recent political dynamics and potential openings*

Citizenship is more than a legal designation or identity marker. It is a political relationship that defines the capacity of individuals to participate in collective decision-making and shape the institutions that govern their lives. Political citizenship entails agency, representation, and the ability to influence how rights are defined, distributed, and exercised.<sup>55</sup> In AA/ULA-controlled areas, this dimension remains severely constrained, with participation grounded in governance pragmatism rather than rights-based inclusion.

Against this backdrop, the AA/ULA has publicly stated to building an “inclusive administration,” claiming to involve all communities including the Rohingya through structures such as a Muslim Affairs Committee and an Ethnic Affairs Committee.<sup>56</sup> In some areas, these commitments have translated into visible engagement. Rohingya in Paletwa, Kyauktaw, Ponnagyun, and Minbya have joined ULA-formed committees, received training as police personnel and health workers, and been included in agriculture and humanitarian departments tasked with resettling internally displaced persons. In Minbya, where relations between Rohingya, Rakhine Buddhists, and other minorities have been relatively cordial, restrictions on movement were lifted after the AA took control, and over 200 Rohingya were appointed to local committees.<sup>57</sup>

The political dynamics become more complex in northern Rakhine. Rohingya communities’ express cautious optimism but stress that equal rights will require the removal of long-standing restrictions and discriminatory policies. Relations are particularly strained in Buthidaung and Maungdaw, where tensions have been fuelled by curfews, security operations, and allegations of AA/ULA abuses, as documented by human rights organisations.<sup>58</sup> These differences indicate that

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<sup>55</sup> *Citizenship. Vol. 2: Who is a citizen? Feminism, multiculturalism and immigration* (1. publ). (2014). Routledge.

<sup>56</sup> The Diplomat, Rohingya Community is divided over Arakan Army’s Plan for Inclusive Administration, October 30, 2024

<sup>57</sup> The Diplomat, Rohingya Community is divided over Arakan Army’s Plan for Inclusive Administration, October 30, 2024

<sup>58</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Myanmar: Arakan Army Oppresses Rohingya Muslims”, Severe Movements Restrictions, Pillage, Mistreatment in Northern Rakhine State, July 28, 2025

reconciliation will depend heavily on local political, social, and economic conditions, making progress far more challenging in conflict-affected northern townships.

Community responses to ULA policies reflect different forms of political relationship and participation, including those who welcome engagement, those who feel compelled to cooperate, and those who remain openly hostile. This diversity underscores that the outcome of the ULA's "inclusive administration" plan remains uncertain, but its trajectory will significantly influence intercommunal relations and governance in Arakan.

Political organisation within the Rohingya community is also evolving. The Rohingya Consultative Council, established in March 2024, has yet to engage in substantive political dialogue with the AA/ULA leadership.<sup>59</sup> More recently, the Arakan National Rohingya Council (ANRC) was formed on 13 July 2025, with the stated aim of serving as the united political voice of the Rohingya, reclaiming their indigenous identity and rightful citizenship, advocating for their just return, and participating in discussions on Myanmar's future federal structure. ANRC claims that they bring together a broad coalition of Rohingya stakeholders, including representatives from inside Myanmar, the majority of the leaders from refugees camps, and the majority of members of global diaspora.<sup>60</sup> However, its formation has been controversial, with some Rohingya representatives inside Myanmar noting that the ANRC did not consult them.<sup>61</sup> These dynamics illustrate that political representation, participation, and legitimacy remain deeply contested, and that internal divisions within the Rohingya community interact with the broader political dynamics of ULA governance, shaping both the scope and the fragility of emerging political openings.

At the same time, there has been a narrow but potentially significant opening among Rakhine actors. Rakhine civil society leaders, political party members, and some armed group leaders increasingly acknowledge that effective governance in multi-ethnic areas requires cooperation with Rohingya communities in order to stabilise the political order in Arkan.<sup>62</sup> The

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<sup>59</sup> Progressive Voice Myanmar, Formation of Convening Committee for the Emergence of a Rohingya Consultative Council, 26 March 2024

<sup>60</sup> Progressive Voice Myanmar, Arakan Rohingya National Council Press Release, July 13 2025

<sup>61</sup> Asian News, Political body formed by Rohingya leaders around the world to advance rights, July 14, 2025

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Rakhine leaders including political members, armed group leaders and civil society representative, August – October 2023.

ULA/AA also publicly asserts that Muslim residents of Arakan are recognised as citizens, with equal rights and duties as other residents, and that its policy is to provide equal services including security, jurisdiction, healthcare, and education without discrimination.<sup>63</sup>

Even so, the limited spaces that do exist can carry political significance. In some areas, day-to-day collaboration with local Rakhine authorities through committees, service delivery, or public order initiatives has created informal channels of negotiation and influence, even if these are not formally recognised. The AA/ULA's reliance on Rohingya cooperation for essential governance tasks embeds a degree of mutual dependence that could, under certain conditions, be leveraged to widen participation. At the same time, the gradual emergence of representative bodies within the Rohingya community, despite internal contestation, signals a growing capacity to articulate collective demands and engage with external actors. While such developments are shaped more by governance pragmatism than by a commitment to rights-based inclusion, they nonetheless highlight that political openings can emerge through practice, interaction, and necessity, even in the absence of formal recognition.

### *Conclusion*

Understanding the Rohingya's citizenship in Rakhine State under AA/ULA governance requires examining multiple, interconnected dimensions rather than viewing it in isolation. Legally, they remain stateless and undocumented. In terms of identity, they are denied recognition, making belonging conditional and fragile. Politically, their participation is narrow, instrumental, and vulnerable to reversal. These three strands of legal, identity, and political are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, sustaining exclusionary governance even under an authority that claims to be an alternative to the Myanmar state. Without reforms that secure legal status, recognise identity, and institutionalise genuine political inclusion, full citizenship for the Rohingya will remain unattainable. Nonetheless, the pragmatic spaces for engagement that do exist, while limited, provide entry points for advocacy and negotiated change. In sum, although the legal and identity dimensions of citizenship remain closed under AA/ULA governance, the political dimension

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<sup>63</sup> The New Humanitarian, The Arakan Amry responds to Rohingya abuse accusations in Myanmar, May 29, 2024

presents constrained yet potentially meaningful opportunities for engagement. These openings fall short of full political citizenship, but if expanded, they could form the basis for a more inclusive governance framework in the future.

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