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### Beyond the 'rebel' territorial trap: governing logics and armed group sovereignty

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# BEYOND THE 'REBEL' TERRITORIAL TRAP: GOVERNING LOGICS AND ARMED GROUP SOVEREIGNTY



**Centre on Armed Groups**  
Research. Dialogue. Advice.

Tony Neil & Saw Day Chit

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TERRITORIAL TRAP: GOVERNING  
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**Tony Neil & Saw Day Chit**

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## ABSTRACT

'Territorial control' has emerged as a central concept in the study of civil wars and rebel governance. However, armed groups are driven by different aims and logics and as a consequence arrive at different sovereign formations. Instead, we ask what are the governance strategies and technologies that armed groups use to project authority? Employing checkpoints as a device for comparing two armed groups that operate in overlapping areas in Myanmar's borderlands, we find that armed groups use technologies of governance differently to achieve different outcomes that are shaped by underlying ideological and cosmological foundations. We also find that sovereignty is relational to the state and other neighbouring armed actors. These findings suggest that research agendas sidestep the structural determinism of the 'territorial trap' and instead further investigate agency-based explanations for *how* and *why* armed groups seek to project or expand their authority.

## INTRODUCTION

At the height of the hot season during Thingyan, the annual water festival, we wade across the Moei river crossing from Thailand into Myanmar. We are planning on interviewing a commander from the Democratic Benevolent Karen Army (DKBA) which has a ceasefire with the military junta and is waiting on the adjacent riverbank. There is a change of plan, the commander has over ten family members in a pick-up and we are going to ride with him to Myawaddy, a regional hub and border trading town. The road hugs the borderline as we head north passing through the Dawna range before dropping onto a large plain. We can see Myawaddy and a thin ribbon, the Asia Highway, a crucial transportation link connecting Myanmar and Thailand in the distance. To the east, the Dawna mountains are a hive of anti-junta resistance comprised of the Karen National Union (KNU) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs). In 1994, in a split from the KNU, the DKBA sided with the Burmese military taking territory from the KNU (Brenner, 2017; Kenny, 2010). Currently, the DKBA, whilst maintaining a ceasefire with the junta, maintains an outwardly ambivalent and discretely co-operative stance towards the KNU and affiliated People's Defence Forces (PDFs), where supplies and troops circulate seamlessly across the Moei, through DKBA areas into resistance forces territory in the mountain ranges behind.

Descending onto the plain we stop at a DKBA checkpoint where a performative ritual unfolds. The commander's wife hands out cash donations to combatants following the precepts of a Buddhist ritual. Troops form a line, place their hands in the prayer position, bowing prior to receiving a small wad of cash in a hierarchical and personalistic ritual, bestowing respect to the commander-strongman. Afterwards, the troops stand to attention and salute the commander blending Buddhist and military repertoires. We pass a final DKBA checkpoint before crossing a series of KNA and junta checkpoints. We eventually arrive at the busy commercial hub of Myawaddy and go to a DKBA storage and logistics facility that also has a barracks for over a hundred troops. Next door is a casino run by the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF). In 2010, the BGF separated from the DKBA (South 2010), becoming a pro-government militia. The DKBA commander walks over and sits next to the BGF boss at the only table flanked by armed men in black fatigues. Beyond is a stage playing loud music and water is being thrown as part of the festival. The commanders are good friends and talk, drink whisky and smoke cheroots. On our way home, the DKBA commander makes a stop at his karaoke and gambling parlour on the outskirts of Myawaddy.

This description chimes against current conceptualisations of 'territorial control' which is often presented as a 'messy patchwork' between states and belligerents (Kalyvas, 2006), or an ordered 'mosaic' of competing armed authority as scholars writing on conflict zones in Myanmar assume (Grundy-Warr and Dean, 2011; Maclean, 2008; Su-San Oh, 2013). Here, control is conceptually assumed to be discrete, territorially bounded parcels. A different ontology is at play, where the DKBA has areas which it monopolises, and areas where it operates yet where the state and its proxies are dominant. The DKBA commander as thanks for his co-operation with the junta is allowed to run illicit businesses, though he also courts

and aids resistance forces. Here, sovereignty is either discrete or overlapping, agreed upon or in contestation and contingent on relations to the state, multiple armed actors and even personal friendships. The congested, multi-actor Myanmar borderlands challenge dyadic theorisations of control between states and their opponents (Arjona, 2016; Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2012).

Currently in the study of civil wars and rebel governance - key arenas in knowledge production on conflict – ‘territorial control’ remains a central concept. Civil war is said to have a ‘territorial foundation’, which is an outcome of asymmetric relations between a state and an armed challenger, leading the latter to choose irregular warfare over conventional and direct confrontation (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). In this article we make two moves; first, to step beyond the ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew, 1994) of presenting territorial control as fixed, bounded containers of shared or individual control, and second to investigate *how* and *why* armed groups seek to project authority through space. We find that ideological and cosmological orientations shape logics of governance and moral registers that create institutions and performative practices, sometimes in counterintuitive ways. The governance technologies and practices that are used to project authority spatially is contingent on relations with other armed actors.

In order to examine how armed groups project political authority we use checkpoints as an explanatory device. Checkpoints are a spatial expression of political authority and are found across conflict zones globally. Their prevalence makes them useful objects of comparative analysis. Yet, checkpoints are seldom researched as objects of social enquiry, let alone their functions theorised. Checkpoints play important roles in different political and economic systems where they are not only nodes of extraction, markers of territory or symbols of authority; they are political technologies that are constituent parts of boarder repertoires and logics of governance. Methodologically we use a paired comparison that presents a puzzle: why and how do two armed groups operating in the same area use checkpoints to achieve such different governmental aims and how does this lead to such different formations of sovereignty? We compare the Karen BGF, a pro-junta militia that seeks to maximise revenue through checkpoints, with the KNU, the world’s oldest currently active armed group, that sees taxation as a second order priority and uses checkpoints to inscribe territory and perform state-like practices. Geographically we focus our analysis on the KNU’s 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade, also known as Mutraw District. These divergent outcomes are even more confounding as the BGF, prior to a split, was formerly part of the KNU.

## MOVING BEYOND THE ARMED GROUP TERRITORIAL TRAP

Territorial control has emerged as an important concept in the study of civil wars: as a scope condition (Arjona, 2016; Mampilly, 2011; Mampilly and Stewart, 2021) or pre-requisite for rebel governance (Kasfir, 2015; Kasfir et al., 2017; Lidow, 2016; Weinstein, 2007; Worall, 2017), as an explanatory variable in theories of violence (Kalyvas, 2006) or a determinant in conceptual typologies (Staniland, 2012). Conceptualisations of territorial control mirror those of the state as a bordered power container<sup>1</sup> (Weber, 1918; Giddens, 1998; as a critique see Agnew, 1994). These assumptions can be traced back to foundational texts such as the ‘stationary bandit’ thesis (Olson, 1986), whereby providing protection and services in return for taxes, a strategy that entails monopolising rent, in turn produces quasi-voluntary compliance among constituencies (Levi, 1989). However, given the broad taxonomy and modalities of armed groups globally such explanations fail to travel beyond a small subset with recent studies challenging the importance of territorial control (Bahiss et al., 2022; Jackson, 2018: 25; O’Connor and Jongderden, 2023; Rubin and Stewart, 2022; Waterman, 2023). Jacob Shapiro (2013) finds that networked insurgencies such as terrorist groups seek to hide amongst the population. Criminal groups such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army live hidden amongst the world’s largest refugee camp in Bangladesh (BNI, 2019). However, as territorial control has become so dominant an assumption, a gap has emerged, if projecting power is so important in civil war, then what strategies do armed groups employ? We find that armed groups project authority through creating institutions to engage their political constituencies, through iterated performative practices and through spatialised governance technologies such as checkpoints.

### Insurgency, asymmetric warfare and territorial control

Territorial control is an important feature in counterinsurgency manuals. The Myanmar government in their ‘Four Cuts’ (ဖြတ်လေးဖြတ်) strategy to cut information, food, recruits and local support (Maung Aung Moe, 2009; Selth, 2001) designates areas ‘black’ (if controlled by insurgents, ‘brown’ (where both sides exercise a measure of control) and ‘white’ (areas free of insurgents) (Selth, 2001: 91). The aim was to clear one area at a time until the whole country was white. Revolutionaries such as Mao (1937) and Che Guevarra (1961) draw attention to the importance of having areas of control such as rear bases from which to launch military offensives or to engage local populations. Drawing on this central insight, Stathis Kalyvas’ (2006: 88) conceives of ‘territorial control’ as an outcome of asymmetrical relations, where armed groups seek cover in mountainous, forested or remote locations and then stage insurgent tactics and project authority through contested areas. The uneven power balance in irregular or guerilla warfare structures spatial relations in specific ways between spaces of contiguous or

<sup>1</sup> Even the popular definition of civil war follows a Weberian view of the state as holding a monopoly of violence: ‘as armed combat taking place within the boundaries of a recognised sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities’ (Kalyvas, 2006).

overlapping control and as a consequence, armed actors encounter three population sets: 'populations under their full control; populations they must share with their rival; and populations outside of their control' (Stathis Kalyvas, 2006: 88).

Extant theories relating to civil wars are based on dyadic relations between an incumbent and an opponent where territorial control is presented as either discrete or overlapping (Arjona, 2016; Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2012.) or as a gradient of control (Kalyvas, 2006). However, there are many settings within civil wars where these dynamics fall away. These include civil wars where opponents choose conventional warfare (Balcels, 2017). Or as the opening vignette illustrates, in contexts where there are multiple actors and sovereignty is contingent on inter-actor relationships<sup>2</sup>. Such institutional arrangements are likely to occur where states operate through local militias (Eck, 2015; Jentzsch, Kalyvas and Schubiger, 2015; Meehan, 2015; Staniland, 2015), local strongmen (Reno, 1998) or strong customary or communal institutions can repel armed actors (Arjona, 2016). Wartime bargains or accommodations can also shift territorial dynamics (Staniland, 2012). Likewise, evidence from ceasefires highlights how, in the absence of violence, states and armed actors instead rely aggressively on competitive governance strategies to assert influence or control over contested spaces (Harrison and Kyed, 2019; Thakur and Venugopal, 2019; Woods, 2011; Woods, 2019; Woods and Naimark, 2020). Peer Schouten suggests considering 'alternative geographies of power' that relocate economic and social power beyond traditional administrative units (Schouten, 2019). For instance, in the Sahel, power has historically never been about how much territory you hold, but instead about controlling what moves through the territory that you do hold (Ranieri and Strazzari, 2015).

Scholars tend to privilege military dynamics and political violence and overlook how relative asymmetry also shapes practices of governance. Rubin and Stewart (2022: 18) point out that observable indicators used to measure and make knowledge claims about territorial control are often based on military capabilities<sup>3</sup>. This obscures the strategies that armed groups employ beyond violence to engage communities through administrative apparatuses and service provision that may interrupt state advances (Arjona, 2016; Arjona et al., 2015; Huang and Sullivan, 2008; Mampilly, 2011). Various studies and counterinsurgency manuals suggest civilian collaboration leads to victory (Wickham-Crowley, 1992). The US Counterinsurgency Field Manual states that 'achieving victory still depends upon a group's ability to mobilise support for its political interests' (US Army, 2006: 1). However, there are no studies that systematically assess how governance

<sup>2</sup> Conversely, spaces solely contested by the junta and the KNU and PDFs follow a spatial schema of irregular warfare.

<sup>3</sup> Rubin and Stewart cite two examples as evidence: Kalyvas (2006: 21) defines control as 'the level, presence of, and access enjoyed by political actors in a given place and time', yet the measurement is troop density. Kasfir (2015: 26) defines territorial control as an actor's 'capacity... to keep its enemies out of a specific area', but relies on military capabilities.

strategies vary in areas of more control to those of diffuse presence and how different strategies may be employed to achieve different ends.

Often 'territorial control' is assumed to be a given and objective fact, as supposed to a humanly devised schema that is defined differently by different scholars and called upon to perform different tasks. First lines of control are assumed to be fixed and carve up conflict zones into a 'mosaic' or 'patchwork' of control<sup>4</sup>. Here, space is subdivided into reified, stabilised entities, separated by hermetic boundaries (Massey, 2005) where control is conceptualised as a reductive binary as either discrete or segmented parcels. Zones of control as a visual schema become stabilised and petrified, failing to account for the diverse and multifaceted ways that armed groups project power beyond areas where they are physically present. Armed groups do not have to hold territory, or even have a stationary presence, to govern or assert influence (Bahiss et al., 2022). Instead insurgency is about dynamic change as armed groups aim to shift the spatial contours of insurgency that lead to wartime social and political transformations (Wood, 2003; 2008).

Territorial control has been assumed to be an outcome of asymmetric warfare, as supposed to an active, dynamic and fluid process: much less attention has been paid to the range of political strategies, practices and technologies that armed actors draw upon to project authority through areas they operate in. Such approaches assume territorial control is structurally determined by asymmetrical relations between states and their opponents. This fails to pay adequate attention to agency-based explanations that seek to understand the range of governmental technologies armed groups are able to draw upon to project political authority.

### **Projecting political authority: strategies and techniques**

The question becomes *how* do armed groups project authority in order to achieve desired governance outcomes? Imposing geometrical containers and assigning them as different zones of control obscures the processes by which social agency produces space (Lefebvre, 1978). In this sense, armed groups produce space in a material sense, such as checkpoints, schools or courthouses or mobile courts as well as in a nonmaterial sense through institutions. In practice these processes are mutually co-constitutive, and occur via performative practices carried out by armed group agents and combatants. In this sense, in situations of ongoing civil war, space can be understood as what is at stake as 'the medium, the instrument and objective of political struggle and violent conflict (Lefebvre, 2000 [1973]: 35-36). Below, evidence is provided of how armed groups project authority through spatial governance technologies, institutions and performative practices.

Establishing institutions enables armed authorities to interact with their political constituencies in ways where 'recognition is mutual and recursive' (Lund and Boone, 2013). Through repetition and routinisation, 'public authority is

<sup>4</sup> See Bahiss et al. (2022) for an explanation of problems raised on using maps to show control.

continually constructed in the imagination, expectation and everyday practices of ordinary people' (Lund, 2002: 14). Central tenets of armed group governance such as mobilising violence, carrying out administration, collecting taxes or providing services, all require institutions (Arjona, 2016; Tilly, 1978; Moe, 1990; Olson, 1993; Bandula-Irwin et al., 2022). Institutions have a spatial effect in the sense of being active in the places where they are in operation. As norms that regulate social life, they can be operational even when armed group members are not present and therefore can be employed to assert and project political authority.

For instance, taxation is often among the first types of institutions that armed groups erect, as a marker of their presence, and routinised collection contributes to social legitimacy (Amiri and Jackson, 2022; Revkin, 2020). Institutions such as taxation also render populations 'legible' to armed authorities (Scott, 1988). Justice provision is another institutional field that can also be used to extend authority and gain popularity and legitimacy. In Myanmar, the KNU provided voluntary dispute resolution in contested areas which was perceived as fairer, more predictable and time efficient than the state (Safer World, 2019). Arbitrating over judicial matters placed the KNU in a position of moral authority over local constituencies and were more accountable and responsive than the state they were trying to outdo. Loyle (2021) finds that in Nepal, the Maoists adopted mobile People's Courts which were able to try cases in territory not directly under their control. Often entrepreneurial armed groups can organise justice provision through mobile officials and courts and can be one among the first institutions armed groups enact (Arjona, 2016).

In a seminal study of roadblocks in central Africa, Peer Schouten (2022) decentres taxation away from projecting authority to how armed groups use checkpoints positioned at different nodes to intercept and tax commodity flows. For instance, in contexts such as the Sahel, power has never been about how much territory you hold, but instead about controlling circulation (Ranieri and Strazzari, 2015). As a result of commodity flows from multinational corporations and aid provided by UN agencies, roadblocks become systems of revenue generation and consequently formations of power which thrive under conditions of supply chain capitalism (Schouten, 2022). In a historicised analysis, Schouten shows this is not a recent outcome of globalisation, but rather an older political configurations of power such as the Hongo, were predicated on establishing nodes in larger systems of circulation. Over time, as strategies evolved, political entrepreneurs sought to move from taxing at specific sites to expanding control over larger parts of the system (Schouten, 2022).

Armed groups draw upon different political technologies that seek to claim and inscribe territory such as operating checkpoints, cadastral land mapping and boundary. These processes of territorialisation are multifaceted and rely on having some degree of organisation and capacity for enforcement, even the use of force or coercion if necessary (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018). These processes are often competitive and contentious and may provoke violent responses (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011). Some armed groups physically demarcate space through property rights (Sikor and Lund, 2009), land zoning (McCarthy and Farrelly, 2020)

or conservation (Naimark and Wood, 2020). For instance, Helene Maria Kyed (2021: 256) finds 'the (KNU) rebels literally came down from the mountains', while under a ceasefire, to expand administration, justice and land governance into the contested lowlands. The head of the KNU land committee explained to us that they had issued over 260,000 land titles since 2012, predominately targeting contested areas as 'a deliberate and revolutionary territorial strategy'. Together these technologies knit together as broader governmental repertoires that are part of a larger ideational and identity-driven political project by the KNU.

Political authority may also be reified through a broad range of performative repertoires that armed groups draw upon. The force of such performative acts achieves a sense of permanence and stability through the ritualised repetition of norms (Judith Butler, 1993). Drawing on linguist J. L. Austin's (1955) concept of the 'performative utterance', Butler (1993) argues that by carrying out social and political actions to achieve intended effects requires enacting them in ways that people will recognise. However, the task of creating and redefining such performative acts is never finished and must be continually repeated for norms to hold, which also opens up the possibility for change. Hocart (1969) finds that the origins of governance can be traced to ritual and performance (in Graeber, 2017: 378). In this sense, space 'too needs to be thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power' (Gregson and Rose, 2000: 434).

Armed groups draw on a diverse array of performative practices. Zachariah Mampilly (2015) draws attention to discourses and other normative behaviours that shape civilian and everyday life. These take place through performative practices and the 'set of symbolic processes available to rebel groups' (Mampilly, 2015: 82). Terpstra and Frerks (2018) find that for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), processes of identity building are achieved through performances such as commemorations, rallies, anthems, military parades and religious ceremonies. These reinforce the LTTE's historical narrative performances of statehood, heroism and martyrdom, which draw upon symbolic repertoires and continuing the groups ideological underpinnings and traditions. Thomas Hegghammer (2017) explores jihadism and finds beyond militancy, that performative rituals, customs dress codes, storytelling and poetry are of central importance and make up jihadi culture. Alpa Shah (2013) describes how Maoist rebels come down from their base areas to Naxalites villages and perform events aligned to Marxist doctrinal principles.

## THE KNU AND KAREN BGF: PRACTICES, PERFORMANCES AND PROJECTING POLITICAL AUTHORITY

In January 2021, a military coup (စစ်တပ်အာဏာသိမ်း) precipitated a nationwide Spring Revolution (နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး), creating new forms of political mobilisation and organisation (Dunford, 2024; Jolliffe, 2024). When the junta began a violent crackdown, protestors began travelling to the eastern border, where subsequent attacks on those seeking sanctuary on the border led to large-scale armed mobilisation for what would later be known as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs). Conflict swiftly spread across six out of seven KNU brigade areas. Initially operating from the Dawna mountains, these resistance forces used asymmetric warfare; over time, however, they have moved onto the plains using semi-conventional tactics, expanding and monopolising areas of territorial control.

Alongside social and political rupture, there are also patterns of continuity with the pre-coup period. During the ceasefire, the Unity Committee for Karen Armed Groups (UCKAG) was formed, bringing together all of the Karen armed groups after a series of acrimonious and violent splits. The split weakened the KNU (Brenner, 2019; South, 2010) and was to dramatically re-shape the orientation and political organisation of the new splinter groups (Chambers, 2019). There are also strong horizontal ties between commanders across different groups, either where they previously served together or through kinship which helps explain the ongoing alliance and reciprocity despite being on opposing sides. While the ceasefire between the government and the KNU broke down, the DKBA and KNLA-KNU Peace Council still maintain a ceasefire with the junta and the Karen BGF is part of its military command structure. As a result, across this multi-armed actor landscape there are multiple and overlapping formations of sovereignty. Some groups such as the DKBA and KNU-KNLA PC play both sides. For a fee, Velcro insignias and badges, can be removed and affixed with the DKBA equivalents and transportation arranged in their marked cars passing freely through checkpoints. Below we trace the origins and political objectives of the KNU and BGF and how these shape their respective governmental practices and formations of sovereignty.

### **The KNU and Karen BGF: origins, logics of governance and sovereignty**

Despite the Karen BGF originally being part of the KNU, both groups pursue very different political and economic goals that shape their practices of governance. Naw Angelene (2023) traces the history of how a pan-Karen identity emerged from the 1830s onwards through engagement with Christian missionaries who helped codify Karen into a written language. Christianity became a way to secure education and ensure literacy. With missionary support, some of the earliest printing presses were used for Karen pamphleteering, providing the basis for self-identification of a novel imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Angelene, 2023). Over time, these shifts became identified with modernity and in the Karen's own schema of identity formation became a moral justification and basis for claims of statehood (Gravers, 2007). However, these processes disproportionately privileged

Skaw Karen elites (Gravers, 2007; Angelene, 2023), which had two effects: first, Christianity became an identity marker and source of confrontation with the Burmese state; and second, it became a source of both internal cohesion and division and latterly violence among the Karen (Brenner, 2019; Gravers, 2007; Naw Angelene, 2023; Thawmaung, 2008; 2012).

As part of a coalescing Karen identity, the term Kawthoolei, an expression of a Karen territory started to emerge<sup>5</sup>. Kawthoolei as a term and imaginary construct emerged as early as 1947, and did not refer to any particular area but as a symbolic space (Gravers, 2007). Garbagni and Walton (2020) track the imaginings of Karen nationhood over time through shifting and conflicting territorial claims and multifaceted attempts to realise the material existence of a Karen homeland through diplomatic attempts, as well as armed struggle. Kawthoolei emerged through a process of self-identification by mapping cultural characteristics onto geographic boundaries that occurred against a backdrop of colonial policies of categorisation and classification and assigning ethnic and national boundaries (Brenner, 2019; Gravers, 2007; Smith, 1999). In this ethnonationalist imaginary, Kawthoolei can represent both a land or nation, and is also contemporaneously referred to as a future Karen state or federal unit within a larger union.

Historically, Mutraw District became one of the core areas of future territorial claims, and over subsequent decades many areas of exclusive governance became eroded with the exception of the eastern highlands. These processes were designed to internally cohere Karen identity, and exclude those outside these categories. However, while such categories appear hegemonic and are presented by elites, as such these political representations and processes of cognition present a reality and strategies that are never shared by all (Gravers, 2007).

The KNU was formed prior to Burmese independence in 1947 with conflict breaking out against the newly established Burmese state in 1949 (Saw Ralph and Naw Sheera, 2020). The KNU operates as a de facto government and parastate. Although not receiving international recognition, the KNU administration aspires to reproduce in areas under its control a 'Weberian modern/rational-bureaucratic state with fourteen departments spanning civil administration, health and education that extract taxes from the local population and claims the right to monopolise violence' (South, 2010: 63). Since the coup, the KNU has been able to expand territory and influence across all of its brigade areas, though many areas are still contested.

In 1994, the DKBA split from the KNU and in 2010 the Karen BGF split from the DKBA (Buchanan, 2016; Kenny, 2010). When the BGF split, it chose a closer institutional relationship with the military, coming under its regional command (Buchanan, 2016), coupled with more freedom to benefit from wealth accumulation through rent extraction and running (il) licit businesses (KPSN, 2020). Counterinsurgent militias typically emerge not prior to, but during civil wars where weak states rely on proxies to project power through incorporation

<sup>5</sup> The meaning of the term itself is deeply contested although many in the KNU today refer to it as 'land without evil'. See Garbagni and Walton (2020) for an extended discussion.

and containment (Jentzsch et al., 2015; Staniland, 2015). The DKBA split, which occurred along religious lines, also signalled a break from ethnonationalist ideology and governance practices. The KNU leadership was entirely Christian, and many Buddhist members felt marginalised. This mirrored historical narratives and material circumstances of inequity and domination by Sgaw Karen (whose elites tend to be Christian) over Plong Karen (who tend to be Buddhist) (Chambers, 2019; Gravers, 2007).

The split happened with help from Buddhist Karen monks, especially a charismatic figurehead U Thuzanna (South, 2009). An animist religious leader in Mutraw told us how as a young man he had helped U Thuzana build the pagoda at Myaing Gyi Ngu. The charismatic monk had been able to perform magic by calling small songbirds to fly and sit in the palm of his hand. At night he had lay Buddhist volunteers move water up the hill to the monastery and proclaimed to local people that he could perform magic. Behind the scenes, Burmese Military Intelligence were providing support and assurances. The split signalled a new trajectory for the nascent DKBA which the BGF also followed. Akin to U Thuzanna, Karen BGF top commanders are charismatic strongmen, and there is also a multi-tiered clientelist order, in which BGF commanders form the structure and constituent units of power.

This becomes spatialised in the sense that the area where a commander is based becomes their area, or fiefdom. Here, combatants and local people pay fealty in a personalistic sense to the commander as supposed to the institution. The DKBA split from the Burmese military allowed them to keep territory and rule areas adjacent to bases. The areas today where the BGF operates is where their commanders and troops were located when part of the DKBA. In multi-tiered clientelism, strongmen at the top of the pyramid generate resources that are channelled down in return for loyalty and support which flow upwards (Hicken, 2011). Through a series of hierarchical relationships, communities, through village headmen, connect to local commanders, who then connect to apex BGF leaders, who ultimately answer to the state through the junta's regional command and must perform services in order to keep their privileges and govern.

The KNU and Karen BGF draw upon very different sources of moral authority which is contingent on 'moral claims and enactments' (Chambers and Cheesman, 2019). The KNU as an ethnonationalist organisation has often been portrayed in moralistic terms (Brenner, 2017; Thawngmaung, 2008), whereas Justine Chambers (2019) relates the moral performative repertoires of armed strongmen and how they are enacted in counterintuitive ways. This shapes political, social and economic authority where relations between authorities and their subjects draw on cultural logics of moral performance. These performances are one way by which authority is projected spatially.

### **Checkpoints in Mutraw District: territorial boundary-making and surveillance**

Mutraw District is comprised of a homogenous Animist and Christian Sgaw Karen population whose location in the steep forested highlands of the northern Dawna range are a topographic and ecological buffer. While political and military might tend to diminish over distance, here the friction of terrain makes power decay faster (Scott, 2009; Schouten, 2022). Mutraw District remains the most autonomous KNU-controlled region, with large mountainous areas of administration that have never been brought under centralised state rule (Brenner, 2017; Joliffe, 2017). There are still a number of Tatmadaw bases, though post-coup they are slowly being cleared out or have been abandoned. Checkpoints are used by Mutraw District authorities as a technology of inscribing territory through boundary demarcation, enclosure and securitisation (Peluso and Lund, 2011; Rasmussen and Lund, 2018). Checkpoints are also nodes that signify gateways that individuals and commodities are channelled through in order to regulate access (Elden, 2010; Jones, 2008). Channelling flows through specific gateways and performing checks on people, their bodies and identities, and the goods they bring also facilitates the operation of security and surveillance institutions which are just as much about admittance as exclusion (Schneier, 2006). There is a spatialised and institutionalised architecture that governs the use of checkpoints both as external boundary markers and for internal security. Once these institutions of surveillance are understood by those who engage with them, they also serve to discipline behaviour through norms and practices (Foucault, 2007). For instance, the KNU administration in Mutraw is very socially conservative and prohibits the import of alcohol or drugs.

Checkpoints are positioned at strategic transportation entry points around the outer perimeter of Mutraw District. The logics of a parastate follow statist territorial practices of inscribing territory, creating borders and marking its external limits and maintaining large-scale infrastructure enabling flows of people and goods (Brenner and Elden, 2009). However, in contrast to the modern state, where statehood is a given a legally and territorially recognised entity, as a parastate this is under question and also under violent contestation (Mampilly, 2011). How and where checkpoints are deployed geographically is relational, either as a public display of sovereignty or obscured and secluded to avoid confrontation.

The eastern boundary of Mutraw is along the Salween River and also forms the borderline between Thailand and Myanmar. Here, with Thailand to the east and Mutraw District to the west, the KNU can operate free of harassment from the junta. Along the Salween River there are two main checkpoints which both permanently flying the Karen flag. There are also large signs dotted along the riverbank that read 'Welcome to Kawthoolei', which is an overt, outwardly facing political statement and assertion of sovereignty. Following Austin's (1955) 'performative utterance', the KNU is literally stating its sovereignty and simultaneously enacting it. At towns along the river, once you disembark and enter Mutraw, there will be a checkpoint. The checkpoints are gateways signalling that you are now entering areas of KNU sovereignty, as boundary markers that inscribe territory (Sikor and Lund, 2009). Along the other terrestrial borders of

Mutraw. there are checkpoints along roads or smaller rivers. At the KNU border checkpoint between Brigade 1 and 5, there is a large checkpoint. However, in other areas bordering where the junta operates, checkpoints are set back geographically in more inaccessible areas along rivers or roads and are not overtly visible. This deliberate strategy of obscuring checkpoints is to avoid direct confrontation from the Burmese military. Here, the techniques and strategies for territorialising and projecting political authority are spatially relational and contingent on the presence and relationship to other political actors.

Inside Mutraw District there are checkpoints at the entrance to larger villages where there are roads, as well as at (?) the district capital of Dae Boh Noh. There are also four checkpoints inside the district stationed at key junctions. They are nodes for surveying the population who pass and for checking goods. At a main junction and checkpoint high on the ridge, traffic and goods travelling from the eastern Salween valley to western Pwe Lo Kloh valley meet with those travelling north to south. The officer in charge explained that the checkpoint was to 'to make sure who you are and what you are doing'. The primary purpose is security where an ongoing threat is troop movements or spies from the Burmese military. Apparatuses of security seek to survey and act upon possible threats introducing new notions of risks in an attempt to manage the 'problem of circulation' (Foucault, 2007: 61). People from the surrounding area told us stories of spies, who were dressed strangely, did not look Karen and could not speak the language, were quickly reported to authorities. Often profiling at checkpoints follows racialised practices (Streicher, 2020). An officer and soldiers as well as police and customs officials are all posted to the checkpoint. However, the checkpoint is also an informal gathering point. The wife of the commanding officer runs a small food shop next to the checkpoint. The checkpoint is a friendly place where travellers and travelling KNU and KNLA officials usually stop. There are also a few small goods shops and a mechanic. They all sell fuel to travellers. Here, formal and informal relations mix and the checkpoint is safe and secure. It is a meeting place for villagers or a resting place when coming back from the fields, where insurgency is socially constituted through formal institutions as well as through informal intimate relations (Shah, 2013).

### **Performing the parastate**

Mutraw District, with its welcome signs announcing sovereignty, is where checkpoints act as boundaries and entry points and facilitate performative aspects of statecraft for both the material parastate and imaginary Karen nation. The parastate through its policies, actions and customs performs itself as sovereign, and for states (and even more so parastates), this is visible at its borders when control over territory, population and identity are in question.

Along the Salween River there is an informal bilateral agreement with Thai authorities that Karen boats must check-in at KNU checkpoints, likewise Thai boats at Thai checkpoints. The identity of each boat is denoted by either a Karen or Thai flag that is mounted at the bow or stern. At Karen riverside checkpoints, KNU officials check people and their travel documents. Import goods are

scrutinised to ensure they are devoid of contraband. Officials in uniforms collect small import fees which are paid by only commercial merchants on different types of commodities. Import duty is only paid once, is standardised and follows the KNU's taxation policy which is set out publicly on big posters at all border checkpoints. Goods to be exported are free of charge, but may be taxed upon entering Thailand. Here, the logics of operating as a parastate are brought into being through the performative practices of KNU custom officials (Gregson and Rose, 2000).

There is a paradox whereby the KNU, a resource-poor armed group seeks to limit tax, yet operates a complex revenue-raising bureaucracy based on its own tax law and policy. Padoh Taw Nee, the KNU spokesperson and head of foreign affairs explained to us from his departmental HQ in the border town of Mae Sot, that at a previous party congress, leaders had decided to make taxation a 'second order' priority. As part of KNU policy, they keep taxes to a minimum. If roadblocks represent the lowest entry costs for revenue raising (Haggman and Stepputat, 2003; Schouten, 2024), then for the KNU this is only one stream for raising revenue. The KNU's Department of Tax and Finance operates a complex and sophisticated tax collection operation based on taxing a small percentage of business profits, agricultural surplus and owned productive assets with an emphasis on keeping taxation as low as possible. Village tract administrators in Mutraw District explained to us that during years of poor harvest, in kind payments of agricultural produce are waived for the poorest households. Two thirds of households are food insecure, which is also why the KNU takes care not to impose regressive taxes. Instead, what is important is to be performing the state through 'ritualised repetition of norms' (Butler, 1993). The force of such performative acts combined with routinised repetition is one authority-making practice between the KNU and its local political constituency. This also appeals to moral and ethnonationalist governing logics that places the KNU as a government but also a paternalistic guardian over Karen people.

There are also frequent and routine engagements between Mutraw District leaders and Thai border officials. These ongoing deliberations revolve around 'citizens' of Mutraw entering and exiting Kawthoolei to Thailand through 'official channels' and carrying the correct KNU identification documents. There are also bilateral relations over the trade of valuable minerals found on the Karen side of the border. Passing through checkpoints, engaging with KNU officials and following their protocols places individuals in a relationship of power where they tacitly accept the KNU as an authority demonstrating recognition and legitimacy as a sovereign authority (Lund and Boone, 2013). Here, the KNU is performing the role of a parastate in its daily routinised engagement with its subjects as well as maintaining horizontal relations with Thailand. Cumulatively, these multifaceted interactions happening at different political scales enforce the notion that the KNU is the sole sovereign authority along this stretch of the shared border between Kawthoolei and Thailand.

### **The Karen BGF: checkpoints, passage and organising logistical space**

The Karen BGF runs a dense gridded network of checkpoints across the spaces where it operates. Instead of creating boundaries to demarcate territory, checkpoints follow a different logic and are employed as a technology of governance to raise revenue (Mampilly and Thakur, 2024). However, these checkpoints are also be understood as an expression of power over logistical space and circulation (Schouten, 2022).

The BGF operates across four separate areas it calls cantonments in southeastern Myanmar. Two are strategically positioned north and south of the Asia Highway and border the town of Myawaddy that connects the economic capital Yangon and Myanmar's largest cities to the rest of Asia and is a transnational trade corridor and logistics network. As the Asia Highway snakes through a gap in the Dawna mountains and onto a plain, this hierarchical schema plays out where the BGF operates checkpoints alongside other armed groups. Who gets to position checkpoints where follows a relational hierarchy forming an 'important recursive overall pattern that connects across them, structuring the overall division of logistical space' (Schouten, 2019). Given its close relationship to the state, the BGF is the apex armed proxy, and its checkpoints top this hierarchical schema. Further away from this critical transportation corridor, other armed groups such as the DKBA and KNU-KNLA PC have checkpoints, some of which are in areas overlapping with the Karen BGF.

(Il)licit cargo and people who avoid formal border crossing seeking lower taxes and avoiding oversight are able to come across from multiple routes over a porous border. Whichever route is chosen at this trans-boundary corridor, formal or informal, which facilitates border posts, barriers and checkpoints and taxes create 'friction' (Hagmann and Steputtat, 2023; Tsing, 2005). The most lucrative BGF checkpoints are at strategic transport nodes for collecting highway taxes, where larger checkpoints are located at junctions and along main arteries, often at close intervals. Here, the profits will accrue directly to the top BGF commander of the cantonment. The second type of checkpoints are those along smaller roads. Often these are run by local commanders, and the profits are kept by them, though some will be shared up the ladder with more senior commanders following patterns of patronage. There are also much smaller checkpoints either on smaller roads or tracks or at the entrance to towns which are opportunistically put up by junior commanders and combatants who keep the rents they extract. For instance, Htoo Eh Moo, a son of Colonel Chit Thu, has his own checkpoint near Shwe Koko where he collects revenue for himself. There are also checkpoints that are run by (?) the Burmese military as security checkpoints, which are also sites of some of the highest taxation rates. During the harvest period, the BGF more than doubles the number of checkpoints, especially on smaller roads close to agricultural fields to tax locals at the site of harvest especially for commercial crops like soybean and corn as well as often multiple times during transportation and again when going to market. The BGF also tries to coral transport flows through its preferred routes to maximise rent.

While the rates and the route may be subject to BGF manipulation, there is a performative and routinised aspect to rent collection that has an ordering effect. A tax receipt is meant to be issued to cars to allow them to pass through all BGF areas with a single payment. However, in practice vehicles are charged multiple times by the BGF as well as other groups. Receipts are only used when a high tax is paid for commercial purposes, for example transporting valuable commodities such as cattle. Some BGF commanders told us that the rate of taxation should be fixed at main checkpoints as per their policy and that there was an official price list. However, in practice rents are taken arbitrarily.

Since 2018, a new territorial formation has emerged as the BGF has created small enclaves either along or close to the border. These centres are sites of physical casino complexes with restaurants, karaoke and prostitution as well as large online gambling and scamming operations run in concert with Chinese gangs (USIP, 2022). They rely on a largely trafficked labour force from south and southeast Asia, and Africa. Financing these hubs draws on Chinese transnational illicit revenue flows. The United States Institute for Peace (2024) estimates that cybercrime raises \$15.3Bn USD per year in Myanmar alone, with the most prosperous and notorious found in areas under BGF control. There are multiple casino complexes; the two main sites are Shwe Ko Ko under control of Chit Thu and KK Park under control of Moe Thone.

Online crime is conducted mainly through ‘pig butchering’, which involves assuming a fictitious online profile to build trust before scamming a victim. For Chinese investors, these casinos are the third generation, where their illicit capital seeks out new sites away from the pressure of Chinese state authorities (Ong, 2022). First-generation complexes adjacent to China were susceptible to border closure; the second in other southeast Asian countries were susceptible to Chinese pressure; This latest iteration involves carefully chosen locations situated in sites of ‘disaggregated sovereignty’ (Slaughter, 2004), nuanced territorial spaces beyond where the Burmese state can project power, and therefore free from pressure from China and Thailand, yet under the autonomous control of a state sanctioned proxy. These sites are physical nodes for carrying out tasks that require human labour within broader transnational flows of illicit revenue through cybercrime (Ong, 2022). However, the BGF is a state-affiliated proxy, and therefore receives protection and permission from the state to the run illicit business and administer territorial enclaves. An alliance with the neighbouring KNU through the United Karen Armed Groups (UKAG) ensures the infrastructure investment is protected from rival armed groups who are actively fighting the military junta.

### **The Karen BGF: reconciling rent and moral authority**

Situated at a cross-border trading zone and regional transnational transport corridor, but within a civil war setting in Myanmar, the BGF draws upon shifting conflict dynamics as part of its revenue raising strategy. When the conflict shifts from warm to hot and the BGF’s patron, the junta, is under attack the BGF also benefits. When fighting escalates and the Asia Highway is closed, cross-border traffic is diverted through BGF controlled areas just north of Myawaddy. When

this happens the BGF erects additional checkpoints and charges higher rates, raising greater revenue. In such conflict economies the system has been rigged to raise revenue across different scenarios whether the conflict is hot or cold (Keen, 2000).

The DKBA and subsequently the BGF made money from taxing at checkpoints, cattle trading, taxing villagers, smuggling cars and logging (Thornton, 2007). To achieve this they deliberately created footholds in lucrative licit and illicit cross-border trading routes north and south of Myawaddy. This was not a novel entrepreneurial innovation, instead it was predicated on older revenue-raising repertoires used by the KNU. The first KNU customs gate was opened at Phalu, (next to the current day KK Park) south of Myawaddy in the 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade area in 1964, the following year the KNU opened another at Kawmoorah (Wangkha) in 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade to the north (and adjacent to where Shwe Ko Ko is today) (Smith, 1999). By the 1970s, the main base of Kawmoorah was producing up to 1000 Kyat per day when cattle would cross the Moei River into Thailand. By 1983 at its peak, the KNU finance minister estimated income to be 500 million Kyat or 50 million USD per annum which was 'an astonishing figure for an otherwise impoverished backwater' (Smith, 1999: 283). Shwe Ko Ko was built adjacent to the ruins of Kawmoorah after it was overrun by the military and DKBA in 1995 following the split from the KNU. Maung Chit Thu, later to become Colonel under the BGF, situated his 999 Special Forces Battalion there seeking to benefit from cross-border trade and establishing informal crossing points such as the Naung Naung gate. Around the site of Shwe Koko, Chit Thu cleared the forest, built pagodas on hill tops and invited Buddhist Plong Karen to the area who settled among and eventually outnumbered Skaw Karen communities who had already lived there. This social engineering provided him with a new and loyal constituency. Just south of Phalu is KK Park, another online gambling, cybercrime and prostitution enclave run by another BGF boss Moe Thone. Such palimpsests are sites where newer sovereign formations and economic systems have been superimposed on older practices through violence and dispossession.

In order to benefit from cross-border trade, the BGF has extended its webs of patronage to Thai border authorities and operate a border crossing informally known in Thailand as the '24 route', where a stream of transport flows day and night, seven days a week. Across the border in Myanmar, it is called the Naung Naung gate. Obscured from public view, the crossing is co-run by Thai border guards, customs officials and the BGF. Collusion is not solely between the Thai authorities and the BGF, instead a tri-partite arrangement involves private enterprise. Ha Yaek Group, a Thai company, operates a vast shopping warehouse selling construction materials and is the main supplier for BGF run casinos. A continuous flow of Ha Yaek marked trucks flows from Thailand to Shwe Ko Ko via the Naung Naung Gate. As a local driver explained, 'during COVID although the border was shut, I transported materials back and forth between Mae Sot and Myawaddy, authorities permitted me to use the "24 route". It was heavily taxed during COVID, so sometimes the Thai trader used other routes. In doing so, we faced a problem from both Thai and Myanmar – they arrested or fined us if we used other routes. Similarly, the BGF fine us if they see us using other routes, and

not the “Naung Naung Gate”. The BGF taxes, but also corrals taxable trade through its transportation circuits and awards penalties for evasion.

Unlike the KNU with multiple departments, a taxation policy and law, the only rents the BGF extracts are at checkpoints. Paradoxically, the KNU seeks to minimise taxes despite a complex bureaucracy whereas the Karen BGF seeks to maximise them despite no bureaucratic apparatus. Whilst checkpoints in Mutraw District can also be sites of communal interaction, community members are fearful of BGF checkpoints where there was always a latent sense of the possibility of violence. The BGF also administers justice, but it is carried out in an ad hoc way and at the discretion of the commander in charge which is often punitive, such as publicly placing people in stocks for petty crimes. However, despite the violent and authoritarian behaviour of BGF, leaders are also able to draw upon different moral registers in the ways they present themselves to their local constituencies. Often on festive days, commanders will give money to local village households. This is performed in a way where recipients must bow and pay respect emphasising the hierarchical and clientelist relations between patron and client.

Justine Chambers (2019) sheds much needed analytical insight on the ways that these armed strongmen draw upon performative elements of moral authority through public merit-making rituals. Despite being embedded in vice, BGF strongmen, such as Chit Thu or Moe Thone, are able to appeal in confounding ways to a Buddhist moral cosmology. As Justine Chambers (2019: 263) finds ‘despite being heavily involved in crime, people trafficking and carrying out violence, these powerful Buddhist benefactors and their highly public and performative acts of generosity to the sangha and their proximity to abbots only serves to reinforce their power and embed them as moral authorities’. The BGF also funds Buddhist events and supports monasteries. Chit Thu has used his clientelist connections with regional Tatmadaw (Myanmar armed forces) commanders in Karen State to foster development projects in areas he controls, including roads, schools and medical clinics (Ibid.). Since the coup, he has invited the KNU to provide these services. Such charismatic strongmen are able to work through local moral frameworks and inter-subjective understandings of morality among Plong Karen Buddhists (Ibid.)

While there is a spatialised hierarchy of who gets to place checkpoints where, which is determined by proximity to the state for its proxies over logistical space over the transport corridor, there is also an organisational hierarchy within the Karen BGF of who gets to place checkpoints where. For the BGF, checkpoints are less about securing or demarcating territory, instead they are located at transport nodes along routes and junctions where people and goods circulate enabling them to maximise rent collection. In some areas they are able to monopolise checkpoints; in others, away from their power centres, logistical space is shared with other groups such as the KNU-KNLA PC and DKBA. The BGF’s relationship to the state means that its areas of operation and territorial enclaves are not under contestation by the state but are tacitly accepted and therefore state-sanctioned and legitimised spaces. In areas of BGF dominance they are able to monopolise

checkpoints and political authority but on the margins there are other armed group checkpoints.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has shown how the KNU and the Karen BGF approach governance different by tracing their objectives to their modes, logics and governance practices. While structural factors influence conflict zones, greater attention has to be paid to agency-based explanations: first, this involves focusing on day-to-day performative practices, institutions and technologies of governance that armed groups employ; second, this involves understanding why armed groups draw upon different performances or governmental repertoires and how these are shaped by different ideological or cosmological foundations that provide the (moral) frameworks and are the basis for inter-subjective meaning making through which armed groups engage their political constituencies; third is how sovereignty is always contingent on how an armed group interfaces with the state and other adjacent armed actors.

Evidence from wide ranging contexts has shown where irregular warfare as a technology of rebellion ceases to shape spatial relations and territorial control in contexts of civil war. There are also many contexts where asymmetric warfare is not used. In settings where 'territorial control' does play an important role as these areas are assumed to be structurally determined, too little attention has been paid to armed group agency and the range of techniques and strategies they employ to project authority. Cartographically, zones of control are visually displayed as static bounded containers when in fact dynamic processes of change shape and recast social and political life in conflict zones (Wood, 2003).

Comparatively employing checkpoints as an analytical device reveals different governmental logics. The Karen BGF which has gained international notoriety for cybercrime and seeks to accumulate wealth also draws upon Buddhist moral and performative repertoires. The evidence presented of how the BGF seeks service providers in the areas where it operates goes beyond mere instrumentalist and greed-based explanations (Bandula-Irwin et al., 2022; Mampilly, 2021). For armed groups, sovereignty is also relational and contingent on their relationship to the state. However, there is a still tacit link between ideological orientations, group objectives and sovereign formations. The Karen BGF was happy to pursue economic incentives over explicitly political or territorial aspirations, which involves taxing the circulation of goods and explains how sovereignty is shared with the state and even other service providers such as the KNU. Conversely, the KNU seeks to challenge the primacy of the state to claim and inscribe territory and perform a parastate. In areas where KNU sovereignty is contested the aim is still to outcompete the state, consolidate and monopolise governance.

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