INTRODUCTION

Myanmar is home to immense ethnic diversity, which has been at the core of questions relating to national identity, governance arrangements and constitutional design. The concepts of a majority and minorities in themselves are highly contested, and the relationship between the Bamar, which is the numerical majority and politically dominant ethnic group, and other groups as well as between some of these groups has been a key question in long-standing conflicts in Myanmar politics. The recent countrywide resistance against the 2021 military coup has provided new opportunities to rethink and redefine some of the established categories and assumptions about ethnicity and ethnic politics in Myanmar.

Despite the centrality of questions related to ethnicity in Myanmar's history and politics, basic demographic information about ethnic groups in Myanmar has not been examined systematically. It is generally assumed that ethnic minorities are the dominant population in the subnational administrative units called states—which are named after the titular nationalities—while the ethnic majority, the Bamar, is the dominant population in the country's regions. Beyond this broad stroke, there is very little information on the subnational geographic distribution of ethnic groups in Myanmar.

Indeed, detailed and reliable ethnic data at the subnational level has long been a missing piece in the puzzle of ethnic politics in Myanmar. While ethnicity and ethnic politics in Myanmar have been studied extensively, statistics related to ethnicity in Myanmar have long been omitted—at least in part because of political sensitivities and contradictory visions, not to mention that a more complete picture of Myanmar's ethnic make-up could challenge the dominance of certain narratives and interests of certain groups—and thus remained largely speculative (though country-level population-share estimates may be based on outdated censuses, which are also referenced throughout this report).

With the aim of filling in part of the information gap in our understanding of ethnic diversity in Myanmar, the analysis presented in this report

draws on information compiled by Myanmar's General Administration Department (GAD) before the 2021 coup and conducts a statistical exercise which is contextualized with historical and qualitative data. To that end, the report (a) quantitatively examines subnational-level ethnic diversity; (b) identifies where the major ethnic groups are located; and (c) contextualizes the geographic distribution of ethnic groups by discussing the historical evolution of the country's administrative boundaries.

Given the controversial nature of the GAD's work, there are important concerns regarding data quality (see Chapter 1). Another caveat is that this report is based on pre-coup population data—specifically the GAD Township Reports compiled between October 2018 and September 2019 and made publicly available in 2020. As such, the report should be understood as an analysis of the ethnic landscape in pre-coup Myanmar.

The period in which the GAD Township Reports were compiled and released was a unique time in the GAD's history. The GAD, formally established by the State Law and Order Restoration Committee in the aftermath of the 1988 uprisings, had been part of the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA), a ministry led by military personnel (Saw and Arnold 2014; Arnold 2019). In December 2018, however, it was transferred to the Ministry of the Office of the Union Government, a ministry overseen by the civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (McDonald 2020). Since the coup on 1 February 2021, there have been significant changes to[1] and limitations on the functioning of the GAD itself—due to the Civil Disobedience Movement and widespread violence across Myanmar (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar 2022). Additionally, there have also been massive internal displacements and population movements.[2] These important changes are not captured in the data analysed in this report.

Despite shortcomings and limitations, the information the GAD provides is perhaps the sole source of subnational ethnic data in Myanmar available at this time. Furthermore, to our knowledge, the general public, stakeholder organizations and policymakers alike are largely unaware of the existence of the data, and the data has yet to be scrutinized. Therefore, we do not know the extent to which the data supports or deviates from speculation regarding the subnational ethnic landscape. This report is intended to serve as a constructive step in seriously engaging with existing data and to generate conversations about ways to improve the quality of ethnicity data from Myanmar: these discussions are especially important given that Myanmar is currently at a crossroad and the transitional constitutional process is underway.

Furthermore, the substance of the report—the subnational administrative units and ethnic landscape in Myanmar (see Chapter 3)—is crucial information with important implications for envisioning, crafting and negotiating the

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[1]   After the coup in February 2021, the military-installed State Administration Council formally transferred the GAD back to the MOHA.

[2]   According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), close to 986,500 people have been displaced internally since 1 February 2021. A further 47,200 people (mostly from Chin State) have been displaced into a neighbouring country. See UNHCR (2022).

institutions that will undergird the new Myanmar. As such, the report is also intended to inform policymakers and relevant stakeholders, including the National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Consultative Council, as they navigate the ongoing transitional constitutional process.

The report proceeds as follows. Chapter 1 highlights the paucity of ethnicity data from Myanmar and discusses background information on the GAD Township Reports and limitations of the ethnicity data generated from these reports. Chapter 2 provides an overview of ethnic diversity in Myanmar and presents ethnic distribution estimates based on the 1931, 1973 and 1983 censuses along with the 2019 GAD Township Reports. Chapter 2 also introduces the ethno-linguistic fractionalization (ELF) index, an index commonly utilized in social science, as a way to conceptualize and compare ethnic diversity at various levels of subnational administrative units in Myanmar. Then, Chapter 3 explains the origins of Myanmar's subnational administrative boundaries and provides an overview of how each state was created. It also examines the ethnic diversity of each state and where the titular ethnic groups are concentrated.

Finally, the report concludes with discussions of three policy issues. First, we recommend that emerging post-coup institutions, with the support of international stakeholders, invest resources in gathering and producing population and other administrative data. This process should be geared towards unifying ethnic categorization and ensuring data quality and accessibility. Second, we highlight the possibility of thinking beyond the status quo territorial organization when designing federal units and other subnational units. In the ongoing discourse on federalism in Myanmar, there is an acute tendency to maintain existing subnational administrative units to a large extent, especially the existing seven states. An examination of changes in subnational borders indicates that existing states are not historically fixed entities but that, rather, their boundaries are products of political negotiation. As such, the federal units in a future Myanmar could be collectively imagined and reimagined so that they facilitate equality between ethnic groups. Finally, regarding inclusive political institutions, we emphasize the importance of creating such institutions down to the lowest level of administrative units, including in the bureaucracy, because much of Myanmar is ethnically diverse down to the local level.