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IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

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Isabel Chew and Jangai Jap

International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE–103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE–103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
Tel: +46 8 698 37 00
Email: info@idea.int
Website: <https://www.idea.int>

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Abbreviations

AA	Arakan Army
CI	Confidence interval
ERO	Ethnic revolutionary organization
FDC	Federal Democracy Charter
GAD	General Administration Department
KIA	Kachin Independence Army
KIO	Kachin Independence Organisation
KNU	Karen National Union
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
MP	Member of parliament
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People's Defence Force
PNO	Pa-O National Organisation
SAC	State Administration Council
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army

Contents

Abbreviations ..... **iv**
Introduction **1**
Summary of findings 3

Chapter 1
About this Report **6**
1.1. Terminology 6
1.2. Data and methodology 8
1.3. Our sample 11

Chapter 2
Findings **24**
2.1. Social identities 24
2.2. Interethnic relations 28
2.3. Ethnicity and politics 32
2.4. Protecting the Rohingya 36
2.5. Religion and politics 39
2.6. Political systems and institutional preferences 44
2.7. Exploring the potential effects of ethnofederalism 61
2.8. Trust in major political actors 63

Chapter 3
Conclusion and recommendations **70**

References **73**
About the authors **75**
About International IDEA **76**

INTRODUCTION

Identity and ethnicity have long been central to Myanmar's protracted political crisis and are key factors in the quest to build an inclusive federal democratic system. To better understand how identity and ethnicity affect social and political preferences, we need systematic data that can shed light on the citizenry's perceptions of political systems and institutions, policy preferences and political attitudes as well as how they see themselves in relation to those with whom they share the same socio-political spaces. Such information is especially vital for present-day Myanmar as it stands at a crossroads, striving towards an inclusive, sustainable peace and a federal democratic union.

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup d'etat against the country's democratically elected government. This usurpation of power has been contested by various segments of society, including ordinary citizens, civil servants and elected representatives. Since then, democratic actors, alongside ordinary citizens, have begun to reimagine the future of Myanmar. As the resistance movement gained momentum, Myanmar's new constitutional framework became the heart of political dialogue among democratic stakeholders. This ongoing discourse revolves around the design of institutional structures that would not only facilitate the inclusion of various groups in Myanmar society, but also help establish pathways towards national reconciliation after decades of civil war.

While many political stakeholders, including ethnic minority leaders, have made their voices clear, we know less about how ordinary citizens understand and interpret different political institutions. In particular, a better understanding is needed of how ethnic minorities

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think about their identities and what that implies for democratic citizenship and constitutional design.

Given Myanmar's immense diversity, it is important to gain insights into the perspectives of specific groups and avoid treating ethnic minorities as a singular bloc.

While many research studies based on survey data have been conducted in Myanmar after the opening up of the country in 2010, they usually face two key constraints: the first has to do with the small sample size of ethnic minorities,[1] while the second is the inability to break down findings by ethnic group (due in part to the sample size limitation). Consequently, many studies do not allow researchers to make reliable inferences about ethnic minorities in Myanmar. Given Myanmar's immense diversity, it is important to gain insights into the perspectives of specific groups and avoid treating ethnic minorities as a singular bloc. This is especially relevant in the present context, as there is a great deal of heterogeneity across ethnic minority groups when it comes to preferences for institutional structures and political actors.

With the goal of contributing to democratic stakeholders' discussions on Myanmar's future constitution, this study (a) collects and analyses opinion data, paying particular attention to minority populations in Myanmar; (b) explores how ordinary citizens understand their social identities; (c) investigates intergroup relations; and (d) illuminates how ethnicity and other social identities influence ordinary citizenry's political and social preferences, including preferences for regime type, political system, support for ethnocentric institutions and pro-minority policies as well as trust in political actors. We also pay special attention to attitudes towards the Rohingya population, given that the Rohingya have been subject to atrocities amounting to genocide in the past 10 years.

The study builds on the findings of a previous survey fielded by International IDEA in November 2022. The research plan was further informed by additional analysis of the 2022 survey undertaken by another researcher, Constant Courtin. This includes the design of specific survey questions, as well as an analysis that breaks down data according to respondents' residence by state or region. We make references to the 2022 survey throughout this report.

1 The small number of ethnic minorities is usually due to attempts at capturing a nationally representative sample. While this is useful for understanding the general opinion of the Myanmar public, it also means that the sample would necessarily consist of a Bamar majority. In a nationally representative sample, ethnic minority voices cannot be adequately captured because they constitute a much smaller proportion of the population.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Based on a non-probability sample of 3,221 participants, the study's main findings are as follows:

- National, ethnic, religious and subnational identities are important to both Bamars and ethnic minorities alike, with the highest proportion of respondents rating religious identity as important.

- National identity is just as important as ethnic identity for the majority of ethnic minorities.

- At the everyday level, there is a high level of tolerance and acceptance between ethnic groups. An exception is in Rakhine State, where Arakan respondents' attitudes towards the Rohingya minority are more negative than 'titular' group relations with minorities elsewhere (the term 'titular' is defined in the next section).

- Most titular minorities support the creation of ethnocentric or ethnic-based institutions in 'their' ethnically defined state, although there is moderate support for policies that provide for ethnic minorities' political and cultural protection. As with everyday interethnic relations, we see that compared to their titular counterparts' attitudes towards minorities in their states, Arakan respondents were much more likely to oppose policies that encourage Rohingya's political and cultural protection.

- When it comes to religious tolerance, Buddhist respondents in general had much higher levels of intolerance towards Muslims as compared to Christians. Intolerance corresponds with higher levels of attachment with one's religious identity.

- Just over half of ethnic minority respondents preferred to have their own 'independent' country, with considerable variations among ethnic groups as well as across demographic characteristics. In particular, support for self-determination increases with ethnic pride but decreases with national pride.

- While there is strong support for federal democracy in Myanmar, understandings of federal democracy vary widely.

- When it comes to preference for territorial organization—specifically the creation of a Bamar state—the majority of respondents preferred to maintain the status quo (i.e. the seven regions or federal units). There is considerable support for decentralization, though support for decentralization is lower among Bamars compared to ethnic minorities.

- Highlighting a context in which one ethnic group within the subnational unit has special status and rights—an important component of ethnofederalism—did not affect support for self-determination. Among members of titular minorities living in their ethnic state, however, it worsened attitudes to outgroups.

- There is enormous trust for the National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defence Force (PDF), with low levels of trust towards the State Administration Council (SAC). When it comes to ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs), there are significant variations depending on the specific ERO and whether the respondent is a coethnic or not. For instance, the Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) and Karen National Union (KNU) received higher levels of trust among all EROs examined in this study. Non-coethnics, however, consistently reported lower levels of trust in the same ERO compared to coethnics.

Although a considerable proportion of titular minority respondents indicated support for self-determination, we note that (Myanmar) national pride is high and that there is even higher support for federal democracy among titular minorities.

While some of the findings in this report confirm conventional wisdom, others may come as a surprise. When reviewing these findings, readers are encouraged to keep an open mind and reconsider prior assumptions. Our sample provides a starting point, but we also hope that readers can investigate and test any such divergences further. We also urge readers to consider the findings in their entirety. For example, although a considerable proportion of titular minority respondents indicated support for self-determination, we note that (Myanmar) national pride is high and that there is even higher support for federal democracy among titular minorities. Finally, although this research addresses important gaps in the empirical research on identity politics in Myanmar, there are also limitations. These limitations are highlighted throughout the report and invite other researchers to address them in future research.

The report is structured as follows: first, terminology used in this report is defined before providing an overview of the data and methodology. This includes an elaboration of our sampling strategy as well as a description of our sample. We then delve into our findings. The findings are broken down into smaller subsections:

(1) social identities; (2) everyday interethnic relations; (3) ethnicity and politics; (4) protecting the Rohingya people; (5) religion and politics; (6) political systems and institutions; and (7) trust in political actors. In the subsection on political systems and institutions, we briefly review an experiment we embedded in the survey. This experiment explores a potential consequence of ethnofederalism where an ethnic group gains special status and rights at the subnational level. We look at its effect on interethnic relations and political preferences. Finally, we conclude the report by offering some broad recommendations for interested stakeholders.

Chapter 1

ABOUT THIS REPORT

1.1. TERMINOLOGY

Before moving on to the study's data and methodology, we first clarify several terms used in this report. It is important to note that during periods of conflict and contestation, what constitutes acceptable and appropriate terminology is often in flux as terms are negotiated. While we have aimed to use categories and terminologies that are commonly understood and used by ordinary people living in Myanmar at the time this report was written, our use of these terminologies does not represent our endorsement of these terms.

For example, when we refer to *taingyinthar* ethnic groups in Myanmar, we are referring to the groups that the Myanmar Government has claimed and recognized as being indigenous to Myanmar. The concept of *taingyinthar* is problematic and controversial, and its application has regrettably had the very real effect of producing two classes of minorities in Myanmar—those with full political rights (*taingyinthar* minorities) and those who are not considered full citizens of Myanmar (non-*taingyinthar* minorities). To better understand the effects of such discriminatory policies, we need to distinguish between minorities who are considered *taingyinthar* and those who are not.

In a similar vein, we refer to the Arakan (Rakhine), Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni (Kayah), Mon and Shan ethnic groups as 'titular' groups and members of these groups as 'titular' minorities.[2] Together with

2 The term 'titular nation' was first used by Maurice Barrès in the late 19th century and aims to denote the single dominant ethnic group in a particular state, typically after which the state was named.

the Bamar, these represent the eight 'major races' in Myanmar that are commonly understood as umbrella terms for smaller ethnic groups, or ethnic subgroups. While the term 'titular' is most closely associated with the autonomous entities formerly located within the former Socialist Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, we adopt the term here because the Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan each have a respective state named after them (ethnic state). Titular minorities, however, do not always live in the ethnic state associated with them. In some of our analyses, we distinguish between titular minorities residing in their ethnic states and those who reside outside of their ethnic state (for example, a Shan in Shan State vs. a Shan in other states).

Again, this does not constitute endorsement of these territorial units or any claim to these units as the 'ethnic homeland' of the titular groups. However, it cannot be denied that this kind of territorial division has remained largely intact since independence and has shaped the popular imagination of how any potential federal units could look. At the present time, the Federal Democracy Charter (FDC) stipulates that in the interim period and unless otherwise decided, the pre-existing territorial organization of 14 federal units should apply.

When referring to the names of specific ethnic groups, we use the terms preferred by each group. For example, we use 'Karenni' instead of 'Kayah', 'Arakan' instead of 'Rakhine', 'Karen' rather than 'Kayin' and 'Ta'ang' rather than 'Palaung'.

When referring to the names of states, we use the terms from the 2008 Constitution, as opposed to the terms preferred, if any, by the titular group in the state. Here, we use Rakhine State (as opposed to Arakan State), Kayah State[3] (instead of Karenni State) and Kayin State (instead of Karen State). Our choice of naming convention was made in recognition of ethnic diversity within each state. As mentioned earlier and explored at length in a report by International IDEA, there is tremendous diversity in each state (see Jap and Courtin 2022). These names are also in line with applicable universal norms and standards for place names used by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

3 The Karenni State Consultative Council issued a statement on 23 November 2023 rejecting the name Kayah State—which was imposed by the Government of Burma in 1951—and encouraging the media and stakeholders to use the term Karenni State. The latter term, referring to all Karenni tribes, 'holds significant historical and cultural importance for the independence of the Karenni people' (Karenni State Consultative Council 2023).

1.2. **DATA AND METHODOLOGY**

Our methodology builds on previous survey research commissioned by International IDEA in 2022. We verify, clarify and expand on some of the earlier survey's findings. We do this in three key ways. First, our survey questionnaire was constructed based on findings from the 2022 survey as well as additional analysis completed by Constant Courtin in December 2023. We worked closely with the International IDEA Myanmar team to refine and translate the questions before pretesting the questionnaire with eight focus group participants in two separate sessions in March 2024.

Second, we leveraged a sampling strategy that allowed us to obtain a better understanding of ethnic minorities' perspectives. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the limitations of using a nationally representative sample is the inability to accurately assess what ethnic minorities are feeling. Our study helps mitigate this. Finally (and as a corollary of the second point), we were able to go beyond the conventional Bamar versus ethnic minority framework by segmenting findings according to four types of ethnic groups. We further elaborate on our sampling and segmentation strategy in the next two subsections.

1.2.1. **Sampling**

Representativeness of a sample refers to the extent to which the sample resembles the characteristics of the larger population of interest. This may be assessed at various levels, such as at the national or country level, subnational level or group level. Many existing surveys collected in Myanmar were constructed to be nationally representative. However, such samples are only useful when the population of interest is the general public. If our population of interest is a subset of the national population, such as ethnic minorities or residents of particular subnational units, nationally representative samples are less useful because very few people from these smaller groups are included in the sample. For instance, a nationally representative sample of 1,000 respondents in Myanmar would include around 200 titular minorities. This is insufficient for making meaningful inferences about these minorities as a group, let alone inferences about specific ethnic minority groups.

By oversampling minority groups and populations residing in the states, we can address an important limitation of the 2022 survey which used a nationally representative sample. For the 2022 survey, although survey findings were often broken down according to state

and region, the sample sizes for some of these groups were very small and, as such, could not be used reliably. When it comes to ethnicity, for instance, the largest minority group represented in the sample was the Shan, with 112 respondents. Other ethnic minority groups ranged from 16 to 80 respondents, which is not enough to draw meaningful conclusions.

1.2.2. **Exploring group status**

Many studies on Myanmar focus on a dichotomous reading of group status, differentiating between the ethnic Bamar majority—who form the politically dominant group within the country—and ethnic minorities. However, at the subnational level (state or region), the majority group is not always the Bamars. To better understand individuals' motivations and behaviour, it is important that we consider how their national-level status interacts with their group status at the subnational level. This allows us to address the heterogeneity in considerations and experiences that exists within the broad categories of 'Bamars' versus 'ethnic minorities'. We thus look at the following groups:

To better understand individuals' motivations and behaviour, it is important that we consider how their national-level status interacts with their group status at the subnational level.

- **Bamars residing in 'regions'.** This group accounts for 64 per cent of the country's population. These Bamars are the majority ethnic group at the national level and at the subnational level. This group tends to be well represented in nationally representative surveys.

- **Bamars residing in 'states'.** This group accounts for 5 per cent of the country's population. While this group is ethnically Bamar, they differ from Bamars in the regions because they are a minority group at the subnational level. Since this group resides in the states—subnational administrative units where ethnic minorities make up the majority population—they are also more likely than their counterparts in the regions to come into contact with ethnic minorities. Consequently, their perceptions of political institutions and relationship with ethnic minorities may be distinct from that of Bamars in the regions.

- **Titular minorities.** Titular minorities account for nearly 20 per cent of the country's population. These ethnic minorities have a designated ethnic state, that is, Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan ethnic groups, although not all titular minorities live in their ethnic state. For example, the majority of Karens live outside their ethnic state. In the case of the Kachins, Mons and Shans, these groups do not make up the majority population in their ethnic state, though they constitute the state's

largest group. In this report, unless we specify residence (i.e. if respondents live in or outside of their ethnic state), we are referring to titular minorities as a whole.

- **Non-titular minorities.** Non-titular minorities account for about 11 per cent of the country's population. This category of ethnic minorities encompasses *taingyinthar* minorities (e.g. Pa-O) without an ethnic state—though several have been designated as 'self-administered' zones or divisions under the 2008 Constitution—as well as non-*taingyinthar* minorities (e.g. Indian) many of whom lack full citizenship rights. These ethnic minorities are likely to have systematically different perceptions and political attitudes compared to the titular minorities.

The objective of our sampling approach is to construct a sample that allows us to make meaningful inferences about the subgroups in Myanmar.

The objective of our sampling approach is to construct a sample that allows us to make meaningful inferences about the subgroups in Myanmar. To do so, we oversampled Bamars residing in states, titular minorities and non-titular minorities, relying on a combination of online opt-in and respondent-driven sampling approaches. Additionally, we strove to obtain a sizeable sample of respondents from subnational units with ethnically heterogeneous subnational units, such as Shan State, Kachin State and Sagaing Region. Interethnic relations in these subnational units are particularly tenuous and it is thus important to ensure that Myanmar's new political institutions do not further strain existing interethnic relationships in these places.

1.2.3. **Survey implementation**

In the current Myanmar context, neither random sampling nor in-person surveys were feasible due to security concerns. To collect public opinion data, we utilized an online Burmese survey, which was programmed in and hosted on the survey platform Qualtrics.

To recruit participants, we circulated the survey via Facebook advertisements. These were targeted at townships in Myanmar and various ethnic minority networks inside Myanmar. We offered MMK 7,000 (about USD 2) in the form of a mobile top-up credit for respondents' participation. Data collection began on 10 April 2024 and concluded on 6 May 2024.

1.2.4. **Data cleaning**

Between 10 April and 6 May 2024, the survey was attempted 6,348 times. Of those attempts, those who did not reside inside Myanmar, were younger than age 18, did not consent to participating in the

study and were residents of Naypyidaw were not able to take the survey. In total, 3,612 respondents were able to participate in the study.[4]

Since an incentive of MMK 7,000 in the form of mobile credit was offered, we were concerned that some participants might attempt the survey multiple times to obtain mobile credit, resulting in low quality data. To exclude such respondents from our sample, we first removed those who completed the survey in less than eight minutes (the bottom 10th percentile of our sample, or 280 responses). Next, we removed respondents who indicated their ethnicity as 'other' (111 responses) because they may not have been given the appropriate questionnaire.[5] This process yielded a final sample of 3,221 respondents.

1.3. **OUR SAMPLE**

Although our sample is not nationally representative, we were able to construct meaningful samples of important subgroups in Myanmar. This included individuals who live in the states as well as titular minorities such as the Kachin, Karen and Shan. Importantly, our sample mirrored closely the distribution of titular minorities both within and outside of their ethnic state. Because our sample was recruited online, we also found that respondents were more likely to be male,[6] younger, more educated and living in urban areas. We control for these factors in our analyses whenever appropriate.

1.3.1. **State or region residency**

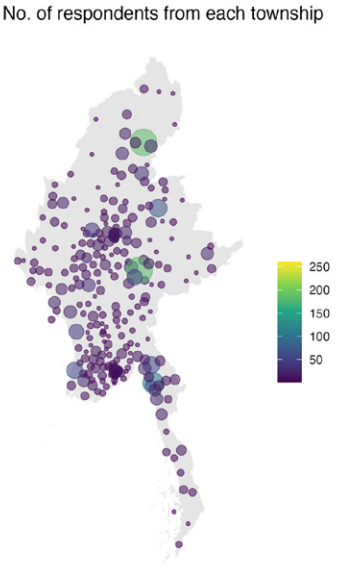
While online surveys allowed for participant recruitment within the current Myanmar context, how well it recruited participants from specific locations depends on a host of local-level factors, including level of Internet penetration, intensity of armed conflict

4 Naypyidaw residents were excluded from the study because it is Union Territory and presumably not associated with any one ethnic group.

5 Respondents were assigned a version of the questionnaire based on their self-reported ethnicity and state or region of residency. Respondents who indicated their ethnicity as 'other', therefore, may not have been given the appropriate questionnaire. Those reporting 'other' could include individuals whose ethnicity was not listed as a response option (e.g. Yaw), individuals whose ethnicity was listed but missed it (i.e. inattentive respondents), and individuals of mixed ethnicity who did not identify with any one ethnicity.

6 Although we had made every effort to recruit a more balanced sample in terms of gender, the current security context in Myanmar presented significant challenges in terms of respondent recruitment—even within an online setting. We were faced with a trade-off between obtaining a balanced sample and a sufficiently large enough sample that would allow us to make reliable inferences.

Figure 1.1. **Geographic distribution of survey respondents**



Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

and the extent of population displacement. This is why our sample includes a sizeable sample of residents from Yangon even though we did not advertise our surveys in Yangon Region; and why there are relatively few respondents from Kayin and Rakhine states and even fewer respondents from Chin and Kayah states even though most townships in these states were targeted for recruitment (see Table 1.1). Nevertheless, the two different types of subnational administrative units (state versus region) are well represented in our sample, with half of the respondents coming from the states and the other half from the regions (see Figure 1.1).

1.3.2. **Ethnicity**

In this study, we determined ethnicity based on self-identification—that is, how individuals identify themselves ethnically. To determine respondents' ethnicity, we asked the following question close to the start of the survey: 'How do you identify yourself in terms of ethnicity (*lumyo*)? (You don't need to put down your ethnicity from your NRC [National Registration Card]. If you identify with an ethnicity that is not listed, you may select 'other' and indicate the ethnicity you identify with).'

Table 1.1. **Survey sample by state and region**

	No. of respondents	Percentage of total sample (%)	Percentage of country's total population (%)
State	**1,630**	**50.6**	**29.3**
Chin State	40	1.2	0.9
Kachin State	390	12.1	3.3
Kayah State	28	0.9	0.6
Kayin State	122	3.8	3.1
Mon State	294	9.1	4.0
Rakhine State	172	5.3	6.2
Shan State	584	18.1	11.3
Region	**1,591**	**49.4**	**70.7**
Ayeyarwady	239	7.4	12.0
Bago	120	3.7	9.5
Magway	133	4.1	7.6
Mandalay	290	9.0	14.2
Sagaing	218	6.8	10.3
Tanintharyi	50	1.6	2.7
Yangon	541	16.8	14.3

Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics; country population statistics from the 2014 Census.

The 12 largest *taingyinthar* groups in Myanmar were presented as response options, along with 'other': Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Kokang, Lahu, Mon, Pa-O, Rakhine, Shan and Ta'ang.[7] Those selecting 'other' were then asked a follow-up question: 'Here's another

7 The Rohingya people are at least as large as some of these groups in terms of population. However, it was not displayed in the first list due to sensitivity issues. It was displayed along with other *taingyinthar* groups in the second list.

list of ethnic groups living in Myanmar. Please select or indicate your ethnic group.' Response options for this question were the largest 20 politically relevant ethnic minority groups in Myanmar: Ahka, Asho Chin, Chinese, Daignet, Danu, Dawei, Gurkha, Kaman, Kayan, Khumi, Indian, Inntha, Lhavo, Lisu, Mro, Naga, Rohingya, Shanni, Wa and Zomi.[8] Those who did not identify as any of these groups had the option of selecting 'other' and writing in their ethnicity.

We were successful in oversampling Bamars residing in the states and titular minorities. However, despite our efforts to recruit ethnic minorities, some groups remained under-represented. Some ethnic groups, like the Kachin, Karen and Shan, are well represented in the sample. However, as discussed earlier, the success of our recruitment efforts depended on local conditions and some groups reside in particularly hard to reach areas of the country. For instance, northern Rakhine—where the Rohingya population is concentrated—was targeted for recruitment, yet we were only able to recruit eight Rohingya respondents for our sample.

Note that the ethnic breakdown of the sample summarized in Table 1.2 does not reveal ancestry or descent of the respondents. In fact, individuals' self-identified ethnicity may not necessarily match their ancestry. To learn more about the extent of mismatch, towards the end of the survey, respondents were asked to indicate their parents' ethnicity. This information together with respondents' self-identified ethnicity suggests that a significant proportion of individuals in Myanmar are of mixed ancestry, though many self-identified with just one ethnic group. As Table 1.3 shows, those who self-identified as Shan have the highest rate of mixed ancestry while those who self-identified as Chin have the lowest rate. This is consistent with the fact that Shan State is the most ethnically diverse subnational unit in Myanmar, while Chin State is the most homogenous.[9]

Ethnicity also should not be conflated with residency. For instance, it should not be assumed that Karen respondents are also residents of Kayin State. As Table 1.4 indicates, some ethnic minorities are concentrated in their ethnic state while others are not. Except in

8 'Politically relevant' ethnic groups refers to cultural or linguistic cleavages that matter for political competition and social conflict. This term is most associated with Daniel Posner's work, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). We determine political relevance in Myanmar as groups that have formed group-based political parties or armed organizations, or groups that have experienced significant discrimination due to their identity.

9 Ethnic homogeneity in Chin State assumes 'Chin' as the category. It is, however, important to note that there is tremendous linguistic and ethnic subgroup diversity within Chin State.

the case of Chin and Rakhine respondents, the residency of several ethnic minority groups in our sample are fairly representative of the actual spread of these populations. For instance, ethnicity data based on the General Administration Department (GAD) Township Reports indicate that 30 per cent of Karens reside in Kayin State while the rest reside in regions, particularly in Ayeyarwady Region; 28 per cent of Karen respondents in our sample are Kayin State residents. Likewise, ethnicity data based on the GAD Township Reports indicate that 66 per cent of Shans reside in Shan State while the rest are split across Kachin State and Sagaing Region; 65 per cent of Shan State respondents in our samples are Shan.

1.3.3. **Other demographic characteristics**

A study conducted in 2018 indicates that Facebook users in Myanmar, who are widely considered to be representative of online users in Myanmar, are substantially different from non-Facebook users: they tend to be younger, highly educated, urbanite and Bamar (Samet, Arriola and Matanock 2024). Our sample reflects several aspects of the above stated differences.

Our sample contains more male, youth, urban and university educated individuals compared to the country's general population (see Table 1.5). There are also notable differences across the subgroups we examined. For instance, among Bamars in regions, nearly 61 per cent are male while just 53 per cent of non-titular minorities are male. Because data on demographic characteristics of the subgroups are, to our knowledge, nonexistent, we are not able to evaluate the extent to which our sample of the subgroups resembles or differs from the actual population.[10]

Of our respondents, 25 per cent are internal migrants (defined as living in a state or region that one was not born in). Of this 25 per cent, slightly under a third (31 per cent) moved state or region in the last three years, while another 23 per cent migrated three to five years ago.

When it comes to knowledge of minority languages, 12 per cent of Bamar reported being able to speak at least one other minority language compared with 68 per cent of ethnic minority groups. The two most popular minority languages among Bamar respondents were Shan and Karen.

10 We opted not to use weights as weighing introduced a certain level of inaccuracy, which in this case would be exacerbated by the lack of precise population demographic data at the subgroup level.

Table 1.2. **Survey sample by ethnicity**

	No. of respondents	Percentage of sample (%)	Percentage of country's population (%)
Bamar	**1,746**	**54.2**	**68.5**
Residing in states	531	16.5	4.1
Residing in regions	1,215	37.7	64.4
Titular minorities	**1,240**	**38.5**	**21.7**
Chin	116	3.6	2.1
Kachin	239	7.4	1.5
Karen	215	6.7	6.6
Karenni	36	1.1	0.4
Mon	166	5.2	2.1
Rakhine	195	6.1	4.3
Shan	273	8.5	4.7
Other minorities	**235**	**7.3**	**9.8**
Ahka	9	0.3	–
Chinese	29	0.9	–
Dawei	12	0.4	–
Danu	31	1.0	0.6
Gurkha	5	0.2	–
Indian	14	0.4	–
Inntha	17	0.5	–
Kaman	5	0.2	–
Kayan	7	0.2	–
Lahu	7	0.2	0.5
Lisu	7	0.2	–

Table 1.2. **Survey sample by ethnicity (cont.)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage of sample (%)	Percentage of country's population (%)
Pa-O	59	1.8	1.7
Rohingya	8	0.3	–
Shanni	5	0.2	–
Ta'ang	13	0.4	0.8
Other	7	0.2	–

Source: The population statistics come from the data based on the 2019 GAD Township Reports. Note that ethnic classification in our survey data is based on self-identification but ethnic classification in the GAD Township Reports is not. For more information about the latter, see Jap and Courtin (2022).

When it comes to language use at home, 63 per cent of ethnic minorities who were able to speak another language that is not Burmese spoke a *taingyinthar* minority language at home, compared to 32 per cent who spoke Burmese at home. Thirty-five per cent of this group of ethnic minorities mainly spoke a *taingyinthar* minority language outside of home.

See Figures 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 for a further breakdown of the survey sample by religion, age, highest education level and life satisfaction.

In the next chapter, we look in more detail at our survey's findings based on responses from this sample of respondents.

Table 1.3. **Respondents' self-identified ethnicity versus ancestry**

Ethnicity	Mixed parents (%)
Arakan	13.3
Bamar	13.2
Chin	12.9
Kachin	18.8
Karen	26.5
Mon	22.9
Shan	37.7

Note: Only groups with more than 100 respondents are displayed.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Table 1.4. **Ethnic minorities by residency**

	Population	Sample		
	Ethnic state (%)	Ethnic state (%)	Other states (%)	Regions (%)
Arakan	92	72.3	4.6	23.1
Chin	50	31.0	10.3	58.7
Kachin	73	83.3	8.4	8.3
Karen	30	28.4	24.7	46.9
Mon	77	77.7	9.0	13.3
Shan	66	64.8	16.1	19.1

Note: Only groups with at least 100 respondents are displayed.
Source: The population statistics come from the data based on the 2019 GAD Township Reports. The sample statistics come from data from the 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Table 1.5. **Survey sample by basic demographic characteristics**

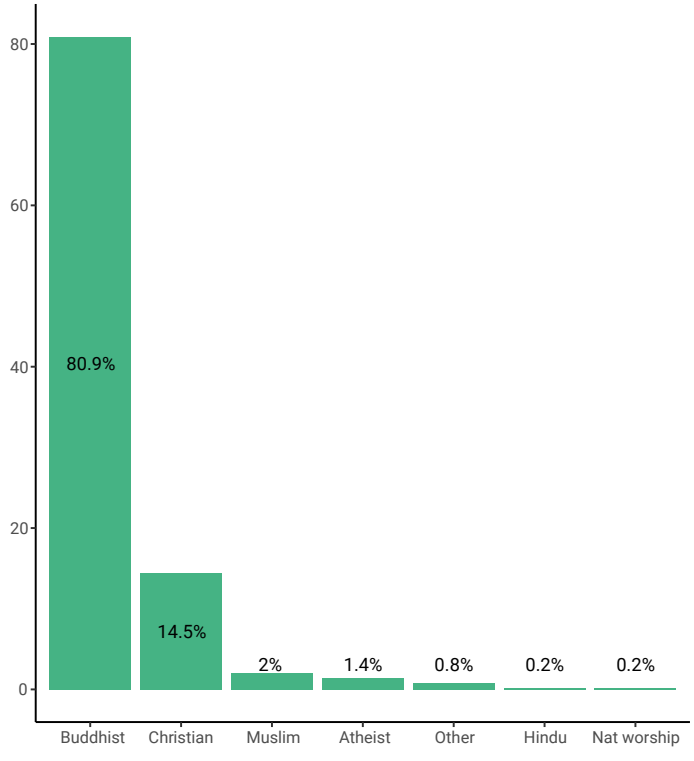
	No. of respondents	Percentage of sample (%)	Percentage of total population (%)
Male	**1,846**	**57.3**	**48.2**
Bamars in regions	735	60.5	–
Bamars in states	309	58.2	–
Titular minorities	678	54.7	–
Non-titular minorities	124	52.8	–
Buddhist	**2,595**	**80.9**	**89.8**
Bamars in regions	1,158	95.5	–
Bamars in states	500	94.5	–
Titular minorities	766	62.0	–
Non-titular minorities	171	74.4	–
Youth*	**1,940**	**60.2**	**39.6****
Bamars in regions	683	56.2	–
Bamars in states	292	55.0	–
Titular minorities	826	66.6	–
Non-titular minorities	139	59.2	–
Urban	**2,076**	**69.3**	**29.6**
Bamars in regions	791	70.7	–
Bamars in states	366	75	–
Titular minorities	771	66.3	–
Non-titular minorities	148	66.1	–

Table 1.5. **Survey sample by basic demographic characteristics (cont.)**

	No. of respondents	Percentage of sample (%)	Percentage of total population (%)
University educated	**1,221**	**48.1**	**–**
Bamars in regions	484	50.4	–
Bamars in states	191	45.1	–
Titular minorities	448	46.3	–
Non-titular minorities	98	51.9	–

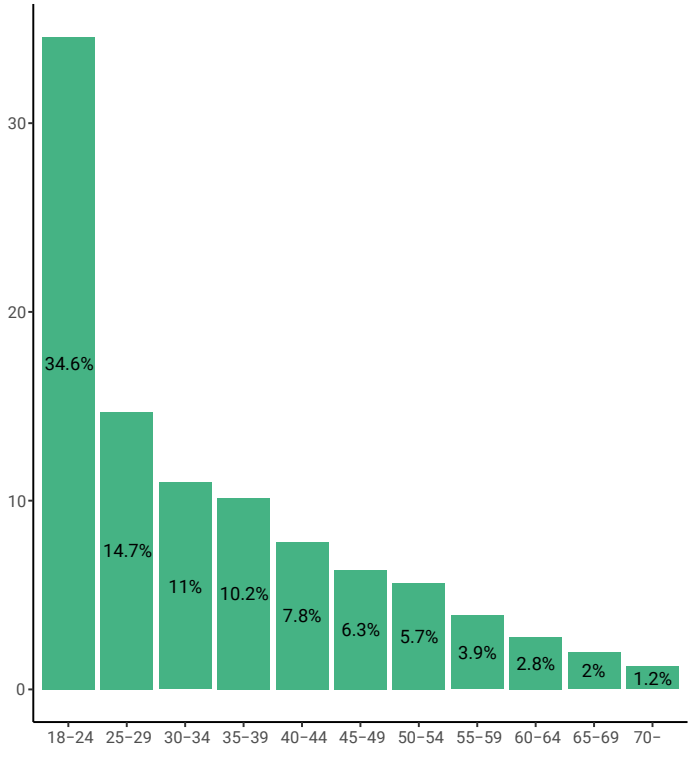
Notes: * The 2017 Myanmar National Youth Policy defines 'youth' as those between the age of 15 and 35 years. We follow this definition, albeit excluding those younger than age 18 because they were not eligible to participate in the study.
**Note that 39.6 denotes the percentage of the population between the ages of 20 and 34 out of the population aged 35 and above.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics; population statistics from the 2014 Census.

Figure 1.2. **Sample breakdown by religion**



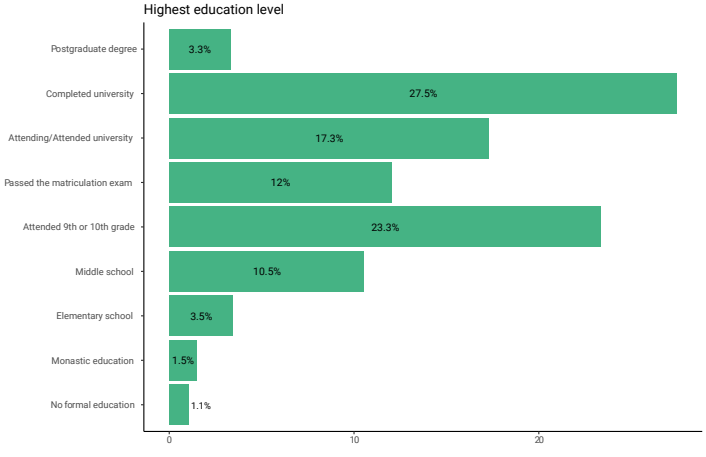
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 1.3. **Sample breakdown by age**



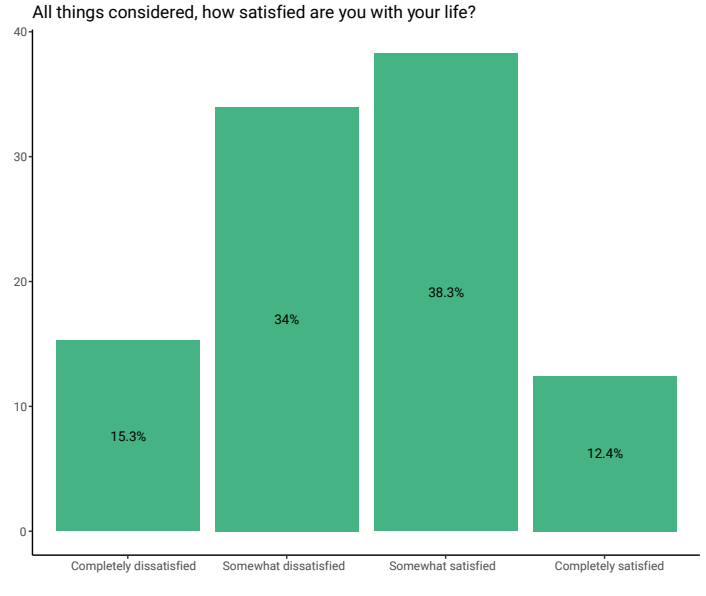
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 1.4. **Sample breakdown by highest education level**



Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 1.5. **Sample breakdown by life satisfaction**



Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Chapter 2

FINDINGS

2.1. SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Social identities play a powerful role in how individuals perceive and respond to socio-political stimuli.

Social identity is generally understood to be 'the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel 1978: 6). Individuals define themselves and others through their social identities, including regional, ethnic, religious and national identities, and these identities play a powerful role in how individuals perceive and respond to socio-political stimuli. In other words, social identities shape individuals' political behaviours and attitudes. In this section, we examine how important various social identities are to ordinary people in Myanmar.

To do so, we asked survey respondents to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements:

- Being a Myanmar citizen is an important part of how I see myself.
- Being a [member of an ethnic group] is an important part of how I see myself.
- Being a [member of a religious group] is an important part of how I see myself.
- Being a [resident of a particular region] is an important part of how I see myself.

The text in brackets was replaced with responses piped in from relevant demographic questions asked at the beginning of the

survey. For example, if the respondent reported that they are Chin, Christian and from Shan State, the brackets would be replaced with 'Chin,' 'Christian,' and 'Shan pyi-ne-thar (ရှမ်းပြည်နယ်သား)'. The first statement is widely interpreted in social science literature as conveying the importance, or centrality, of national identity.

This chapter sheds further light on findings from the 2022 survey in which respondents were asked to indicate how they felt about their identity. Thirty-eight per cent self-identified as 'someone from Myanmar'; 19 per cent as being from a particular religious group; 15 per cent as being from a particular ethnic group; and 7 per cent as a person from a particular state. 21 per cent of respondents saw themselves as a combination of the above descriptions.

Results from the 2024 study show that all four identities are important to Bamars and ethnic minorities alike (see Figure 2.1). The ratings were scored from 1 to 4, with higher numbers representing higher degrees of importance. The average ratings are all between 3 and 4 which correspond to important and very important (see Table 2.1). Among both Bamars and ethnic minorities, religious identity was rated as the most important of the four identities while regional identity was the least important of the four. The second most important of the four identities, however, is different for Bamar and minority respondents. For the Bamars, it is the Myanmar national identity while it is ethnic identity for the minorities.

Among both Bamars and ethnic minorities, religious identity was rated as the most important of the four identities while regional identity was the least important of the four.

Further analysis indicates that religious and ethnic identities are more important to minorities than they are to the majority. For example, religious identity is more important for non-Buddhists compared to Buddhists (see Figure 2.2).[11] Likewise, ethnic identity is more important to non-Bamars compared to Bamars (see Figure 2.2). These identities are also less important to men, non-youths, individuals with university education and urbanites.

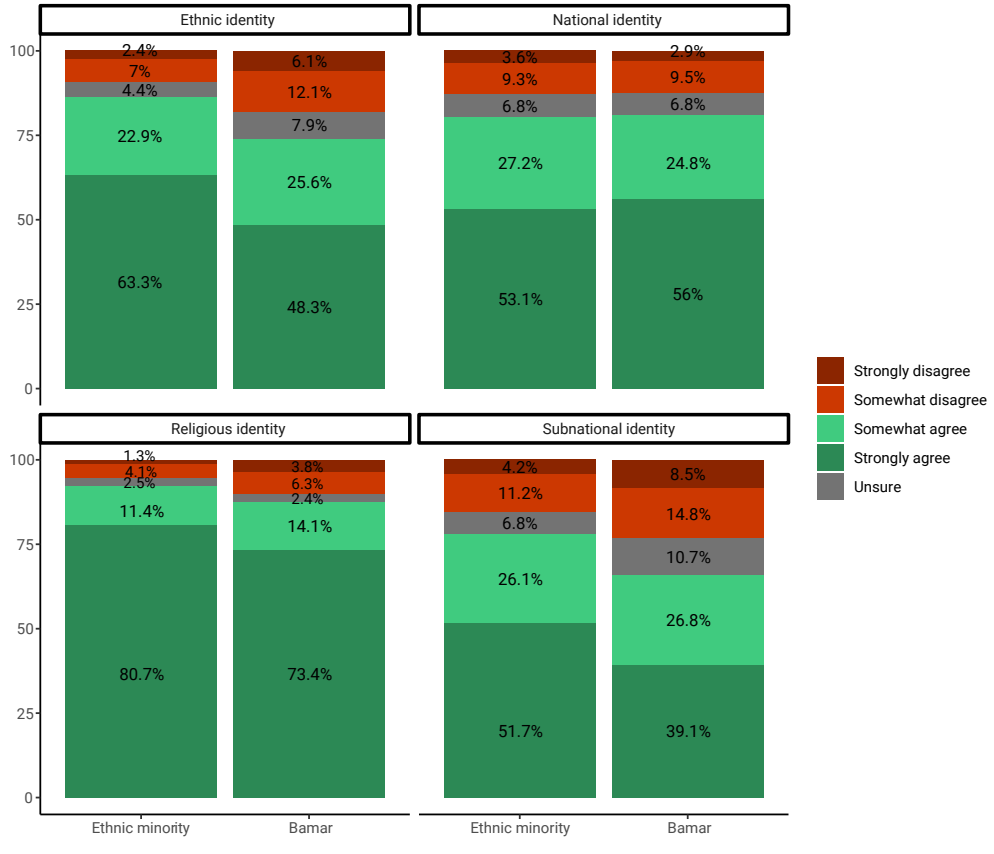
The findings are consistent with recent survey research highlighting how ethnic minorities prioritize and take pride in their national identity which is contrary to the belief among some Myanmar observers. In this survey, 52 per cent of minority respondents 'strongly agree' with the statement 'Being a Myanmar citizen is an important part of how I see myself' while another 28 per cent indicated that they 'somewhat agree'. This finding is also consistent with responses to another survey question in this study: 'How proud are you to be

11 In our analysis, this finding is primarily driven by Christians, as there are very few Hindus and Muslims in our sample.

a citizen of Myanmar?' This question is also widely used in social science research as a measure of national identity (see Table 2.2). In the current study, 48 per cent and 25 per cent of minority respondents indicated that they are 'very proud' and 'proud', respectively. These findings suggest that while defining a common national identity in Myanmar is contentious, ordinary ethnic minorities are attached to a Myanmar national identity, however they define it.

Another commonly held belief that our findings call into question is the idea that ethnic minorities value their ethnic identity over their

Figure 2.1. **Centrality of ethnic, national, religious and subnational identities**



Note: Number of respondents for each bar ranges from 1,302 to 1,597.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

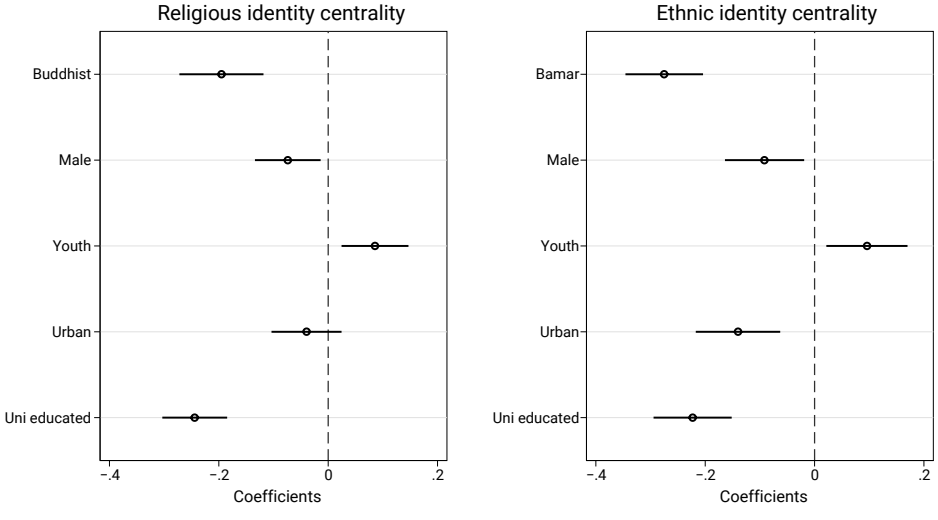
national identity. As Figure 2.3 shows, for most ethnic minorities, their Myanmar national identity is just as important as their ethnic identity. The ethnic identity is reported to be more important than

Table 2.1. **Average rating of identity centrality**

	Bamar	Minorities
Myanmar national identity	3.44 (0.80)	3.39 (0.82)
Ethnic identity	3.26 (0.92)	3.54 (0.74)
Religious identity	3.61 (0.78)	3.78 (0.59)
Regional identity	3.08 (0.99)	3.34 (0.86)

Notes: Lowest rating is 1 and the highest is 4. Those who selected 'unsure' are excluded from these calculations.
Numbers in parenthesis indicate the standard deviation.

Figure 2.2. **Correlation of religious and ethnic identity centrality**



Note: 95 per cent confidence intervals.. N (religious identity) = 2,273; N (ethnic identity) = 2,336.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

the Myanmar national identity for just 23 per cent of ethnic minority respondents. These findings suggest that while ethnic identity is an important force in Myanmar, it is not necessarily in opposition to the national identity.

Table 2.2. **Proportion of respondents 'somewhat proud' or 'very proud' to be a Myanmar citizen**

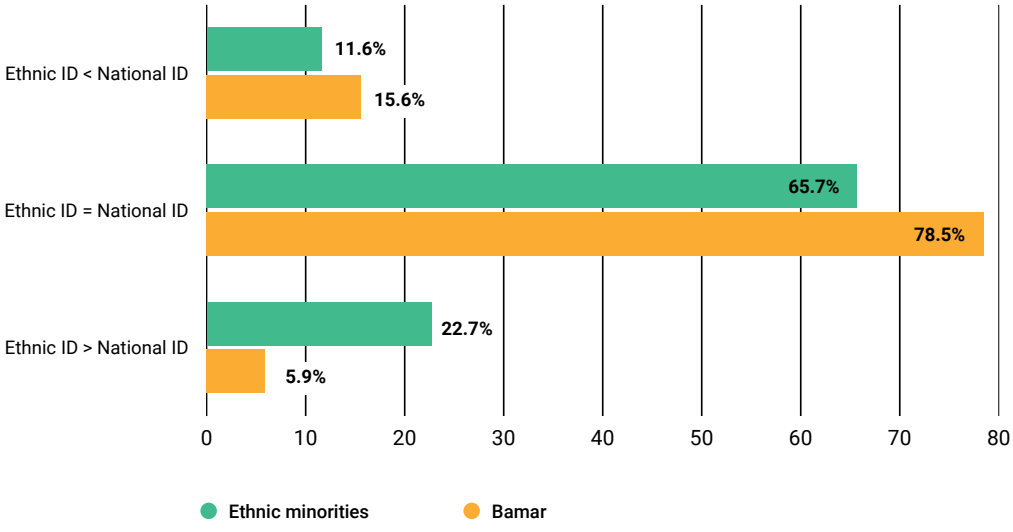
Survey	Year	Mode	Bamar (%)	Ethnic minority (%)
Asian Barometer survey	2015	In person	99.3	94.2
Jangai Jap's dissertation survey	2019	In person	100.0	87.8
World Values survey	2020	In person	98.2	98.6
Isabel Chew's dissertation survey	2020	Online	97.8	91.6
United States Institute of Peace survey	2022	Online	88.1	85.2
International IDEA survey	2024	Online	78.5	72.9

Note: The option 'not sure' was included in the International IDEA 2024 survey (the focus of this report), but not in several of the previous surveys. This may explain why the percentage of respondents expressing national pride is lower for this survey. However, it is also possible that this decrease in national pride we see over time is a reflection of the national crisis after the coup. The proportion of Bamar respondents who indicated that they were proud to be Myanmar citizens dipped by around 10 per cent in 2022 after the coup; this proportion dropped by another 10 per cent in 2024.

2.2. **INTERETHNIC RELATIONS**

Interethnic relations in Myanmar tend to be characterized through the lens of conflict, in part due to the longstanding conflict between ethnic armed groups and the Myanmar military. Before the 2021 coup, however, many of these conflicts were localized to the border areas; in large parts of the country, many ethnic minorities live side-by-side with Bamar neighbours or other ethnic minority neighbours. In this section, we look at two measurements of interethnic relations: trust of members of other ethnic groups and acceptance of interethnic minorities. We focus specifically on two dyads: (1) the attitudes of minorities in the states towards the titular group (e.g. how Shans in Kachin State view Kachins) and (2) the attitudes of

Figure 2.3. **Centrality of ethnic identity relative to national identity**



Note: To determine ethnic identity centrality relative to national identity, the rating of national identity importance is subtracted from the rating of ethnic identity importance. Number of ethnic minorities and Bamar in this analysis are 1,214 and 1,439, respectively.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

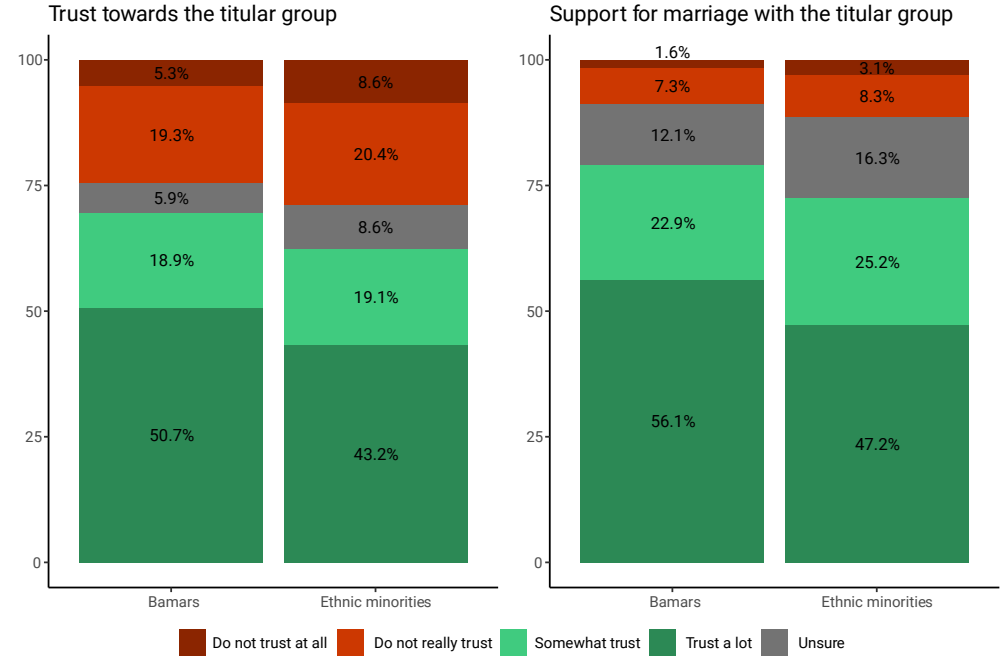
titular groups towards minorities in their ethnic state (e.g. how Kachins view minorities—such as the Shans—in Kachin State). Results indicate that in general, at the everyday level among ordinary citizens, interethnic group relations are good, with a high level of tolerance and acceptance; an exception is Rakhine State (see 2.4: Protecting the Rohingya).

2.2.1. How do minorities in the states view the titular group?

In general, minorities in the states have positive sentiments towards the titular groups. When asked about their level of trust towards the titular group, 70 per cent of Bamars said that they trusted the titular group while 62 per cent of ethnic minorities did so (see Figure 2.4). Likewise, when it comes to intermarriage with a member of the titular group—which requires a considerable threshold for acceptance—79 per cent of Bamar respondents expressed support while 72 per cent of minorities did the same (see Figure 2.4). This means that although there is strong ethnic identification, there is a large degree of tolerance of outgroup members and fluidity in terms of intermarriage.

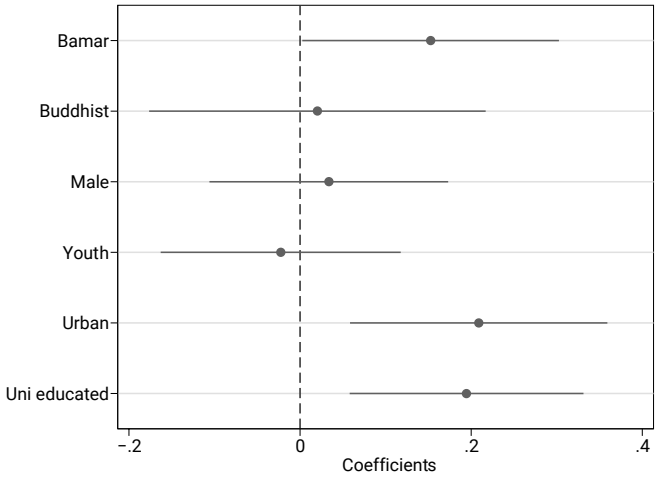
A notable finding is that Bamars in the states generally had more positive sentiments towards the titular group than ethnic minorities did. This is in line with the literature on outgroup attitudes; although the Bamars are a subnational minority, being the national majority, they may have less to fear from the titular group. In contrast, ethnic minorities might be more suspicious of the titular group. We also found that urbanites and university educated respondents expressed more trust towards the titular group (see Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.4. **How minorities living in states view the titular group**



Note: N (Bamar) = 509; 506. N (ethnic minority) = 324; 326.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 2.5. **Correlation of trust towards the titular group among minorities in the states**



Note: 90 per cent confidence intervals. N = 600.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

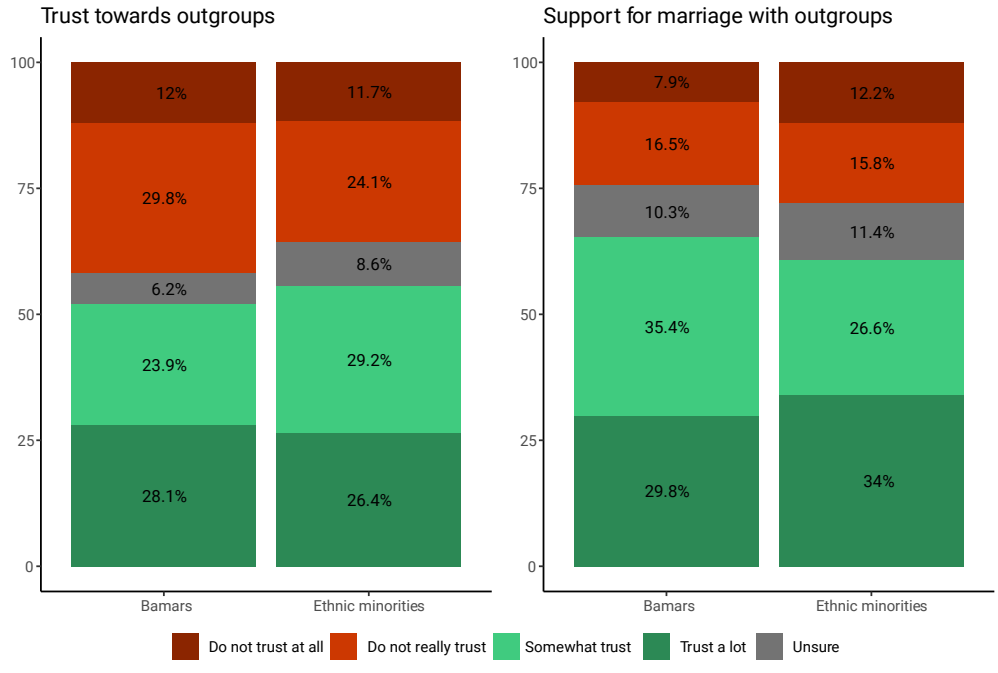
2.2.2. How do titular groups in the states view minorities?

While titular minorities' views of other minorities in the states are still positive, there are some key differences.[12] First, we see that titular minorities are less trusting of Bamars and ethnic minorities than vice versa. Fifty-two per cent of titular respondents said that they trusted Bamars, while 56 per cent said the same of other ethnic minorities (see Figure 2.6).

Acceptance of intermarriage, on the other hand, was similar with those of minorities. Sixty-five per cent of titular minorities would support intermarriage with a Bamar for themselves or a family member, while 61 per cent would do the same for intermarriage with an ethnic minority (see Figure 2.6).

12 When asking members of the titular groups about their attitudes towards minorities in their ethnic state, we specifically asked about the largest non-Bamar minority group in the state as well as about the Bamars. This means, in addition to questions about Bamars, Kachins in Kachin State were asked about Shans; Karens in Kayin State about Mons; Karennis in Kayah State about Shans; Mons in Mon State about Karens; Arakans in Rakhine State about Rohingyas; and Shans in Shan State about Pa-Os.

Figure 2.6. **How titular groups in ethnic states view minorities**



Note: N (Bamars) = 1,165; 1,161. N (titular minorities) = 685; 683.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

2.3. **ETHNICITY AND POLITICS**

While interethnic group relations are generally positive at the everyday level in Myanmar, social acceptance may not necessarily translate into support for pro-diversity institutions and policies. In this section, we look at political attitudes, specifically, titular minorities' support for ethnocentric institutions, as well as support for inclusive policies among groups with power. Results indicate that while titular minorities strongly support ethnocentric institutions, a majority of both titular minority and Bamar respondents also support pro-diversity policies that promote minority languages and political representation.

2.3.1. **Support for ethnocentric institutions**

Since the country's founding, the Bamars have been the politically dominant group with their dominance reinforced by Bamar-centric

institutions. There are concerns that if ethnic-based federalism emerges in Myanmar, ethnocentric institutions may also emerge at the subnational level—'merely replacing one set of ethnocentric institutions (at the central level) with another (at the state level)' (Breen and He 2020: 75).

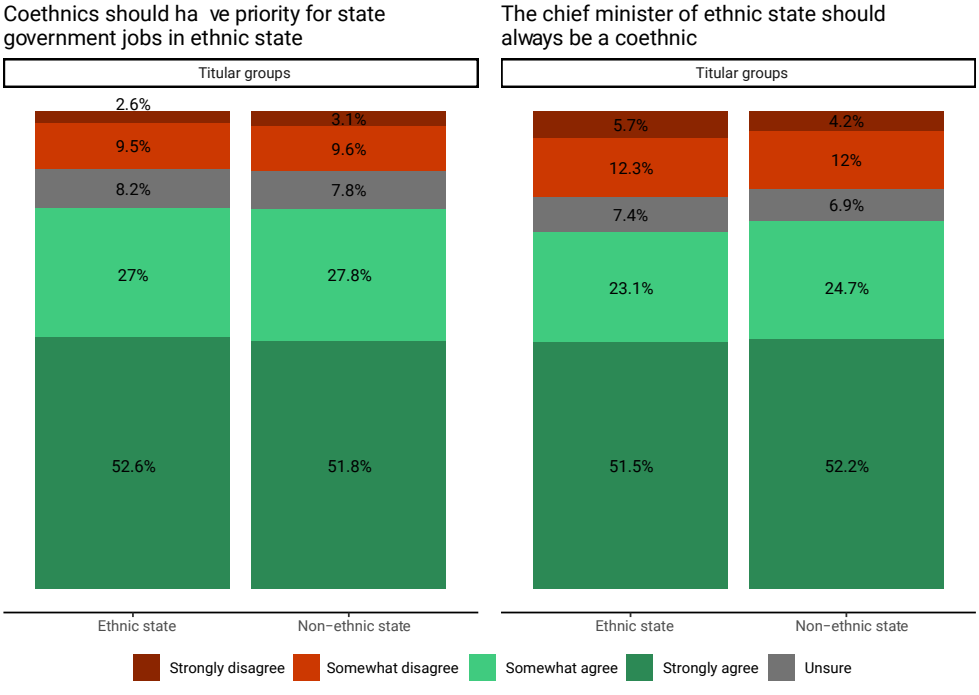
In this section, we investigate the extent to which members of the titular groups would support ethnocentric institutions that advance their own interests at the expense of other minority groups within ethnic states. To do this, we asked titular minorities to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following proposals: (1) [Ethnic group] should have priority for government jobs in [their ethnic state] and (2) The chief minister of [their ethnic state] should always be [a member of their ethnic group]. The text in brackets specifies the respondent's self-reported ethnicity. For example, if the respondent is Chin, the statements were: (1) 'Chin should have priority for government jobs in Chin State' and (2) 'The chief minister of Chin State should always be Chin.' We did not ask this set of questions to the Bamars as these are sensitive questions that may arouse Bamar respondents' suspicion about the intentions of the survey. Previous testing of similar questions among focus group respondents raised such concerns. Consequently, we opted to drop this set of questions for Bamar respondents.

Our study indicates that titular minorities have strong inclinations towards ethnocentric institutions (see Figure 2.7). Nearly 80 per cent indicated that members of their ethnic group should be given priority for government jobs in their ethnic state. Likewise, three-quarters of them also indicated that the chief minister of their ethnic state should be a member of their ethnic group.

Nearly 80 per cent of titular minorities indicated that members of their ethnic group should be given priority for government jobs in their ethnic state.

Such preferences for ethnocentric institutions appear to vary across titular groups. Figure 2.8 shows the distribution of responses by ethnic group. Groups associated with ethnic states that are most diverse—Shan, Mon and Kayin states—appear to have the strongest opposition to ethnocentric institutions. Shan respondents had the strongest opposition to the proposed ethnocentric institutions—nearly 20 per cent of them disagreed with giving their ethnic group priority for government jobs in Shan State and nearly 30 per cent of them disagreed with reserving the position of Shan State chief minister for their ethnic group.

Figure 2.7. **Support for ethnocentric institutions by residency**

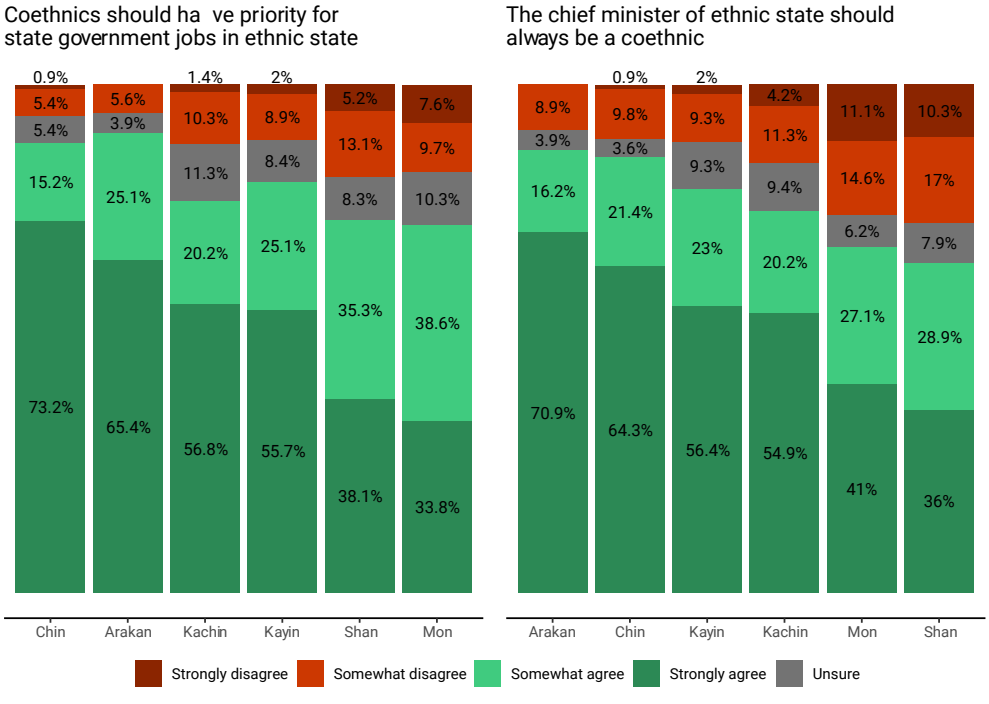


Note: N (ethnic state) = 684; N (outside) = 450.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

2.3.2. **Support for policies accommodating minorities**

Given these strong inclinations for ethnocentric institutions among titular minorities, it is important that there are strong institutions and policies that protect non-titular minorities and their rights. In this section, we examine the extent to which groups with power—Bamars in regions and titular minorities in their respective ethnic states—support pro-diversity policies. We focus on two specific measures that promote minorities' cultural rights and increase political representation for minority groups: support for classes teaching minority languages in public schools and support for reserved seats

Figure 2.8. **Support for ethnocentric institutions by ethnic group**



Note: Number of respondents for each bar ranges from 112 to 213.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

for minorities within the subnational government.[13] We chose these two measures because of their prominence in minorities' discourse.

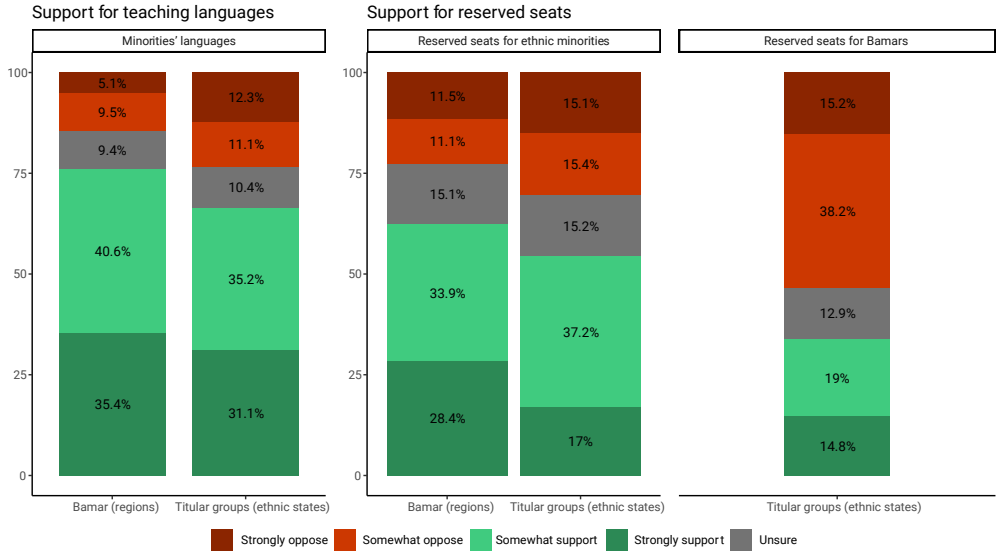
We observed two general trends. First, subnational majorities—be it the Bamars in regions or the titular groups in their ethnic states—tend to be more supportive of cultural rights than minority political representation (see Figure 2.9). We see that 76 per cent of Bamars support cultural protection compared to 62 per cent for minority political representation. Likewise, 66 per cent of titular minorities support cultural protection in contrast to 54 per cent for political representation. This divergence in results may be because preserving

13 While these questions referenced minorities more generally, we gave the example of the largest non-Bamar minority group. For example, in Kayin state, Karen respondents were asked about the Mons, who formed the largest non-Bamar minority group in the state.

cultural rights poses less of a threat to these groups. Having reserved seats for minorities guarantees them a voice in the political process, potentially undercutting the amount of power dominant groups have. Second, Bamar respondents expressed more support for these provisions compared to titular minority respondents.

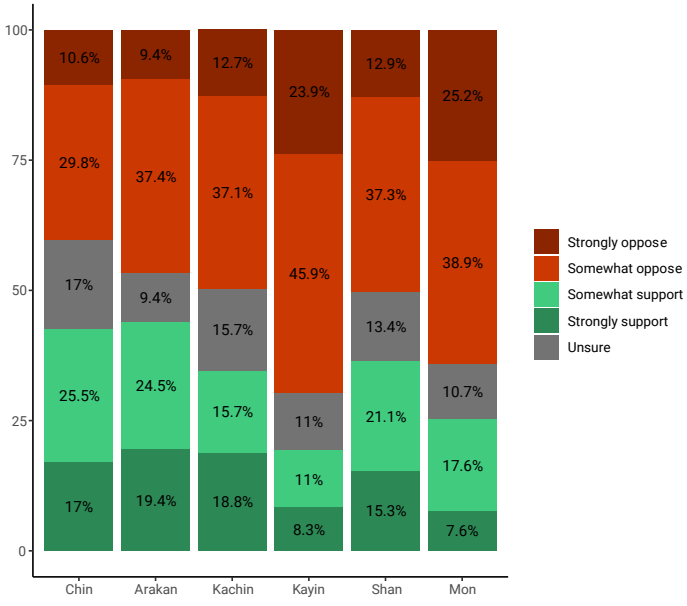
While Bamar are usually studied as the majority group in Myanmar, they constitute a minority group in some states. In particular, Bamars form the largest ethnic minority group in Kachin State (33 per cent of the state's population), Kayah State (15 per cent), Kayin State (14 per cent) and Mon State (37 per cent) (see Jap and Courtin 2022). Bamar is also a substantial ethnic minority group in Shan State where they account for 12 per cent of the population. Although Bamars are minorities in these states, the levels of support for reserved seats for Bamars among titular minorities in the states are much lower at 34 per cent (see Figure 2.10). This may be because they are not viewed as requiring special provisions for political representation since they are the national majority. As Figure 2.10 shows, the titular groups that are least likely to support reserved seats for Bamar are associated with the ethnic states where Bamar form the largest ethnic minority group (i.e. Mon State, Kayin State and Kachin State).

Figure 2.9. **Support for pro-minority policies**



Note: N (Bamar) = 1,082; 1,159. N (titular minority) = 685; 649; 703.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 2.10. **Support for reserved seats for Bamars**



Note: Number of respondents for each bar ranges from 109 to 209.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

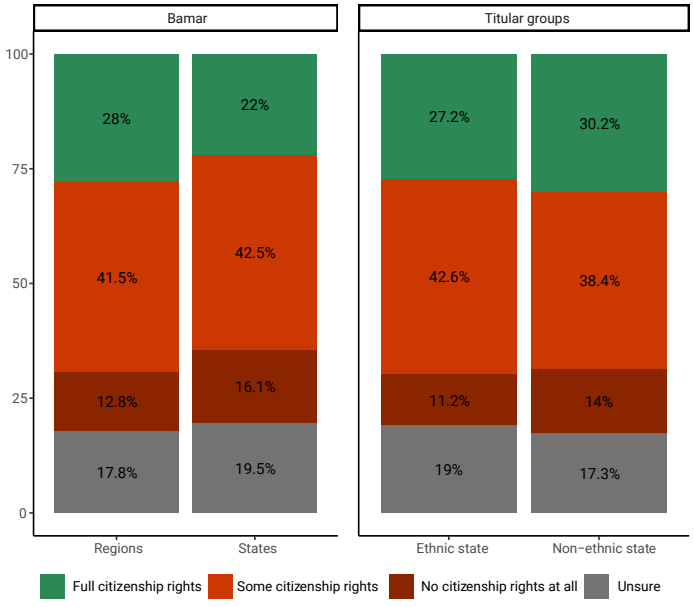
2.4. **PROTECTING THE ROHINGYA**

While previous sections suggest that interethnic relations are by and large positive, with a majority of respondents supporting pro-diversity policies, attitudes towards the Rohingya in particular warrant a closer look. The Rohingya are the most vulnerable ethnic group in Myanmar, having been subject to decades of persecution and atrocities amounting to genocide. While anecdotal accounts suggest that public sentiments towards the group softened in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, results from the 2024 study indicate that there are still considerable exclusionary attitudes towards the Rohingya in Myanmar.

In the International IDEA survey fielded in 2022, nearly everyone (98 per cent) agreed that 'everyone living in Myanmar should have equal citizenship rights regardless of their race or religion'. This study further probed views about citizenship rights by asking respondents

to indicate whether the Rohingya people should have full, some,or no citizenship rights. As Figure 2.11 shows, although the majority of Bamars and titular minorities support some citizenship rights for the Rohingya, there is still fairly low public support for full citizenship rights—just 26 per cent of Bamars and 28 per cent of titular minorities reported support for full citizenship rights.

Figure 2.11. **Support for Rohingya citizenship rights**



Note: N (Bamar, regions) = 1,119; N (Bamar, states) = 492; N (titular, ethnic states) = 690; N (titular, outside) = 450.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Since the Rohingya are concentrated in Rakhine State, it is important to consider attitudes of ethnic Arakan respondents towards the Rohingya and policies protecting their rights. When it comes to intermarriage with the Rohingya, 72 per cent of Arakan respondents—residing both inside and outside of Rakhine State—reported that they 'oppose' (27 per cent) or 'strongly oppose' (45 per cent) intermarriage. Likewise, when it comes to trust towards Rohingya people, 70 per cent of Arakan respondents reported distrust, with 34 per cent

reporting strong distrust. In contrast, only 17 per cent of all other titular minorities reported opposing intermarriage with the largest minority in their state and 28 per cent reported distrust. These findings indicate strong hostility towards the Rohingya.

When it comes to citizenship rights, among Arakan respondents (residing inside and outside of Rakhine State), just 26 per cent reported support for full citizenship rights. When asked about support for the allocation of reserved seats for the Rohingya in the Rakhine State government, more Arakan respondents indicated more opposition than support—47 per cent reported opposition while 40 per cent reported support (see Figure 2.12). This is a stark contrast to other titular minorities, which had 26 per cent indicating opposition and 57 per cent reporting support. Finally, when asked about the provision of cultural accommodation to the Rohingya—in the form of allowing language classes in government schools in Rakhine State—46 per cent of Arakan respondents reported support but 41 per cent reported opposition (see Figure 2.12). Likewise, this sharply deviates from other titular minorities, which had 71 per cent reporting support for the inclusion of minority language classes and 19 per cent reporting opposition.

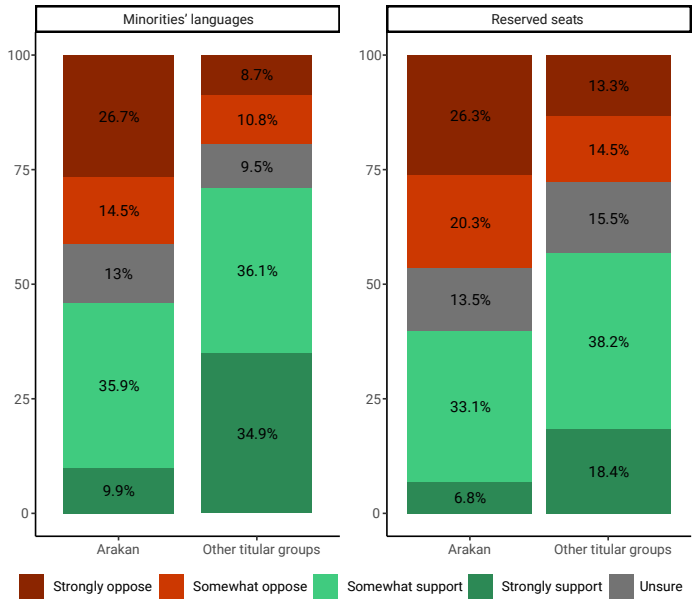
2.5. **RELIGION AND POLITICS**

Results indicate that there is strong intolerance towards Muslims among Buddhists—regardless of ethnicity.

While intergroup conflicts in Myanmar have mostly been viewed along ethnic lines, there is a religious dimension to these tensions, exacerbated by the rise of Buddhist nationalist groups, such as the Ma Ba Tha, which have propagated Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments. This section explores religious tolerance. Results indicate that there is strong intolerance towards Muslims among Buddhists—regardless of ethnicity. However, certain individual characteristics are associated with higher levels of tolerance, including education, urban residence and lower levels of attachment to one's religious identity.

According to the 2014 Census, which excluded significant parts of the Muslim population and the Rohingya, nearly 90 per cent of Myanmar's population was counted as Buddhist. The Bamar as well as most ethnic minority groups are predominantly Buddhist—the exceptions are Chin, Kachin and Karenni. It is widely thought that these three groups are predominantly Christian; the sample breakdown shown in Table 2.3 is consistent with this assumption.

Figure 2.12. **Arakan's support for pro-minority policies**



Note: N (Arakan) = 131;133. N (other) = 554; 516.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

In the FDC, Myanmar is envisioned as a secular state and this view is thought to have strong support among the Myanmar public.

Not only is Buddhism the majority religion in Myanmar, but it has also held a special status within the country in the past. However, in the FDC, Myanmar is envisioned as a secular state and this view is thought to have strong support among the Myanmar public. In the 2022 survey, 81 per cent of respondents indicated that Myanmar should be a secular state. Furthermore, 96 per cent indicated that religious minorities should be free to practise their religion.

Support for a secular state and religious freedom, however, do not necessarily convey religious tolerance, in particular, the recognition of rights to participate in politics regardless of religion. The rights of religious minorities merit special attention within the context of Myanmar because there is a long history of persecution and state-sanctioned violence against religious minorities.

To gauge religious majorities' attitudes towards religious minorities' rights to participate in politics, in the current study, Buddhist

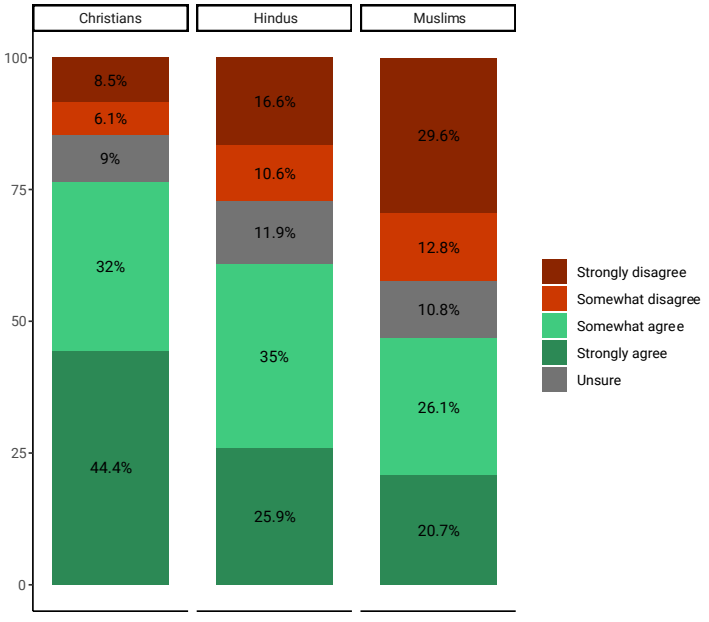
Table 2.3. **Survey sample by ethnicity and religion**

Ethnicity	Buddhist	Muslim	Christian
Kachin	11.8	0.4	86.1
Karen	61.4	3.3	34.0
Chin	14.7	1.7	81.0
Mon	91.5	1.8	4.9
Bamar	95.2	1.3	0.9
Arakan	95.4	1.5	0.5
Shan	89.0	3.3	5.9

Note: Karenni not shown due to sample size limitations.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

respondents were asked to indicate their views on this statement: '[Muslim/Christian/Hindu] individuals should be able to run and hold public offices in Myanmar if they want to (e.g. MP).' The text in the brackets displayed one of the three main minority religions in Myanmar. As Figure 2.13 shows, Buddhist respondents reported their highest level of religious tolerance was towards Christians, with 75 per cent supporting Christians' rights to participate in politics. There is very little support for Muslims, however; just 45 per cent of Buddhist respondents support Muslims' rights to participate in politics. This antipathy is even more stark when we look at the level of opposition for minority participation in politics. Almost 15 per cent of Buddhists indicated that they disagree with the stated political rights for Christians; this number more than doubled to 42 per cent when it comes to Muslims. In short, there is significant intolerance of Muslim minorities among Buddhists in Myanmar.

Figure 2.13. **Support for political participation of religious minorities among Buddhist respondents**



Note: N (Buddhists) = 820; 795; 802.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

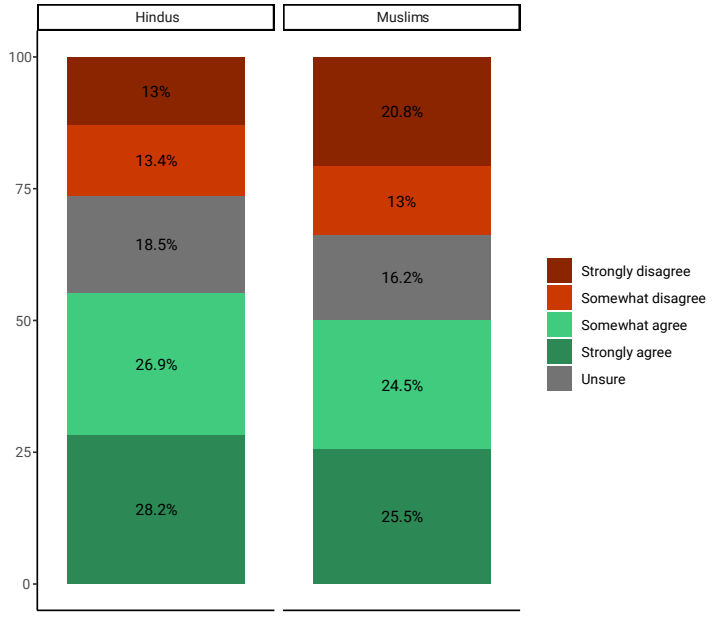
To further investigate religious tolerance in Myanmar, we also examined how Christians view Hindus and Muslims.[14] According to the 2014 Census, Christians comprise 6.3 per cent of Myanmar's population. While this number is small, at the subnational level, it is the majority religion in Chin State, accounting for 85 per cent of the state's population, and a sizeable population in Kayah, Kachin, Kayin and Shan states—they account for 45 per cent, 34 per cent, 10 per cent and 10 per cent in these states, respectively. When it comes to Muslims, half of Christian respondents support their rights to participate in politics, with just 26 per cent indicating strong support. When it comes to Hindus, 55 per cent of Christian respondents

14 We do not investigate how Hindus and Muslims view Buddhists and Christians. Instead, we focus on how Buddhists view Christians, Hindus and Muslims, and how Christians view other religious minorities for two main reasons. First, there are very few Hindus and Muslims in the sample, which does not allow us to make meaningful inferences about their views. Second, how Buddhists view religious minorities and how Christians view other religious minorities may have policy implications because of their sheer numbers within the population.

expressed support for their rights to participate in politics, with 28 per cent indicating strong support (see Figure 2.14).

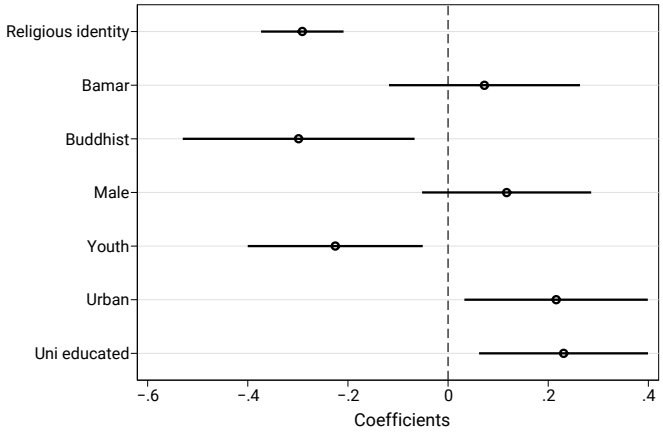
An alarming finding is that Bamars and ethnic minorities hold similarly negative attitudes towards Muslim minorities. As Figure 2.15 shows, we do not detect statistical differences between Bamars and ethnic minorities regarding their support for Muslims' political participation. This finding further underscores the extent to which Islamophobia pervades Myanmar society, both within and beyond the ethnic majority. Not surprisingly, urbanites and university educated individuals reported more support for Muslims participating in politics while individuals who expressed a stronger sense of religious identity were more likely to oppose Muslim participation in politics (see Figure 2.15).

Figure 2.14. **Support for political participation of religious minorities among Christian respondents**



Note: N (Christians) = 216; 216.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 2.15. **Correlation of support for Muslims' political participation**



Note: 95 per cent confidence intervals. N = 701. The dependent variable is measured on a 4-point scale. The measure of religious identity importance is standardized and all other independent variables are on 0–1 scale.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

2.6. **POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND INSTITUTIONAL PREFERENCES**

While the earlier sections have focused primarily on the horizontal relationship between groups, this section shifts the focus to the vertical relationship between individuals and the state. In particular, we look at support for self-determination as well as support for federal democracy. In asking about federal democracy, we also probe deeper into individuals' understandings of federal democracy, as well as their preferences for territorial organization and power-sharing. While federalism may take on different forms, we focus on the potential consequences of ethnofederalism because of its prevalence in the popular narrative.

In general, there is a high level of support for self-determination among ethnic minorities, with support positively corresponding to the strength of ethnic pride while inversely correlating to national pride. While understandings of federal democracy differ among respondents, support for federal democracy is consistently high

across the different subgroups, with a preference for political power to be decentralized at the subnational level. There is also an inclination towards maintaining the status quo when it comes to the organization of a 'Bamar State'.

2.6.1. **Desire for self-determination**

Nationalism lies at the heart of many ethnic conflicts around the world today. One widely accepted definition of this contested and complex concept argues that 'the political and the national unit should be congruent' (Gellner 1983). Here, the political unit refers to a sovereign country and the national unit refers to a cultural group. Particularly after the end of World War II, it was not uncommon for ethnic minorities to express desire for self-determination and to believe that self-determination is best achieved by establishing their own country. This has been the case for many ethnic minority groups in Myanmar.

Not surprisingly, the majority of ethnic minorities in the sample (55 per cent) reported that their ethnic group should have their own independent country.[15] This is much higher than in the 2022 survey, where about a fifth of respondents indicated that their state should be 'independent'—understood as 'the state being a self-governed area'. This discrepancy is due to sample characteristics and differences in question format. Because the 2022 survey relied on a nationally representative sample, the majority of respondents were Bamar. The question also did not isolate options for future systems but provided respondents with a choice of four possible systems.[16]

Our survey also differed from the 2022 survey in another aspect: respondents who indicated that they supported an independent state were asked a follow-up question—whether they would still support the establishment of an independent country for their ethnic

15 To directly gauge the extent of ethnic minorities' support for independence, we asked respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with this statement: '[Ethnic group] should have their own country [ethnic country].' '[Ethnic group] လူမျိုးဟာ ကိုယ်ပိုင် နိုင်ငံ ('[Ethnic] နိုင်ငံ")အနေနဲ့ ရပ်တည်သင့်ပါတယ်။'. The text in brackets specifies the ethnicity that the respondent reported at the start of the survey. If the respondent is Kachin, the statement would be 'Kachin should have their own country (Kachin country).'

16 The 2022 survey question asked: 'Thinking about the form of government that Myanmar should have in the future, which of the following best reflects your feelings about its system of government?' Respondents could select one of five options: (1) Myanmar should keep the form of government it had under the 2008 Constitution; (2) Myanmar's states and regions should have the autonomy and power to make certain decisions for themselves under a new federal democracy and constitutional framework; (3) Myanmar should continue under the State Administrative Council established by the military; (4) My home state should be independent; (5) No opinion/ Don't know.

group even if recognition by the international community was not possible. Forty-four per cent said they would 'strongly support' such an endeavour and 28 per cent would 'somewhat support' it. In other words, there is a strong desire for group-based self-determination among ethnic minorities in Myanmar.

As one's ethnic pride increases, affinity for independence also increases. Likewise, as one's national pride increases, affinity for independence decreases.

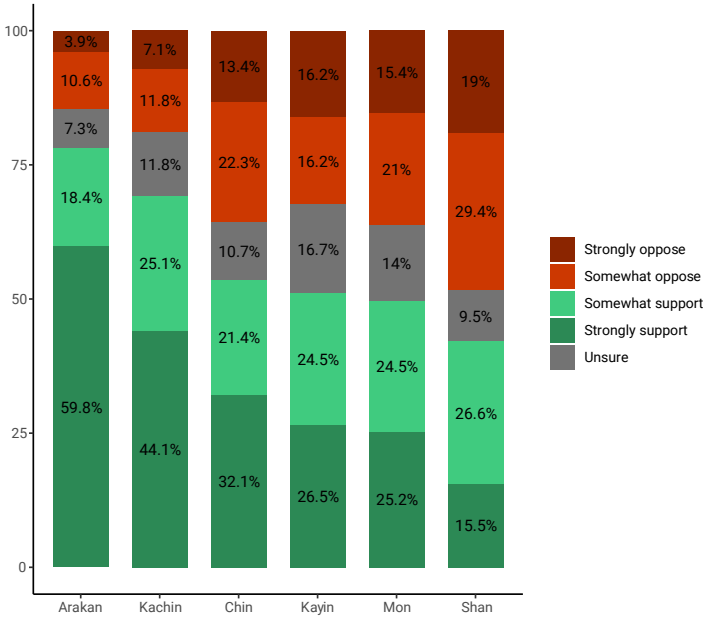
It is, however, important to note that there are considerable variations across ethnic groups. Arakan and Kachin respondents expressed the highest support for independence, with 83 per cent and 71 per cent respectively reporting that they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' that their ethnic group should have an independent country. In contrast, less than half of Mon and Shan respondents agreed (see Figure 2.16). At the individual level, ethnic pride is positively correlated with affinity for independence while national pride is negatively correlated (see Figure 2.17). In other words, as one's ethnic pride increases, affinity for independence also increases. Likewise, as one's national pride increases, affinity for independence decreases.

Support for self-determination also varies by demographic characteristics. As Figure 2.17 documents, affinity for independence is lower among Buddhist and urbanite ethnic minorities. However, those residing in their ethnic state (e.g. Kachins in Kachin State) and youths expressed a stronger affinity for independence compared to other ethnic minorities. These findings suggest that affinity for independence among Myanmar's ethnic minorities is not a fixed attribute—rather, it is malleable and highly contextual. Furthermore, political systems and institutions such as federalism and decentralization may increase opportunities for political participation and autonomy. Over the next few sections, we explore respondents' perceptions of such institutions.

2.6.2. **Support for democracy**

According to the 2022 survey, democracy was most commonly understood as a system where 'no one is discriminated against, and everyone can live freely and participate in public affairs'. When asked about the extent to which they support the statement 'Democracy may not be perfect but it is the best system we have', the proportion of Bamar living in the regions who agreed was 85 per cent while those living in the states was 81 per cent. Among titular minorities, 81 per cent of those living in their ethnic states agreed while 83 per cent of those living outside their ethnic states agreed (see Figure 2.18). These findings highlight the importance of democracy—at least at an abstract level—to people in Myanmar.

Figure 2.16. **Support for the establishment of own country**



Note: For this question, the number of respondents in each ethnic group ranges from 100 to 228. Although we asked this question about self-determination to Karenni respondents and non-titular minority groups such as the Pa-O, their results are not displayed here because the sample size for these groups is too small.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

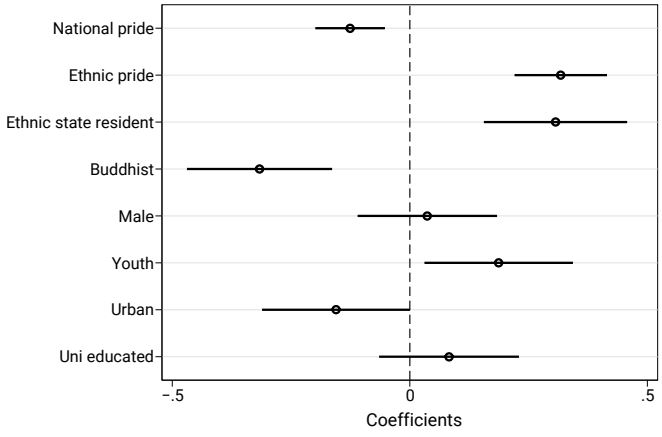
2.6.3. **Understanding of federal democracy**

In the 2024 study, however, we wanted to delve into how ordinary people understand federal democracy given its centrality to the ongoing revolution. How do ordinary people understand federal democracy? When asked to elaborate on their understanding of the concept,[17] responses conveyed diverse understandings,[18] including allusion to inclusion, peace, justice, autonomy, power-sharing and democracy.[19]

Many referenced sovereignty of the people in the following way:

17 The prompt in Burmese: ဖက်ဒရယ်ဒီမိုကရေစီစနစ်ကို ဘယ်လိုနားလည်ပါသလဲ?
18 It should be noted that many participants stated that they did not understand or were not sure.
19 Of the 3,221 participants in the study, only about 30 per cent responded to this question.

Figure 2.17. **Correlation of titular minorities' affinity for independence**



Note: 95 per cent confidence intervals. n = 753. The dependent variable is measured on a 4-point scale. National pride and ethnic pride measures are standardized and all other independent variables are on 0–1 scale.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

> Federal democracy is a system of government by the people and that's why people are happy. It gives you full rights to act and speak as you like. That's why I like the federal democracy system very much. (Shan)

Many perceive federal democracy as a system with human rights and equality:

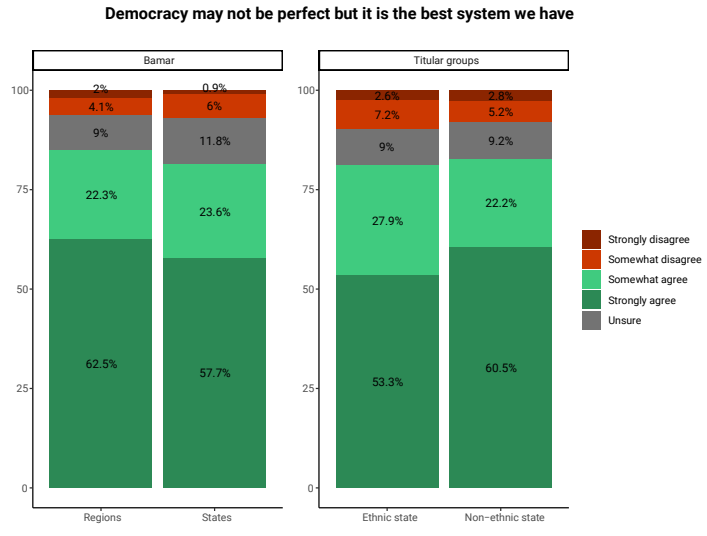
> I see it as a system that guarantees a life of human dignity. (Indian)

> It is a governance system or government by the people where every ethnic group has equal rights … (Karen)

> I want everyone living in Myanmar to have full human rights first of all. Regardless of ethnicity and religion, everyone should have equal rights. Federalism means coexisting together with equal rights and respecting and recognizing each person's dignity. Individuals' freedom and human rights are valued and recognized in federalism … (Chin)

'I want everyone living in Myanmar to have full human rights first of all. Regardless of ethnicity and religion, everyone should have equal rights.'

Figure 2.18. **Preference for democracy by subgroup**



Note: N (Bamar) = 990; 433. N (titular minority) = 613; 400.
Source: Data from 2022 International IDEA survey.

> In a federal democracy system, people of all ethnicities and religions can freely coexist. They also have the rights to autonomy and self-determination, and also the rights to chart their own destiny … people of all religions and ethnicities recognize and help each other in protecting their culture, customs and traditions. (Rohingya)

> It is a system where all *taingyinthar* groups enjoy equality and full human rights as well as the right to freedom and self-determination. (Bamar)

Some emphasized decentralization and power-sharing:

> It is not a centralized system—rather, each *taingyinthar*, each state has self-determination, and is governed by a political party that won in a free and fair election. (Kachin)

> A system with autonomy, self-determination, inclusiveness in accord with democratic standards, and without centralization. (Bamar)

> My understanding is that … we would be able to work together collectively to improve education, health, economy and comprehensive development of our region. Together with the central government, we would need to march forward with unity, integrity and in consultation with one another without fearing anyone (any group or armed organization) for the betterment of the country. (Bamar)

While some respondents primarily perceived it as territory-based (i.e. territorial federalism), others conveyed ethnic-based understanding (i.e. ethnofederalism):

> We will get more autonomy in our region. I believe that we will then have more opportunities to make laws and mechanisms as well as the policies pertinent to technology, education, economy, social issues, health, religion and traditions that are more aligned with our region. (Chinese)

> *Taingyinthar* know their own regions best. If *taingyinthar* had the right to govern themselves, the coup would not have happened easily. That's why we need a federal system. (Karen)

> All *taingyinthar* should be the full owners of the sovereignty of their respective states, and they should have the right to freely decide what is good and/or bad for their own state … [For example,] In Kachin State, the Kachin people's decision should be the foremost priority. (Kachin)

> Kachins govern Kachin [State], Kayahs govern Kayah [State]. (Lisu)

Many ethnic minority respondents alluded to Bamar dominance:

> If Bamar-dominated governments continue to rule Myanmar, I don't think any system will work. (Rakhine)

> If we are to build a federal system, I want to see all *taingyinthar* to truly have full equal rights. Bamar chauvinism needs to be dismantled ... I don't want to only see images of Bamar leaders on banknotes. Images of *taingyinthar* leaders should be displayed on banknotes as well. Just as *taingyinthar* have their own ethnic state, Bamar should also have their own … (Mon)

A few alluded to secession in this way:

> There will be the right to autonomy and the right to self-determination, but there should not be secession from the Union. (Bamar)

> Just as people can choose to participate in the federal system, there is also the right to secede. (Mon)

A respondent also expressed concerns for retaliatory oppression from ethnic minorities in a future system:

> I see it as a system in which respective powers rest with the state governments with little to no centralization by the union. I live in Kachin State but I don't know what kind of administration system KIO/KIA [Kachin Independence Army] uses. Under the name of federalism, groups like these could come to power … If these groups favour/practise military-rule, I would neither support them nor wish to live under their rule. I am also concerned that there can be corruption over natural resources … Given oppression by successive Bamar governments in the past, I also wonder if these groups will retaliate against the Bamar public with prejudicial treatment. Nevertheless, any federal governance means nothing without justice. (Bamar)

2.6.4. **Support for federal democracy**

Despite the diversity of meanings attributed to federal democracy, there is strong public support across all groups in Myanmar. As Figure 2.19 shows, around 80 per cent of Bamars in regions, Bamars in states, titular minorities residing in their ethnic states and titular minorities outside of their ethnic states support federal democracy. The level of support for federal democracy among Bamars is on par with that of ethnic minorities.[20] This finding is remarkable given that federal democracy was largely considered an 'ethnic minority cause' (*taingyinthar ayay* in Burmese) until after the 2021 coup.

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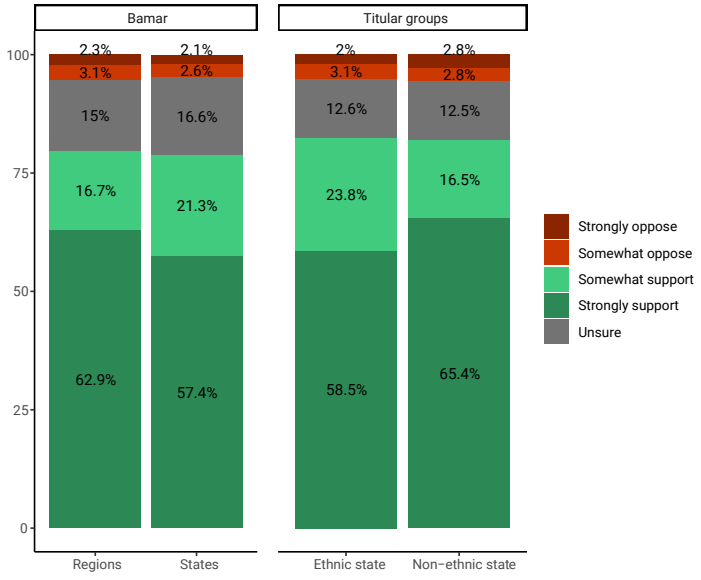
As seen in 2.6.3: Understanding of federal democracy, it is important to note that respondents are answering this question based on their own understanding of federal democracy. These understandings may not always be consistent with one another; at times, they contradict

20 β(Bamar) = 0.011; standard error = 0.029; p-value = 0.692; n = 2,226. This means the difference between support for federal democracy among Bamar compared to support level among titular minorities is not statistically significant.

each other. Despite overt public support for federal democracy, there is a need to better clarify in the public discourse what federal democracy means.

Figure 2.19. **Support for federal democracy by subgroup**



Note: N (Bamar) = 982; 427. N (titular minority) = 605; 393.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

2.6.5. **Territorial organization**

While there is strong support for federal democracy, one of the main points of contention in the political discourse has been around what a federal system would look like, particularly concerning the organization of a 'Bamar State' as well as the possibility of new states.

The 1947 Constitution established Kachin State, Karenni State, Shan State and the Special Division of the Chin (see Figure 2.20); it also guaranteed the creation of a Karen State, which was later created following a border determination commission. The 1974 Constitution then reconstituted the Special Chin Division as Chin State and established Karen State, Mon State and Rakhine State (see Figure 2.20). However, the constitutional status of the seven

states and the seven divisions was exactly the same and the ethnic nature of the states was not recognized as such in both the 1974 and 2008 Constitutions. Since then, each of the major ethnic groups in Myanmar, with the exception of Bamar, can be said to have an ethnic state, regardless of this being in name only. The Bamar heartland (the dry zone or *anyar*), along with adjacent territories, comprises seven 'Divisions' (or 'Regions' since the 2008 Constitution), but there is no 'Bamar State'. According to the 2008 Constitution, which also created for the first time a Union capital territory, the quasi-federal rights and competences of the seven states and regions are the same.

Some ethnic minority leaders have argued that the nonexistence of a 'Bamar State' is contradictory to the promise of ethnic equality that General Aung San made—'if Burma gets one *Kyat,* then you will get one *Kyat*' (cited in Walton 2008: 897)—and has exacerbated ethnic inequality.[21] Consequently, the creation of a Bamar state has been referenced in several existing federal constitution proposals.

To gauge the preferences of different groups in Myanmar, we asked respondents to indicate whether they most agreed with (a) the reconstitution of existing regions as multiple Bamar states, (b) merging existing regions into a single Bamar state, or (c) if they prefer the existing territorial division. Respondents were also presented with the fourth option: 'I would like to make a different proposal'.

Results indicate that when it comes to the idea of a Bamar state, Bamars and ethnic minorities hold fairly similar views. A minority of Bamars and ethnic minorities support the idea of a Bamar state (see Figure 2.21). The establishment of multiple Bamar states is the least preferred proposal among both Bamars and ethnic minorities. While the proposal to merge regions into a single Bamar state is more popular than having multiple Bamar states, just 17 to 20 per cent of the respondents across different groups agreed with it. Overall, there seems to be a strong preference for maintaining the status quo.

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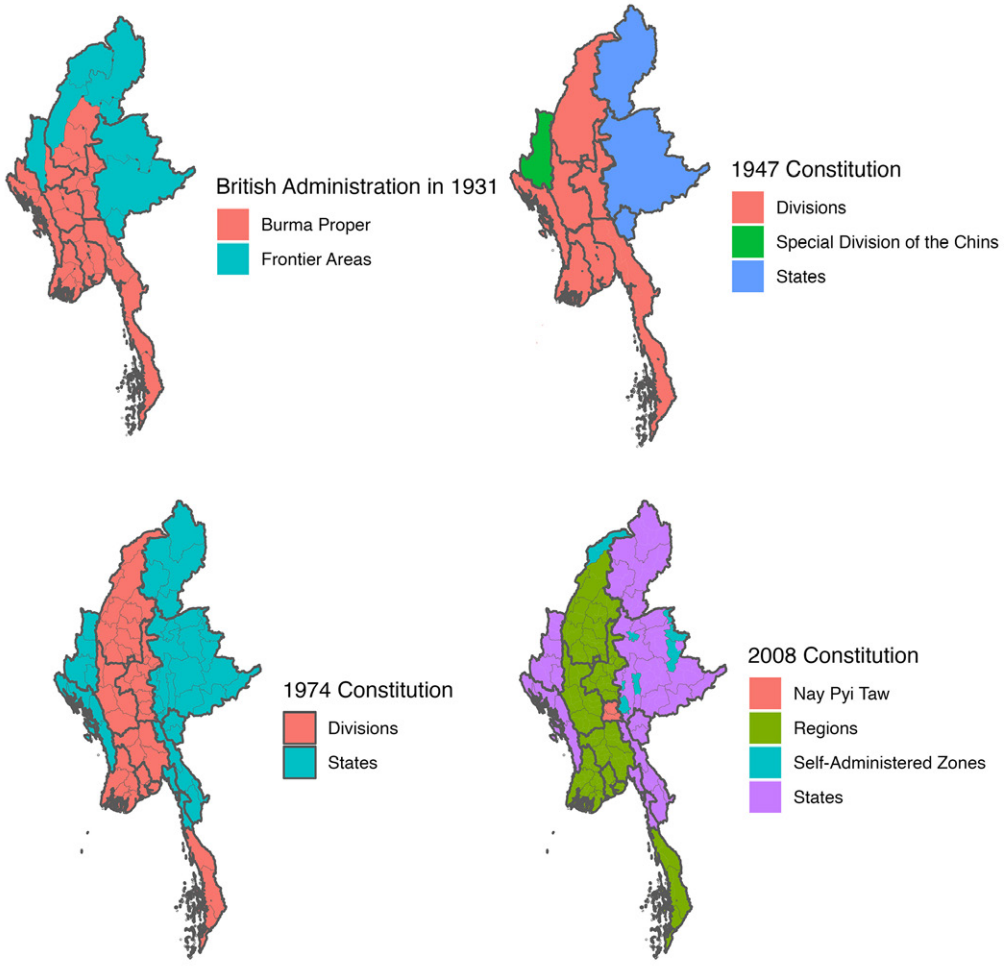
Of the respondents who did not select one of the three specified positions, about 150 submitted a proposal. Several Bamar respondents stated that there should not be ethnic-based states, including a Bamar state. One respondent explained their view this way:

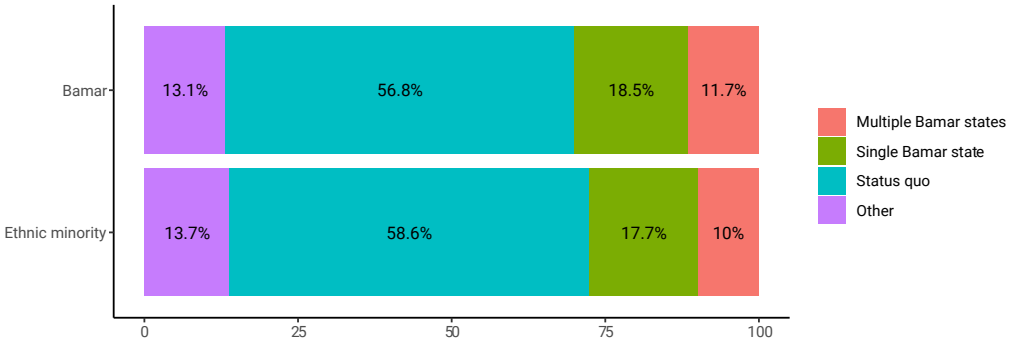
21 Another version of this quote is 'Bamar one kyat, Shan one kyat'. This version has been interpreted to mean ethnic equality at the individual rather than at the group level (Shan Herald 2016). Put differently, individuals will have equal representation regardless of ethnicity, as opposed to each ethnic group having equal representation.

Figure 2.20. **Evolution of Myanmar subnational units**



Sources: H. Tinker (ed.), *Burma, the Struggle for Independence, 1944-1948: Documents from Official and Private Sources* (London: HMSO, 1983) for information on Frontier Areas delimitation; *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, v. 26, Atlas 1931 edition; and Constitutions of Burma/Myanmar 1948, 1974, 2008; map drawn by Constant Courtin, 2024.

Figure 2.21. **Preferences for territorial organization**



Note: N (Bamar) = 1,252. N (ethnic minority) = 1,065.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

> They should simply be the country's subnational units—having ethnic-based states is detrimental to peace.

Several also proposed how subnational units could be renamed based on territorial characteristics.

> I would suggest keeping the current territorial setup but with different names. For example, Mai Hka Mali Hka State instead of Kachin State, West Coastal State instead of Rakhine State …, Pobba State instead of Shan State, Dekhina State instead of Mon State … Obsession with ethnicity [when it comes to naming territories] should cease. Also, instead of State and Region, there should be just one terminology. For instance, Yangon State, Dekhina State, West Coastal State. (Bamar)

> Current territorial division has been discussed, scrutinized and approved by the National Convention comprising eight groups multiple times at various levels. Though the current issues revolve around ethno-nationalism, in reality, people have become descendants of mixed blood for so long and spread across the country. This can be seen in the national census. [Territories] should not be named after ethnicity but based on another notable feature of choosing. If based on Yangon City, then Yangon Region, if based on Bago City, then Bago Region, etc. Likewise, southern Shan State should be

> Taunggyi State or Region, Kachin State should be Myitkyina [State or Region] … wouldn't that be great? ... (Bamar)

Many respondents, both Bamars and ethnic minorities, also further reiterated the importance of having ethnic-based states and creating a Bamar state and proposed ways to change the territorial boundaries.

> I would like to see eight states. This would bring justice and fairness towards ethnic groups. (Bamar)

> Places where Bamar is the majority should be established as Bamar State, and the remaining places where other groups are the majority should be transferred. For example, Kalay should be transferred to Chin State. (Bamar)

> Kawlin, Wuntho, Banmauk, Inndaw, Katha, Htigyaing in Sagaing Region should be transferred to Kachin State. Kalay should be transferred to Chin State. Mogok and Pyin Oo Lwin should be included in Shan State. Nyaunglebin and the surrounding area in Bago Region should be added to Kayin State. Some parts of Ayeyarwady Region should also be added to Kayin State. Tanintharyi should be added to Mon State. What is left then should be established as Bamar State. (Bamar)

A few comments pointed to the importance of creating new ethnic-based territories. For example, a respondent stated:

> Groups like Shanni and Kadu should also have their own territory. (Shanni)

Indeed, with the establishment of a federal democracy system, it is possible that new states could emerge. While only seven ethnic minority groups have had the creation of an ethnic state, with six additional ethnic groups being granted recognition through the formation of self-administered zones with the 2008 Constitution,[22] a federal democracy system may create new subnational territories.

We asked respondents without an ethnic state about their preference for their own ethnic state. The majority indicated their group should

22 These six groups are the Danu, Kokang, Naga, Ta'ang, Pa-O and Wa. However, such zones do not provide for equal footing with the state even in the context of the 2008 Constitution.

have their own ethnic state (see Figure 2.22).[23] Given that the sample size for non-titular minorities is quite small, this finding should be interpreted with caution and followed up with further research.

There are two important concerns to consider here. The first is whether creating more ethnic states will inspire an ever-increasing number of ethnic groups to demand an ethnic state. While we lack the data to speculate on this concern, a comparison of responses from Pa-O respondents—the largest non-titular *taingyinthar* minority group in Myanmar—and other titular minorities is telling.[24] Among Pa-O respondents, those who 'strongly agree' that their group should have an ethnic state is 65 per cent whereas among other non-titular minorities, the figure is just 37 per cent. This contrast suggests that the desire for ethnic states correlates with population size. Thus, it is perhaps unlikely that desire for an ethnic state would be high among small non-titular minorities.

The second concern is the proliferation of ethnic conflict between titular and non-titular groups. Creating ethnic states for non-titular groups would require significant redrawing of Kachin State, Shan State and, to a lesser extent, Sagaing Region boundaries. Settling the boundaries for new states could fuel ethnic conflict; this was a main concern expressed in deliberations of territorial federalism versus ethnofederalism in a study conducted in 2018 (see Breen and He 2020). The risks of these implications are beyond the scope of our study; future research could explore this aspect.

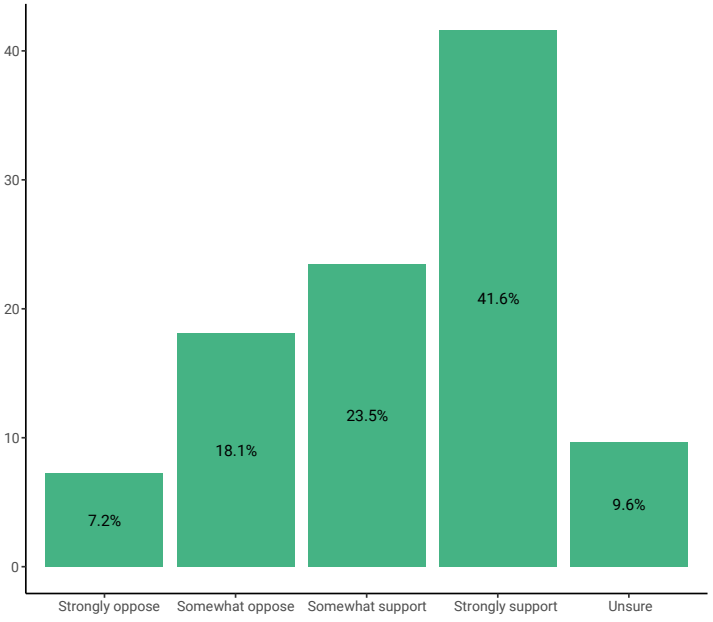
2.6.6. **Decentralization**

In addition to federalism, decentralization provides another avenue for improving minorities' political participation and autonomy. In fact, decentralization, which is concerned with the delegation of authority away from a central government to subnational and local administrative units, is essential to proper functioning of a federal democratic system. For most of its history, Myanmar has been a highly centralized state, with the central government overseeing all functions of governance and administration at the local level. This feature of the state has facilitated political hegemony of the Bamars, contributing to ethnic minorities' grievances.

23 We asked non-titular minority respondents to indicate the extent to which they agreed with this statement: '[Ethnic group] should have their own state [ethnic state] within Myanmar.' The text in brackets specifies the ethnicity the respondent reported at the beginning of the survey. If the respondent is Pa-O, the statement would be 'Pa-O people should have their own state (Pa-O State) within Myanmar.'

24 According to GAD Township Reports, in terms of population size, Pa-O is larger than Karenni and is at least as large as Kachin (see Jap and Courtin 2022).

Figure 2.22. **Desire for own ethnic state among non-titular minorities**



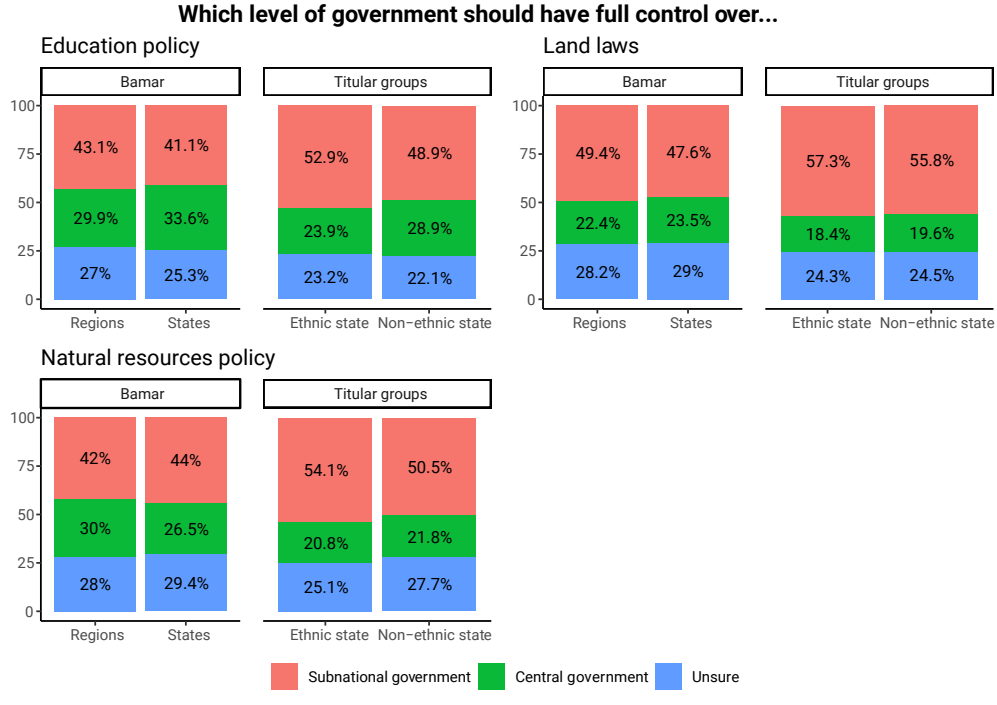
Note: N = 159.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

To gauge public support for decentralization, we asked survey respondents to indicate whether the central government or the state/region government should have full control over education policy, land laws and natural resources policy. Because discussions around decentralization are often complicated, we opted to focus on topics that were more salient for the general population. We also only compared preferences for subnational and central governance, since these would be the main arenas where higher level policy is being carried out (as opposed to the day-to-day running of townships at the local level).

We found considerable public support for decentralization. A plurality of Bamars and titular minorities indicated preferences for subnational governments to have full control over these policy areas, although we also note that the proportion of respondents who indicated that they were unsure was relatively high as well (averaging around a quarter of the sample) (see Figure 2.23). This corresponds to the high level of

uncertainty in the 2022 survey. Across the three policy areas, support for subnational government control was highest for land laws, which perhaps speaks to the importance of land ownership in Myanmar. In the case of titular minorities, land laws that are unaligned with traditional practices have been a source of discontent.

Figure 2.23. **Preferences for decentralization**

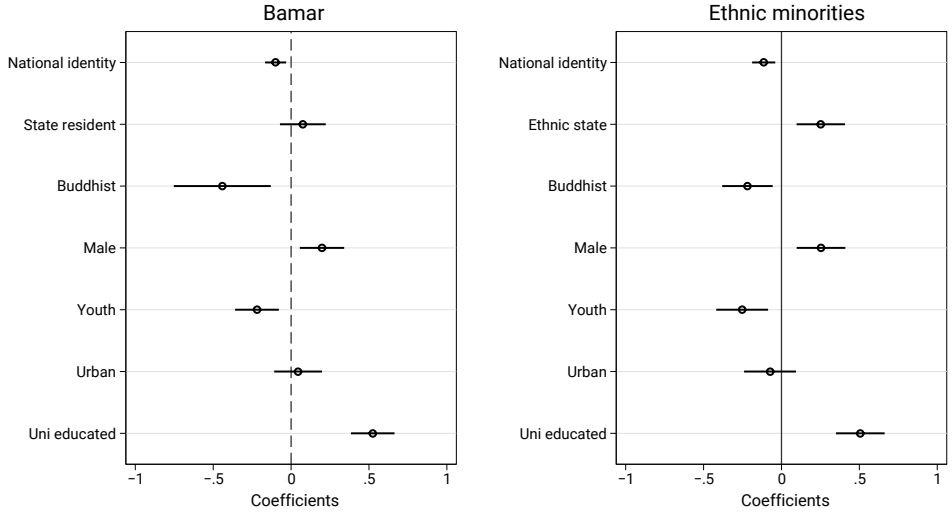


Note: For these sets of questions, N (Bamar in regions) range from 1,073 to 1,079. N (Bamar in states) range from 452 to 455. N (titular minorities in ethnic states) range from 630 to 637. N (titular minorities outside of ethnic states) range from 422 to 428.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

There are a few notable variations, however. On average, regardless of ethnic background, support for decentralization decreases as the importance of Myanmar national identity increases (see Figure 2.24). When comparing Bamar and ethnic minorities, support for

decentralization is lower among Bamars.[25] Among ethnic minorities, titular minorities residing in their own ethnic state (e.g. Kachin in Kachin State, Chin in Chin State and the like), on average, support decentralization more than other ethnic minorities (see Figure 2.24). Among Bamars, there is no difference between residents of states and regions in terms of support for decentralization (see Figure 2.24).

Figure 2.24. **Correlation of support for decentralization**



Note: 95 per cent confidence intervals; N Bamar = 1,170; N ethnic minorities = 985. The dependent variable is measured on a 4-point scale. National identity measure is standardized and all other independent variables are on 0–1 scale.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

25 Support for decentralization is created as an additive index based on the three decentralization survey questions. For each question, those who indicated that the subnational government should have control over the policy area are coded as 1 and those indicating the central government or not sure are coded 0. Then the dichotomous measures are added up. β(Bamar) = −0.20; standard error = 0.055; p-value = 0.000; n = 2,355. This means the difference between support for decentralization between Bamar and ethnic minorities is statistically significant.

2.7. **EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL EFFECTS OF ETHNOFEDERALISM**

The struggle for federalism—a system in which ethnic groups (usually minorities) have constitutionally guaranteed self-rule and power that is shared between the central/national and subnational/territorial governments—has been an enduring theme in Myanmar politics since the country's founding. The 1947 Panglong Agreement, a historic document cementing the establishment of the Union of Burma, enshrines the idea of self-rule this way: 'Full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle.'[26] However, Myanmar (then Burma) has fallen short of the expectations of those advocating for maximum decentralization of powers to the states, despite the fact that the 1947, 1974 and 2008 Constitutions include a number of federal features.

Since the 2021 coup, the democratic forces have outlined their vision for the future of Myanmar in the FDC—a document of the political framework largely considered to be a precursor for a new constitution to replace the military-drafted 2008 Constitution.[27] It is clear in the FDC that Myanmar would be remade as a federal democratic union.

However, federalism can be ethnic-based or territory-based, and it is not yet clear which of the two Myanmar would adopt, or if it would be some combination of both. The former, also known as ethnofederalism, is a system in which geographically concentrated ethnic groups are given territorial autonomy (Anderson 2014). In this system, subnational units 'recognise and institutionalise the rights of ethnic nationalities to their traditional homelands and resources, to use their own languages in official business and education, and to self-determination' (Breen and He 2020). In contrast, for territory-based federalism, also known as territorial federalism, boundaries of subnational units are 'based on criteria like geographical continuity, economic resources and infrastructure, more so than ethnicity, language and historical continuity' (Breen and He 2020). The FDC has yet to specify criteria for how the subnational units will be defined (International IDEA 2022).

Ethnic minority leaders, however, have generally favoured ethnofederalism in the past as well as at the present time (Breen and He 2020; Wansai 2024). We know little about whether or not

26 See Walton (2008) for the complexity in understanding the Panglong Agreement and its legacy.

27 For an analysis of the FDC, see International IDEA (2022).

ordinary ethnic minorities also favour ethnofederalism over territorial federalism. According to a study conducted by Michael G. Breen and Boagang He in 2018, which was based on 166 respondents in Shan State and Sagaing Region, 60 per cent supported ethnic states; after deliberative discussions, it dropped to 43 per cent (Breen and He 2020), suggesting that there is at least some support for ethnofederalism among ordinary ethnic minorities.

One important concern about implementing a federal democracy within the context of Myanmar is whether it will merely replace centralized Bamar-centric institutions with decentralized ethnocentric institutions that advance the interests of titular groups at the expense of minority groups in the subnational units.

In this section, we investigate the effects of ethnofederalism in diverse societies. The existing literature does not provide a clear answer on this. While ethnofederalism is thought to help accommodate ethnic minorities' aspirations for self-determination (Hechter 2000), thereby preventing secession, ethnofederalism is also thought to make secession more likely (Roeder 2009). This concern is apparent in some of the qualitative responses presented in 2.6.6: Decentralization. There are also concerns that interethnic relations might worsen under an ethnofederal system (Juon and Rohrbach 2023). As alluded to already, one important concern about implementing a federal democracy within the context of Myanmar is whether it will merely replace centralized Bamar-centric institutions with decentralized ethnocentric institutions that advance the interests of titular groups at the expense of minority groups in the subnational units.

To investigate the effects of ethnofederalism, we embedded an experiment within the survey—a research design social scientists often utilize to address causal questions. This approach involves the *random* assignment of *treatment* which minimizes differences between the comparison groups. Since randomization of the treatment assignment should produce comparison groups that are similar, researchers are able to attribute any resulting differences to the treatment itself.

In our experiment, we randomly assigned half of the respondents to a treatment group and the other half to a control group. The treatment was a text that described ethnofederalism, priming respondents to think about the subnational-level status of their ethnic group. This means that some respondents were conditioned to think about their status as the titular group (which may have special status and rights within a given subnational unit), which we hypothesized would influence their answers to subsequent questions. The other half of the respondents who were randomly assigned to the control group were asked to read a text of similar length that was completely

unrelated to politics. Instead, they read a short text about rivers, biodiversity or agriculture.

After reading either the experimental or control text, respondents were then asked several questions related to institutional preferences, interethnic relations and support for pro-minority policies. Table 2.4 shows the differences in the two groups (treatment versus control) when it comes to certain outcomes. 'Null' results are findings where any difference between the two groups is not statistically significant. Statistically significant results are indicated in the red (negative effect) and green (positive effect) coloured cells. These effects can be interpreted as evidence showing the likely 'effects' of ethnofederalism.

As Table 2.4 shows, most results are null. Simulating a context in which one ethnic group within the subnational unit has special status and rights—that is, one aspect of living in an ethnofederal system—yielded no effect on support for self-determination. When it comes to territorial integrity of the country, there is very little evidence that ethnofederalism is detrimental; among titular minorities living in their ethnic state, support for self-determination remained the same. Ethnofederalism also does not appear to affect any of the outcomes we examined for Bamars living in the states as well as non-titular minorities.

Highlighting a context in which an ethnic group had special status and rights, however, did produce some effects on outgroup attitudes. For titular minorities living in their ethnic state, it worsened their trust of other minorities and Bamars in their state, while reducing their support for policies that promote other minority languages. In contrast, for Bamars living in the regions, the description of an ethnofederal context fostered an increase in support towards reserved seats for minorities.

2.8. **TRUST IN MAJOR POLITICAL ACTORS**

The constitution-making process requires that key political actors are committed to, and engaged in, political dialogues. How are these actors perceived by ordinary people in Myanmar? In this section we investigate how much trust ordinary people have towards key political organizations that are currently involved in (or should be involved in) the ongoing political dialogue.

Table 2.4. **Experimental results**

	Bamars in regions	Bamars in states	Titular minorities in ethnic states	Non-titular minorities
Support for self-determination	NA	NA	Null	Null
Ethnic pride	Null	Null	-^	Null
Trust in minorities	Null	NA	-*	NA
Trust in Bamars	NA	NA	-^	Null
Trust in titular group	NA	Null	NA	Null
Support intermarriage with minorities	Null	NA	Null	NA
Support intermarriage with Bamars	NA	NA	Null	Null
Support for intermarriage with titular group	NA	Null	NA	Null
Minorities' language protection	Null	NA	-^	NA
Reserved seats for minorities	+**	NA	Null	NA
Titular language protection	NA	Null	NA	Null
Reserved seats for titular minorities	NA	Null	NA	Null
Reserved seats for Bamars	NA	NA	Null	Null
Reserved public service for coethnics	NA	NA	Null	NA
Reserved chief minister for coethnics	NA	NA	Null	NA

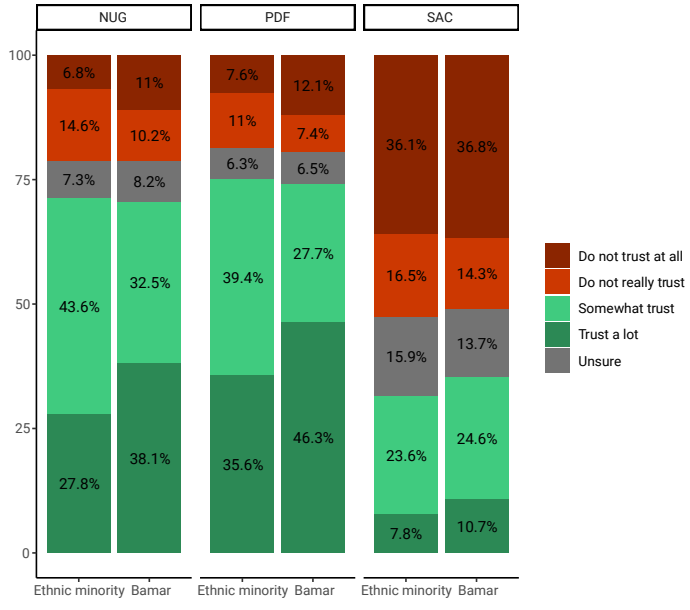
Notes: Significance levels: ^ = 0.1; * = 0.05; ** = 0.01.
NA means that the respondent was not asked the particular outcome, while null means that there was no effect.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

There is enormous trust for the NUG with around 70 per cent of the sample expressing trust (see Figure 2.25). This is consistent with findings in the 2022 survey when 62 per cent of respondents viewed interim government institutions such as the NUG, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) favourably.

There are notable variations, however. There is some suggestive evidence that trust towards the NUG among ethnic minorities is slightly lower than among Bamars, indicating lingering scepticism among ethnic minorities. Among Bamars, those living in the states were less likely to trust the NUG compared to those living in regions (see Figure 2.26), while among titular minorities, those living in their ethnic states were less likely to trust the NUG compared to their counterparts living outside their ethnic state (Figure 2.25).

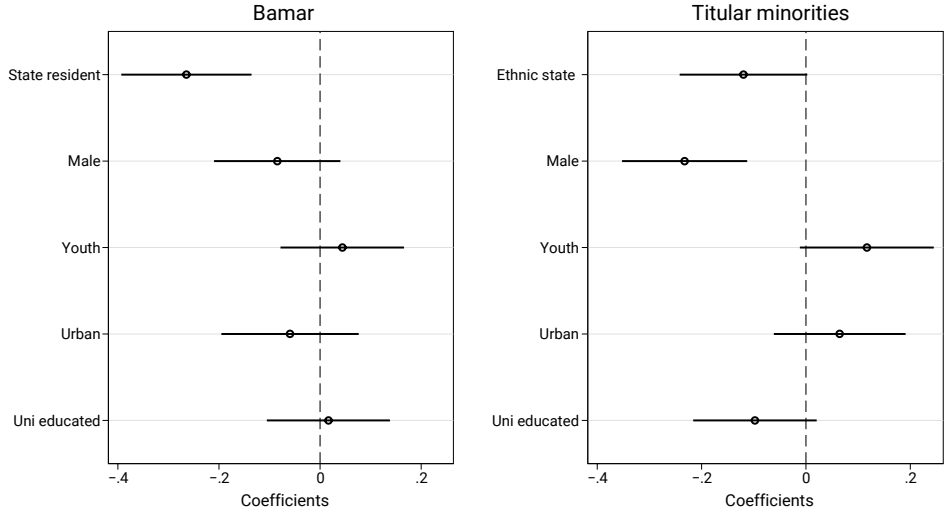
There is enormous trust for the NUG with around 70 per cent of the sample expressing trust.

Figure 2.25 **Trust towards political actors**



Note: N (Bamar—NUG) = 1,332. N (ethnic minority—NUG) = 1,088. N (Bamar—PDF) = 1,276. N (ethnic minority—PDF) = 1,042. N (Bamar—SAC) = 1,192. N (ethnic minority—SAC) = 973.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 2.26. **Correlation of trust for the NUG among Bamars and titular minorities**



Note: 95 per cent confidence intervals. N (Bamar) = 1,121. N (titular minorities) = 791.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

When it comes to the PDF, we also see enormous trust, with 75 per cent of respondents indicating trust. This finding is consistent with the 68 per cent of favourable attitudes recorded during the 2022 survey. Bamars who lived in the states were less likely to trust the PDF compared to those in the regions. On the flip side, youth—both Bamars and ethnic minorities—were more likely to trust the PDF.

In contrast, respondents reported low levels of trust towards the SAC. Only 34 per cent of all respondents said that they trusted the SAC—this level is expected to be lower in the population given the high non-response rate for this question (17 per cent). Again, this is consistent with the 30 per cent found in the 2022 survey.

Ethnic revolutionary organizations are widely considered to be some of the most influential players in the ongoing political processes of post-coup Myanmar. The 2022 survey showed that 61 per cent of the sample had positive feelings towards ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs). We note here, however, that respondents were asked about EROs in general, which ignores the many differences

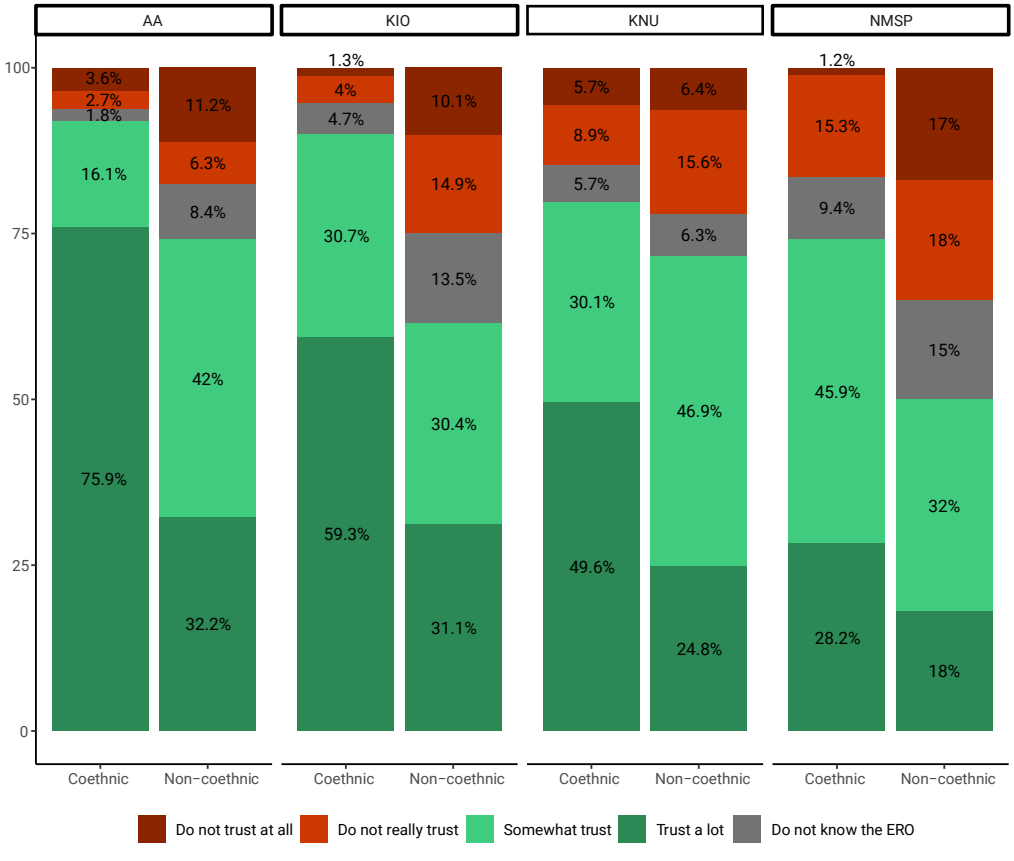
between EROs. To further probe how ordinary people in Myanmar view EROs, we asked respondents about their level of trust towards the ERO that was most active in their subnational unit. For example, respondents living in Kachin State were asked about the KIO.

In general, respondents had higher levels of trust in EROs associated with the AA, KIO, KNU and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) (65 per cent of the entire sample reported trusting EROs). However, even among these EROs, there is a clear disparity between coethnics and non-coethnics (see Figure 2.27). Stakeholders, including the EROs themselves, need to be aware of this divergence and work to gain the trust of non-coethnics.

For example, in Rakhine State, 92 per cent of Arakan respondents reported trusting the AA compared to 74 per cent of non-Arakan respondents. In Kachin State, 90 per cent of Kachin respondents said that they trusted the KIO. In contrast, among non-Kachins, two-thirds of that same proportion (61 per cent) reported that they trusted the KIO. Likewise, in Kayin State, 80 per cent of Karen respondents indicated that they trusted the KNU; this percentage drops to 72 per cent among non-Karen respondents.

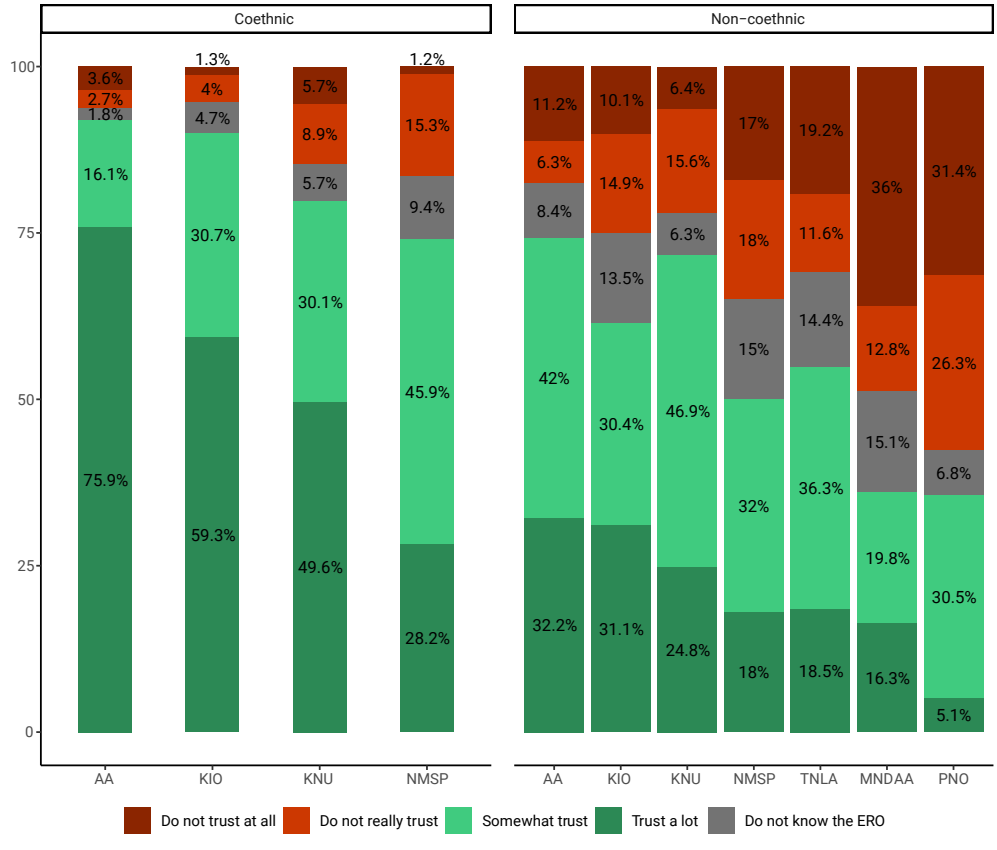
There are also differences across EROs (see Figure 2.28). Among non-Ta'angs, for example, 54 per cent reported trusting the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). For the NMSP, although 74 per cent of Mon respondents from Mon State said that they trusted the organization, only 40 per cent of non-Mon respondents said the same thing. This percentage is even lower for the Pa-O National Organisation (PNO) and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA): 36 per cent of non-Pa-Os said that they trusted the PNO and 31 per cent of non-Kokangs reported trusting the MNDAA.

Figure 2.27. **Trust towards specific EROs**



Notes: We are not able to examine trust towards other EROs such as the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) because of sample size limitations. N (coethnic) range from 85 to 150. N (non-coethnic) range from 100 to 621.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Figure 2.28. **Trust towards specific EROs**



Notes: We are not able to examine trust among coethnics for the TNLA, MNDAA and PNO due to sample size limitations. N (coethnic) range from 85 to 150. N (non-coethnic) range from 86 to 621.
Source: Data from 2024 International IDEA online survey via Qualtrics.

Chapter 3

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Myanmar currently stands at a critical juncture, requiring ordinary citizens and key stakeholders to imagine what a new Myanmar could look like. The democratic forces have outlined how they imagine a new Myanmar in the FDC and have begun to design inclusive institutions at all levels. As this process continues, a crucial piece of information relates to perceptions of identity and how they affect the preferences of ordinary people in Myanmar. While existing surveys have made important revelations about the Myanmar public as a whole, there is little information on the opinions of ordinary ethnic minorities as very few of these minorities are captured in nationally representative surveys. Our study helps fill this gap by capturing this neglected but vital segment of the population. We also endeavoured to provide a more nuanced lens beyond the Bamar versus ethnic minority paradigm.

Based on our findings, we outline several broad recommendations for the various stakeholders to consider as they continue to chart Myanmar's way forward.

Among ordinary people in Myanmar, ethnic equality is primarily perceived as equality between Bamar and titular groups, overlooking other ethnic minority groups in Myanmar.

First, federalism stands at the forefront of the ongoing revolution in Myanmar in part because it is believed to facilitate ethnic equality and inclusion. However, which groups are considered when thinking about ethnic equality in the Myanmar context? Many of the open-text responses given by our study participants suggest that, among ordinary people in Myanmar, ethnic equality is primarily perceived as equality between Bamar and titular groups, overlooking other ethnic minority groups in Myanmar. While perceptions and preferences at the elite level are beyond the scope of this study, such a biased view of ethnic equality may exist among key stakeholders who are involved, or will be involved, in the ongoing political or constitutional dialogues. It is important to ensure that federating Myanmar does

not lead to ethnic equality only between Bamars and select minority groups.

Related to the broader conceptualization of ethnic equality is the need to design robust institutions that safeguard the rights of ethnic and religious minorities at both the national *and* subnational levels. Although a federal system allows for decentralization and self-rule at the subnational level, it is important to ensure that minorities within subnational units are not disenfranchised culturally and politically. The ongoing political dialogue thus needs to include all relevant ethnic minorities and empower them to co-design inclusive institutions. Furthermore, given the high levels of support for ethnocentric institutions among titular minorities, more research should be done to better understand how higher levels of support for pro-minority institutions and policies can be cultivated.

Although a federal system allows for decentralization and self-rule at the subnational level, it is important to ensure that minorities within subnational units are not disenfranchised culturally and politically.

Furthermore, potential religious fault lines need to be monitored and deliberate efforts made at protecting religious minorities in Myanmar. Preference for a secular state and religious tolerance should not be conflated. Our findings indicate that Myanmar society still struggles to accept Muslims. In addition to working with religious minorities to co-design institutions that will facilitate the full participation and acceptance of religious minorities in political life, democratic actors and civil society need to promote discourses and programmes—including education—that will facilitate tolerance of Muslims as an integral part of Myanmar society.

Democratic actors and civil society need to promote discourses and programmes—including education—that will facilitate tolerance of Muslims as an integral part of Myanmar society.

Our findings also point to the need for all key political actors to do more trust-building. Just as ethnic minorities expressed lower trust towards the NUG compared to the Bamar, non-coethnics expressed lower trust towards EROs compared to their respective communities. As many commentators have noted, the NUG should evaluate how to build trust with minority communities. At the same time, EROs should also evaluate their relationship with non-ethnic communities and build trust with those communities.

Another important consideration has to do with raising awareness. An informed public is important for a healthy democracy and to maintain participatory democracy. Findings from both our survey and the 2022 survey suggest low literacy around key concepts that form the foundation of the FDC. For instance, although the term 'federal democracy' is commonly referenced by both political elites and the public, a significant portion of study participants indicated that they are 'not sure' or 'don't know' what the term means, not to mention significant variations in how it is perceived among those

who provided substantive responses. Contradictory perceptions of key principles underpinning the ongoing revolution could run the risk of misunderstandings and hamper progress. While we focused on political concepts in our survey, future research should continue to evaluate ordinary citizens' understandings of, and preference for, how federalism and power-sharing would work both at the big picture level and in everyday life which would include revenue generation and distribution, as well as service delivery. Democratic actors and civil society could consider ways to raise awareness of some of these major concepts among the general public, thereby expanding the informed civic base in the democratic process.

An unexpected finding from our study concerns youths' attitudes relative to the adult population. We see that not only do youth prioritize their ethnic and religious identity more than their adult counterparts, they are less supportive of Muslims' political representation, express higher levels of affinity for independence and indicate more support for decentralization efforts. These findings are inconsistent with results from our previous study on Myanmar youth (see Chew and Jap 2023). There are a couple of possible reasons for these findings; first, even among the youth, there may be generational differences between those who spent their formative years living under a military regime and those who grew up after reforms in 2010. Second, our sample may have excluded those who are most actively involved in the resistance movement. These individuals may be systematically different from those who participated in our survey. These potential explanations point to underlying heterogeneity within the youth population. Given the central role that the youth play in the ongoing resistance movement against the military regime, future research should further investigate Myanmar's youth's political behaviour and attitudes.

Finally, while this study has made some strides in eliciting the views of ethnic minorities, the sub-sample of non-titular minorities—in particular, Kokang, Pa-O, Shanni and Ta'ang—is not as large as we had hoped, limiting how much we can infer about these minorities. These minorities have a sizeable presence in Kachin State, Sagaing Region and Shan State (where they account for half of the population). Given the tenuous situations where non-titular minorities are located, a better understanding of their views is needed to identify concrete action for peacebuilding. One way to rectify this limitation of the current study may be to conduct a follow-up study that focuses on just non-titular minorities.

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About the authors

Isabel Chew, PhD, is a behavioural insights practitioner for a provincial government in Canada. Previously, she worked as a policy consultant for governments in Southeast Asia and East Africa. Isabel recently completed her PhD in political science from the University of British Columbia. Her research examines intergroup relations and identity politics, with a focus on Myanmar and Southeast Asia.

Jangai Jap, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Government and member of the Politics of Race and Ethnicity Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. She is also an incoming assistant professor in the Department of International Affairs at the University of Georgia. She studies comparative politics with a focus on ethnic politics, nationalism, minority–state relations, civil war and Burma/Myanmar politics.

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International IDEA
Strömsborg
SE-103 34 Stockholm
SWEDEN
+46 8 698 37 00
info@idea.int
www.idea.int

Identity and ethnicity have long been central to Myanmar's protracted political crisis and are key factors in the quest to build an inclusive federal democratic system. To better understand how identity and ethnicity affect social and political preferences, systematic data is needed that can shed light on the citizenry's perceptions of political systems and institutions, policy preferences and political attitudes as well as how they see themselves in relation to those with whom they share the same socio-political spaces.

This information is vital for present-day Myanmar as it stands at a crossroads, striving towards an inclusive, sustainable peace and a federal democratic union.

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