



SITUATION UPDATE:

Rohingya ‘Elections’ in Bangladesh

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Current Situation

Emerging information suggests that authorities in Bangladesh are planning the ‘election’ of a Rohingya leadership body — ostensibly to represent the interests of Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh — in mid-July 2025. Residents of refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar told this analytical unit that Bangladesh’s Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) was directly involved, but that its involvement may follow directives from Dhaka. They said that Bangladesh is seeking the formation of an Arakan Rohingya Unity Government (ARUG)¹, composed of 150–200 Rohingya leaders and several committees. The new body will likely be expected to represent the refugee community in discussions with international partners, as well as with stakeholders in Myanmar — including, critically, the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA) — regarding the issue of repatriation. According to the same sources, the intention is for the ARUG to advocate for the rights of refugees in the camps, potentially including at the UN’s High-Level Conference on Rohingya Muslims and Other Minorities, scheduled for September.

Refugees told this analytical unit that the current process (including a proposed ARUG constitution) has been dictated by Bangladesh authorities, and that the expected contenders to lead the ARUG are Rohingya individuals with strong ties to the Bangladesh security apparatuses, Myanmar’s State Administration Council (SAC), Rohingya armed actors, or all three. Both refugees and independent experts have expressed concern that the ARUG and its leaders will not be democratically elected, will hew closely to the interests of the Bangladesh security and intelligence forces, and may encourage Rohingya armed groups’ military operations against the AA.

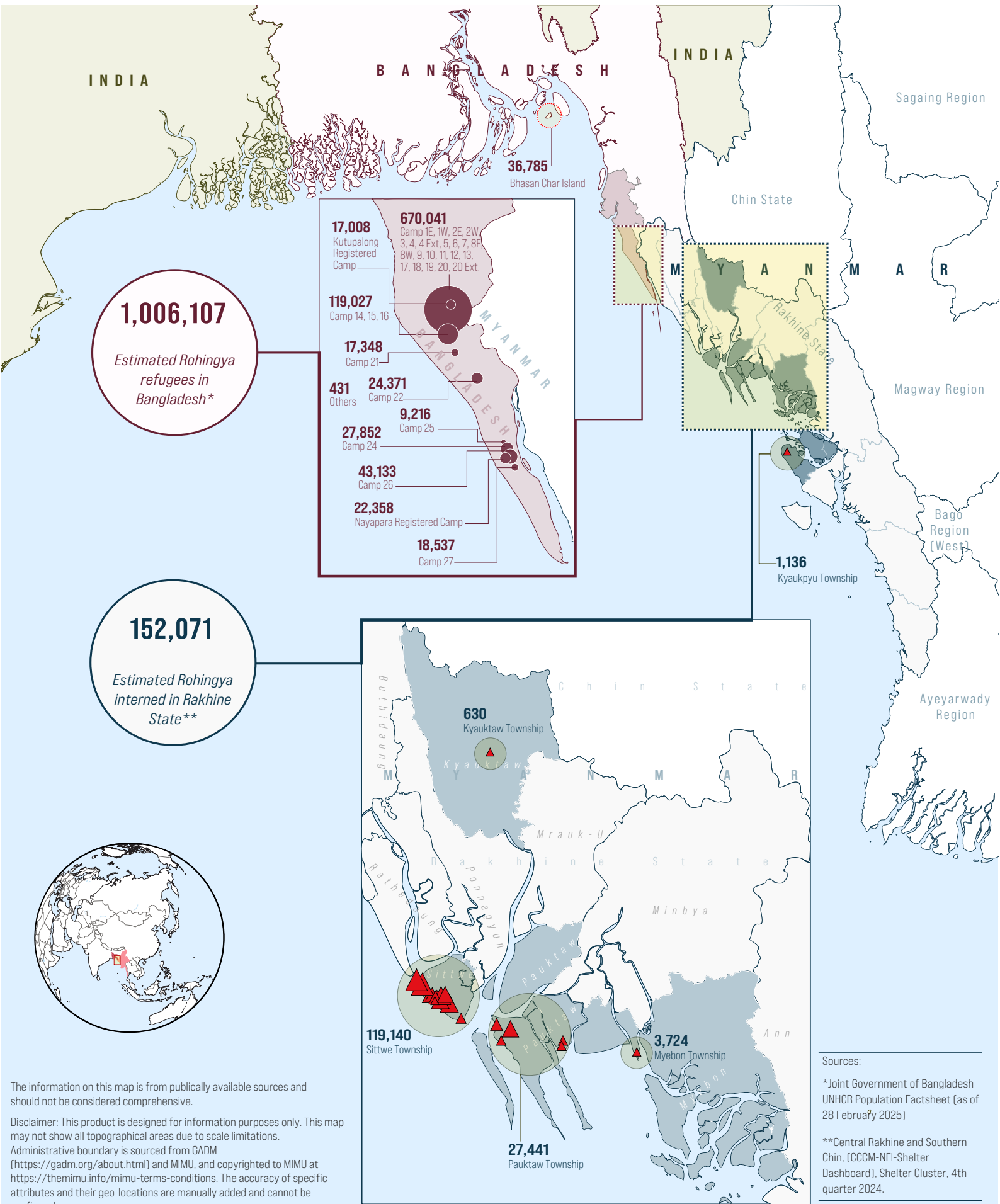
Background

For years, Rohingya refugees have languished in camps in Bangladesh, where resources and income opportunities are [scarce](#) and restricted, and where communities have been regularly [menaced](#) by armed actors such as the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the Rohingya Solidarity Organisation (RSO). Despite these groups purporting to represent the interests of the Rohingya community as a whole, much of their activity is criminal in nature, and dozens of armed actors (many of them fundamentally resembling criminal gangs), have fought for control of camp territory and the profits of extortion and trafficking, with uninvolved civilians often bearing the [brunt](#) of violence. These actors have effectively silenced civil society and other moderate voices, including by co-opting religious leaders and assassinating civilian opponents — most notably [Mohib Ullah](#) in 2021. The balance of power between these actors has often been dictated by the interests of the Bangladesh security apparatus.

Bangladesh has long sought the repatriation of Rohingya refugees. Domestically, the camps are unpopular and associated with negative economic, environmental, social, and political impacts. Bangladesh has been involved in [multiple efforts](#) to coordinate repatriation with successive Myanmar authorities in Nay Pyi Taw, and has furnished [lists](#) of eligible returnees. At the same time, Dhaka is constrained by the optics of pushing refugees back into Myanmar in a context that could be seen as less than safe, dignified, and voluntary. While conditions remain unsuitable for repatriation, the key interlocutor for returns changed in 2024; it is no longer the Myanmar State in Nay Pyi Taw, but the ULA/AA.

¹ According to local sources, the planned group’s name has not yet been finalised; ARUG appears to be one of several potential names for the body-to-be. However, for the sake of simplicity (and while a naming decision is pending), this update will refer to it as the ARUG.

ROHINGYA CAMPS IN RAKHINE STATE AND BANGLADESH



The information on this map is from publically available sources and should not be considered comprehensive.

Disclaimer: This product is designed for information purposes only. This map may not show all topographical areas due to scale limitations. Administrative boundary is sourced from GADM (<https://gadm.org/about.html>) and MIMU, and copyrighted to MIMU at <https://themimu.info/mimu-terms-conditions>. The accuracy of specific attributes and their geo-locations are manually added and cannot be confirmed.



Rohingya Camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Several factors have had major impacts on dynamics in the camps, and between the camps and Rakhine State, over the 18 months.

- The AA's offensive, starting in November 2023 and aiming to secure control of all of neighbouring Rakhine State (and Chin State's Paletwa Township), impacted dynamics around armed activity and repatriation in the Bangladesh camps. As the SAC increasingly found itself on the back foot in fighting the AA (and amid its nationwide push to recruit more soldiers), it [enlisted](#) Rohingya people in Rakhine State, and it appeared to [coordinate](#) with Rohingya armed actors in the Bangladesh camps to enlist Rohingya people from there. After taking Buthidaung and Maungdaw townships, the AA was also in control of much of Rakhine State and the entire border between Myanmar and Bangladesh, increasing the importance of dialogue between it and Bangladesh authorities — including around repatriation.
- The dramatic [ousting](#) of Bangladesh's Sheikh Hasina government, in August 2024, affected coordination between stakeholders inside the Bangladesh government, and thereby relationships between Bangladesh actors and the AA. Under the current interim government, led by Mohammed Yunus, Bangladesh's DGFI appears to have greater space to take a hostile and confrontational track towards the ULA/AA, by allowing Rohingya armed actors to organise in the camps and move freely across the border.
- Major cuts to international aid have likely changed dynamics in the camps, and possibly changed Bangladesh's calculus vis-a-vis the international community. International funding for humanitarian relief in the camps [dropped precipitously](#) in early 2025, further diminishing resources and increasing desperation among Rohingya refugees. While the full effects of this remain to be seen, it is highly likely — and anecdotal reports suggest — that it will increase the power of armed actors in the camps and push more refugees to join them. More tentatively, major cuts to international development funding flowing into the camps could reduce the government's sensitivity to international opinions regarding the state of the camps and the nature of repatriation.
- Finally, it is worth considering the unprecedented impact of arms proliferation along the border. The flight of SAC military personnel into Bangladesh in the face of ULA/AA operations, the SAC's training of Rohingya conscripts and recruits in Rakhine State during 2024, and reported arms shipments by the SAC to Rohingya armed actors in Bangladesh have all contributed to a great availability of arms in and around the refugee camps. This raises the stakes of DGFI's high risk calculation. However, while Rohingya armed actors are likely better equipped than ever before, they are unlikely to be able to contest the ULA/AA, which is now among the most powerful armed actors in Myanmar.

Impact

The proposed election process and formation of the ARUG are likely to have humanitarian and political impacts, for Rohingya communities in Bangladesh and Myanmar, and their relationships with stakeholders in Myanmar and internationally.

Most immediately, the proposed election appears set to enhance the perceived legitimacy of specific Rohingya actors, with the objective of allowing them to take a leading role in discussions with the ULA/AA. By effectively casting actors such as [Dil Mohammed](#) as the voices of the Rohingya refugee community, the ‘election’ and formation of the ARUG would give a platform — seemingly endorsed by Bangladesh — to people whose message is: militant; in favor of swift repatriation regardless of the circumstances; ostensibly aligned with the SAC and against the ULA/AA; and unaligned with much of the wider Rohingya community. There are also [concerns](#) that the ‘election’ of these people would give them the opportunity to represent Rohingya interests at the upcoming UN conference (and other fora), affecting the message conveyed to international actors and solidifying their legitimacy in these actors’ eyes. Finally, a perceived alignment between Rohingya people and the SAC could [worsen](#) perceptions of the Rohingya community by many people in Myanmar, including resistance actors.

Beyond this, the ‘election’ and ARUG formation will likely set the stage for greater recruitment and militancy within the Bangladesh camps in service of an armed push against the AA in northern Rakhine State. Attacks by Rohingya armed actors — potentially as part of a united front under the ARUG — and perceptions by the ULA/AA that these attacks are endorsed by Bangladesh would be not only deadly for the Rohingya people involved in fighting but also harmful to unarmed Rohingya people in Rakhine State and prospects for repatriation from Bangladesh. AA efforts to securitise northern Rakhine State have already impacted Rohingya people living there — through both [restrictions](#) and violence against them where they are confused with (or accused of supporting) Rohingya armed actors — and would likely take a far higher toll in the face of a more concerted effort from the Bangladesh side. To the extent that this situation galvanizes support for Rohingya armed actors from Rohingya residents of Rakhine State, and/or [tensions](#) between Rohingya and Rakhine residents of the state, the fallout is likely to impact Rohingya people most.

Perceptions that Bangladesh endorses armed pressure on the AA would almost certainly undermine discussions of repatriation, and possibly the ULA’s willingness to engage in any dialogue with Bangladesh stakeholders. Fundamentally, any pro-SAC candidate elected in these elections is unlikely to be accepted as a legitimate interlocutor by the ULA/AA, and this dynamic will almost certainly also reverberate in the treatment of Rohingya communities by the AA in Myanmar.

The Challenge of Rohingya Representation

Identifying appropriate representation among Rohingya communities has been a persistent challenge. In the refugee camps in Bangladesh, the decimation of civil society, the stranglehold of armed actors, and the power of state actors mean that it would be extremely difficult for any democratic process to take place, or any moderate voice to emerge as a leader. In Rakhine State, a lack of free expression — for fear of retaliation from the AA or SAC — raises similar concerns. Diaspora and global civil society groups dedicated to advocating for Rohingya people’s rights are moderate and popular internationally, but many of their members do not live in Bangladesh or Myanmar and may not be seen as accurately reflecting the interests of people in those places. Nonetheless, the lack of a body seen as representing the interests of Rohingya people — or at least those in the refugee camps — has been cited by the ULA/AA as a rationale for not engaging in repatriation discussions, and it remains a problem.

On 13 July, a [press release](#) announced the new formation of the Arakan Rohingya National Council (ARNC), which described itself as “the most inclusive and unified platform ever formed to represent Rohingya communities, inside Myanmar, in the refugee camps and globally.” The ARNC reportedly includes Rohingya community leaders from the camps — though it appears to have no connection to the proposed ARUG — as well as many parts of Rakhine State and the diaspora. The importance of the ARNC will be determined in part by the degree to which external stakeholders engage with it, but it appears to be a more representative body, more genuinely embodying Rohingya voices (as opposed to SAC or Bangladesh interim government policy), than the ARUG.

Response Implications

Geopolitical actors and humanitarian responders in Bangladesh and Myanmar should anticipate a situation in which the ARUG nominally represents the Rohingya refugee community, but in fact marches to the drum of the DGFI, and perhaps the SAC as well to some extent, and thereby undermines both life in the camps and prospects for repatriation from them.

For humanitarian responders in Bangladesh, this could have multiple implications. Greater cooperation — rather than jockeying for power — between Rohingya armed actors could mean a drop in inter-group violence, attacks against refugees, and devastating fires in the camps. However, hopes of improved conditions must be tempered by a recognition of the recent aid cuts’ devastating impacts on hunger and the provision of services, and of the prospects of wider scale armed recruitment and extortion (potentially in the name of ‘freedom fighters’). The proposed leadership of the ARUG has previously been [implied](#) in forced recruitment by Rohingya armed actors, and similar protection concerns are likely to remain critical. While the degree of interest among refugees in joining armed actors is unclear and liable to change, this should be understood as a [harmful](#) potential outcome for anybody involved. Increased Rohingya militarisation would also severely harm prospects for repatriation, meaning that refugees — and massive needs — should be expected to remain in the camps for the foreseeable future.

For humanitarian responders in Myanmar, efforts to support Rohingya communities and inter-communal relations are likely to become more challenging. Though discussions of repatriation are likely to remain on hold, it should be anticipated that conditions for

Rohingya communities — in camps or otherwise — in AA-controlled parts of Rakhine State worsen, and that the AA may even increase barriers to supporting these communities as securitisation takes hold. Information, whether true or not, about militant Rohingya activity may increase negative sentiment between Rohingya communities and the ULA/AA, and/or between Rohingya and Rakhine communities. To the extent that this affects economic activity between communities, it is likely to affect living conditions of Rohingya people. To the extent that it affects AA policy toward Rohingya people (even if localised), it is likely to affect their income opportunities and the ability of responders to reach them. Particularly in northern Rakhine State, increased AA securitisation would likely make access extremely challenging while also displacing communities and aggravating needs.

The elections may create an impression across Myanmar — including among forces resisting the SAC — that Rohingya communities in Bangladesh are universally aligned with the SAC and Rohingya armed actors. This could undo some of the meagre gains in social cohesion achieved nationwide for the Rohingya since 2021, and potentially make them targets of violence.

For geopolitical actors, the ‘elections’ create a conundrum. By opposing this effort, these actors risk playing into a narrative that the international community does not care about or pursue solutions to the Rohingya issue. On the other hand, by endorsing a process that appears to be curated and undemocratic, these actors may find it harder to oppose the ‘election’ process planned by the SAC in Myanmar.

Recommendations

For Bangladesh:

1. Pause this ‘election’ and reassess the strategy around it;
2. Find an approach to camp conditions, repatriation efforts, the ULA/AA, and the SAC that is both unified — between the civilian interim government, DGFI, and army — and proactively engaged with the international community;
3. Allow UN actors to facilitate engagement and discussion with Rohingya civil society;
4. Enhance protection activities in the camps, which would better allow the organic development and voices of Rohingya civil society;
5. Recognise that the ULA/AA is now the key interlocutor with which to engage on border issues and repatriation;
6. Facilitate an increase in trade and (informal) cross-border aid, address dire humanitarian needs and social tensions in Rakhine State, support local economies in Bangladesh, and enhance border stability;
7. Recognise that repatriation is a long-term objective that, in order to be voluntary, safe, dignified, and **sustainable**, can only be achieved with careful planning and coordination — not through sponsoring the use of armed violence; and
8. As a corollary, recognise that stability and improved conditions for Rohingya people in Rakhine State requires sustained efforts to improve social cohesion, economic conditions, governance, and service delivery. These things are more likely to allow for the long-term goal of repatriation than support to actors who promote further violence.

For donors, international responders, and geopolitical actors:

1. Advocate the above messages to the Bangladesh government;
2. Advocate to the Bangladesh government that the results of an election that is not seen as free and fair will not bring international legitimacy, and that any elected person with perceived ties to the SAC will inhibit the ability to engage in dialogue with the ULA/AA;
3. Do not legitimise the ‘election’, or actors ‘elected’ through it, by giving them a platform internationally or visiting them in Cox’s Bazar;
4. Pursue a stronger and more coordinated international approach to the issues of Rohingya repatriation and protection in Rohingya refugee camps, to enable strategic planning and a more proactive stance on these issues;
5. Advocate to Bangladesh, the ULA/AA, and the SAC to improve conditions for all communities in Rakhine State, including the Rohingya, providing them with alternatives to joining armed actors;
6. Support the promotion of genuine Rohingya civil society actors, in both Bangladesh refugee camps and Rakhine State, who can represent their communities in dialogue and at international fora;
7. Support the ULA/AA in figuring out how to integrate more Rohingya people into its structures, in a way that is palatable to the ULA/AA, thereby improving relations between it and Rohingya communities in Rakhine State and increasing its support within these communities; and
8. Monitor both physical and online spaces to better understand intercommunal sentiment in Rakhine State, including as a result of the potential ‘elections’.

