Panarchy of Myanmar and Digital Zomia

Analysis of Myanmar Multi-state reality and State-Evasion in Contemporary Context.

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While anarchy implies the absence or rejection of hierarchical government and centralized authority, panarchy represents its conceptual opposite, a plural and overlapping system of governance where multiple political orders coexist within the same geographic area.

The term was popularized by **Paul Émile de Puydt (1860)** to describe a condition in which individuals could freely choose their preferred form of government without being constrained by territorial borders. In contrast to anarchy's total decentralization, panarchy envisions a dynamic network of interdependent systems, political, ecological, to adapt and evolve together.

In modern terms, panarchy can describe how state, non-state, and digital authorities (such as global corporations, online communities, and transnational militias) all govern simultaneously, forming an entangled order rather than chaos. But a right to choose

is always a privilege, and not many in the world can have such a privilege.

According to James C. Scott's Zomia Theory, state evasion has long been the most effective weapon of the weak, a silent refusal to be ruled. In pre-colonial Burma, power concentrated along the river basins and fertile plains, as the means of production in a feudal agrarian society, where dynasties, landlords, and monastic networks established the mandala system of control. Commoners were taxed, conscripted, or subjected to forced labor. But escape was still possible. Those who fled into the uplands could live off the forest, hunt and gather, and exchange goods through barter among kin communities. Resistance meant flight walking uphill beyond the king's reach, avoiding taxation, corvée, and war, and taking back from the feudal lord by raiding tribute caravans and stealing from the lord's villa and redistribute among the needs. (**Nga Tapyar: The Legend of The Great Outlaw**). The mountains were not only a sacred place to abandon the material way of life but also a geography of freedom; the forest was the shelter of those who refused to be governed. As local Buddhism preached Annata (impermanence of men-made (uncontrollable-ungovernable) and five mortal enemies of humankind, the kingship is among one of them.

Nowadays, that form of evasion has become almost impossible. Since the 2021 military coup, Myanmar has descended into a multi-state reality, a fractured map of overlapping authorities, rebel administrations, and foreign interests **(ICG, 2023)**. From the north to the east, west, south, and central plains, each region is ruled by competing centers of power of armies, militias, global capitalists, or foreign brokers. For civilians, this does not bring autonomy but multiplied domination. Each "state" taxes, conscripts, and controls, creating an everyday life filled with checkpoints, bribes, and fear**.** UN OCHA (2024)estimates more than 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and another 1.5 million refugees in neighboring countries. Across this broken landscape, state evasion has re-emerged not as a theory but as a daily practice, people surviv-

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ing by slipping between jurisdictions, migrating, or vanishing into informal networks.

In the north conflict zone, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) and PDF fighting with the Junta and its ally local militia groups, which have Chinese-linked mining companies, the area where the jade and rare-earth trade, worth billions annually, flows primarily into China through cross-border smuggling and legal concessions, leaving behind deforestation, toxic waste, and displaced villagers **(Zhang, 2022; Woods, 2011)**. The people here are caught between military bombardment, double administration, and corporate extraction, ruled by all, protected by none. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) and its allies have created some of the most stable yet opaque polities in the country. The UWSA, the Kokang MNDAA, and Mong L(NDAA) each maintain their own administrations, currencies, and school systems, effectively operating as de facto states integrated into the Chinese economic orbit **(ICG 2023)**.

Yet beneath this semi-autonomy lies another layer of exploitation. Since 2022, vast **r**are-earth mining operations in Kachin State and UWSA-adjacent zones have caused deforestation and toxic pollution, enriched Chinese firms and militia elites while displaced local villagers **(Global Witness 2023)**. At the same time, the region has become a center of cyber-scam compounds, where trafficked workers from China and Southeast Asia are forced into online fraud. Civilians are trapped between militia taxation, environmental ruin, and trafficking networks. The north's "peace" is not stability but the quiet rule of armed capitalism under Chinese shadow influence.

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), operating primarily in northern Shan State, has increasingly contested control over lucrative world-famous Burmese ruby and gold mining areas traditionally dominated by the Tatmadaw and its allied militias. These mineral-rich zones represent critical sources of revenue that fund armed groups and local economies alike.

The competition over these mines intensifies armed clashes, exacerbates environmental degradation, and deepens the struggle for local autonomy and resource control. Both the TNLA and the junta deploy military force to assert dominance, contributing to civilian displacement and instability in the region **(ICG, 2023; Global Witness, 2023).**

In neighboring Karenni (Kayah) State, the conflict has intensified into a near-total war of liberation. The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and its armed wing, the Karenni Army (KA), have united with local PDFs under the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF), effectively driving out junta forces from most of the countryside. Only parts of Loikaw, the state capital, remain under contested control. The junta's response, massive airstrikes, artillery bombardments, and village burnings, has devastated the region, forcing over half of the state's population to flee their homes. Across the border, Thailand has become a crucial yet ambivalent actor in this humanitarian and political crisis. Thousands of displaced civilians from Karen and Karenni States have fled into Thai provinces such as Mae Sot, Mae Hong Son, and Tak, seeking safety in informal settlements and temporary shelters. While Thailand has allowed limited humanitarian operations, it has refrained from granting official refugee status or opening new camps, leaving many asylum seekers in legal limbo. This situation has exposed displaced people and migrant workers to human trafficking, labor exploitation, and cyber-scam recruitment along the Thai–Myanmar frontier. Many are deceived by brokers offering jobs in factories or services but end up trafficked into scam compounds, casinos, or brothels along the Myawaddy–Mae Sot corridor.

Others are exploited as undocumented labor in construction, agriculture, or domestic work, often with no pay or legal protection. The porous border has also become a hub for illicit trade and criminal economies, where corrupt officials, militias, and business networks profit from the chaos. Scam centers, illegal casinos, and traf-

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time, in between and constant negotiations and diguising. The Junta and its allies use surveillance technologies sourced from Chinese and Russian suppliers to track dissidents and monitor digital communication **(Amnesty International, 2022)**. Here, resistance takes the form of digital camouflage: using pseudonyms, secret donation routes, and coded language on Facebook and Telegram. Activists, teachers, artists and exiles create a virtual landscape of freedom amid the ruins of physical space.

Yet even this is fragile; the same platforms that enable resistance are monitored, infiltrated, and weaponized by multiple "states."

In Myanmar today, there is no single state to flee from, only a crowd of them, each demanding obedience, taxes, or silence. This modern "weapon of the weak" takes the form of strategic invisibility. Migration becomes a political act; digital work transforms into a refuge. Many engage in cross-border online jobs, remittance networks, or diaspora crowdfunding to support resistance efforts. These actions are far more than economic survival, they are deliberate tactics of evasion, ways to endure without submitting to any ruler. In this way, Myanmar's people have recreated a vast, dispersed "digital Zomia," where knowledge, communication, and mobility have replaced physical territory as the true instruments of freedom.

While international pressure on the junta, the NUG and ethnic armed organizations, ceasefire talks, and the shamed December election may provide some relief to the exhausted population, the emergence of a multi-confederation panarchy risks further complicating state evasion, making it even more challenging for people to navigate overlapping authorities and maintain autonomy.

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ficking rings operate under weak enforcement and local patronage. Although Thai authorities have conducted occasional raids, the underlying issues of statelessness, poverty, and war-driven migration remain unresolved.

The West reflects another form of statelessness. The Arakan Army (AA) now controls large parts of Rakhine, often clashing with the Tatmadaw. Rohingya are forced to conscript on both sides. Meanwhile, on the border of Bangladesh, Rohingya refugees remain trapped in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar camps, where they face labor exploitation and restrictions on movement. Children as young as seven have been found in construction and fish-drying industries around the camps **(U.S. DOL, 2021)**. Without legal status, many Rohingya resort to informal work or are trafficked into bonded labor **(Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018)**. Bangladesh benefits indirectly by securing international aid while using cheap refugee labor for its industries **(Al Bawaba, 2018)**. Thus, even beyond the border, Myanmar's stateless continue to live under new forms of control.

In the south, cross-border economies with Thailand reveal another dimension of exploitation. Displaced Myanmar nationals in Mae Sot are described by Human Rights Watch as "walking ATMs," subject to constant extortion by brokers and bribery **(HRW, 2025)**. Migrant recruitment agencies impose illegal fees up to US $800, trapping workers in debt bondage **(Bangkok Post, 2018).** At the same time, Thai businesses profit from Myanmar's instability by running factories, plantations, and fishery networks that depend on undocumented labor. Even anti-trafficking operations have exposed scam compounds and forced labor camps along the Thai-Myanmar border **(Walk Free, 2025)**. These dynamics show how neighboring states exploit Myanmar's collapse to extract cheap labor and political leverage.

In the central Bamar heartland, the plains of Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay are now burned fields. The NUG shadow opposition government has created autonomous resistance zones; at the same

time, the military has responded with scorched-earth tactics like burning villages, using air strikes, and artillery to impose terror. For many, "state evasion" means living underground, switching SIM cards, using VPNs, and creating community-based welfare networks online. Physical escape has become impossible, so evasion moves into the digital sphere. According to UN OCHA's Humanitarian Update No. 35, at the end of 2023 more than 2.6 million people had been displaced nationwide, many from central zones. In these central regions, the official state has largely retreated; civilians now govern themselves through underground networks, local councils, and community militias. They evade the junta by hiding, migrating, or negotiating with local PDFs; they evade rebel taxation by staying mobile or shifting allegiances. The result: the state exists but is contested, resisted, and evaded.

The multi-state structure appears practical on paper, allowing ethnic armed group autonomy, ceasefire governance, and local self-rule, but in reality, it multiplies the burdens on the people. Every authority or foreign investor extract resources and loyalty. The same village may pay "tax" to three different groups in a single year. Under modern global capitalism, neighboring states are also turning Myanmar's crisis into an opportunity: cheap minerals, cheap labor, and political buffer zones. Even humanitarian aid becomes a contested resource, filtered through armed groups or corrupt bureaucrats (**Callahan, 2003**). State evasion, once a symbol of freedom, now means constant negotiation among competing rulers. There are no more outside but only layers of power. As a Burmese proverb goes, "Slipping from the overlord's womb, fall into the womb of a young lord."

Along the Thai border, Shwe Kokko and KK Park epitomize the new frontier of militia-capitalism. Officially part of Karen State, they are controlled by the Border Guard Force (KNA), led by Colonel Saw Chit Thu, a former KNU commander who allied with the Tatmadaw in 2010. Backed by Chinese investors from Yatai International Holdings, Shwe Kokko was marketed as a "smart city," but evolved into a hub for illegal casinos, cryptocurrency fraud, and human trafficking **(The Diplomat 2024)**. After the coup, thousands of trafficked workers were held under armed guard; residents describe the enclave as a "state within a state."

The junta tolerates these operations because they generate revenue and ensure loyalty from local militias. Governance, policing, and taxation are fully internal and autonomous criminal-polity, similar in structure to the UWSA's Wa region but driven by global capital rather than ideology. For ordinary Karen villagers, this means militarized checkpoints, land seizures, and the spread of vice economies that corrode community life. Across these regions, people live between multiple authorities rather than under one. A tea farmer in Shan State may pay taxes to the junta in the morning and to the UWSA at night, a merchant in Myawaddy pays "security fees" to both the BGF and Thai police; a teacher in Rakhine teaches two curricula, one for the AA, one for the Ministry of Education. Survival depends on flexibility and disguise.

For Myanmar's people, this means that evasion has become internal rather than external. Instead of running into the hills, many now hide in plain sight, concealing political identities, masking online communication, or using coded speech on social media. Refugees and migrant workers cannot vanish into anonymity the way upland villagers once could; their passports, fingerprints, and digital traces follow them across borders. Even the informal economies that sustain millions, like online trade, remittances, and digital payments, are gradually drawn into systems of control. This is the paradox of the present: as the state collapses in territory, it tightens its grip through data. To evade the state today means to learn the art of digital camouflage, encrypted solidarity, and selective visibility. The new Zomia is not on the mountain ridge but in the hidden layers of networks, in encrypted chats, VPN routes, and the silent trust between families who send aid through informal channels. And evasion doesn't mean to one particular state or authority, but multiple states or authorities at the same