

THE RISE OF PRINCELINGS - 2

An Upturn of Ta'ang's Non-Royal Leadership (*Ngattapa Min*)

After passing through difficult and downgraded times with determination not to go down against all tides, the youth's self-paved journey now results in evident success.

Under the theme "The Rise of Princlings," ISP-Myanmar is presenting a series of analytical articles on the new generation of leaders emerging in Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). This week introduces an analysis of the new leaders of Ta'ang (Palaung) and their vision. The first in the series, "The Rise of Princlings-1," already introduced an analysis of the emergence of new leadership in the Wa regions. In comparison, the new leaders of Ta'ang (Palaung) have walked a different path to those of the Wa to get to where they currently are. The current Wa leaders are mostly successors by lineage to their predecessors. In contrast, the emerging Ta'ang (Palaung) leaders have forged mainly their own paths, akin to what Myanmar history refers to as "*Ngattapa Min*¹," which literally means a king unrelated by bloodline to royal predecessors. Similarly, the concept of *Ngattapa Min* extends to the youth leadership in Rakhine, Karen, and the broader Spring Revolution, where young leaders are carving out their own unique trajectories. These themes will be explored further in future ISP Insight Emails.

The Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/ TNLA) gained the upper hand following Operation 1027, resulting in sizable territory gains after securing control of seven cities. Such a victory has never been seen in the 50-year-long history of the Ta'ang (Palaung) national movement. The current outcome contrasts starkly with the Palaung national movement of the past, also indicating a difference from the leadership from previous generations. A systematic institution, spearheaded by young adults, is evidently taking shape, aiming to establish a new "Nation/State" characterized by effective leadership, robust institutions, and well-defined systems.

The Ta'ang (Palaung) revolution started in 1963 and has progressed through various stages across different eras in modern Myanmar history. In 1976, the Palaung National Front (PNF) transitioned into the Palaung State Liberation Organization/ Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLO/ PSLA), concurrently becoming members of the National Democratic Force (NDF). Afterward, in 1991, a ceasefire agreement

¹Individuals who become kings without royal lineage are regarded as "*Ngattapa Min*." Historians regard *Maung Shin Ngae* from the *Srikhetra* Dynasty (B.C.98) as "*Ngattapa Min*," as he became a king without being an offspring of the *Dwuttabaung* royal family. In Myanmar's history, *Kyansittha (Hti-Hlaing Min)* of the *Bagan* Dynasty, *Raza Dipadi (Dhammazedhi Min)* (1472-1492) of the *Hongsawady* dynasty, *Byaminediraza (Binnya Dala)* (1747-1757) of the Restored *Hongsawady* Kingdom, and *Alaungpaya (Aung Zeya)* of the *Konbaung* Dynasty are examples of such rulers.

▶ was signed with the then-military junta led by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). However, internal divisions emerged between factions supporting and opposing the ceasefire. In 1992, those who remained in Manerplaw on the Myanmar-Thailand border formed the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), which maintained ties with the NDF and participated in the first conference of the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). At those times, a few PSLF youth leaders continued their revolutionary pursuits while passing through difficult and

downgraded times with determination not to go down against all tides. The early days of the PSLF were limited to providing political awareness training and educational support for Ta'ang youth. The TNLA, the armed faction of PSLF, began preparations for its formation only in 2007 and officially came into existence in 2009.

On the other hand, the PSLO/PSLA (led by Aik Mong), whose territory was designated as Northern Shan Special Region-7, forcedly disarmed themselves and surrendered to the State Peace and



■ Beginning of TNLA: 42 Comrades and 22 Rifles

The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the armed wing of the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), was formed by recruiting former commanders from PSLO/PSLA and youth after the third conference of the PSLF in 2009. In December 2011, 42 Ta'ang (Palaung) youths completed military training from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and initiated their revolt with 22 rifles, heading towards Ruili River in northern Shan State. By January 2012, they had resettled in the Ta'ang (Palaung) region. By 2013, the group had expanded to about 500 troops, and in 2023, little more than a decade since inception, the TNLA had transformed into an EAO with a force of tens of thousands of troops.

The PSLF/TNLA, comprising experienced core members and youthful newcomers, maintains the legacy of engaging in alliances. Previously, they allied with the **National Democratic Front (NDF)** and the **Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB)**. Additionally, in 2011, the TNLA joined the **United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC)**, a coalition of 11 ethnic armed groups, including the Karen National Union (KNU), formed under the leadership of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). After resigning from the UNFC in 2016, the PSLF/TNLA became a member of the **Northern Alliance**, which comprises the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Arakan Army (AA), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). In 2017, along with the Northern Alliance, they also became members of the **Federal Political Negotiation and Consultative Committee (FPNCC)** led by the Wa. Since Operation 1027, the TNLA has continued its alliance with the **Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA)**, formed with the MNDAA and AA in June 2019.

▶ Development Council (SPDC) on April 29, 2005. Mai Aik Kaw detailed in the Ta'ang (Palaung) National History book, published in 2017, that Maj. Gen. Myint Hlaing, the Commander of the Northeastern Regional Military Headquarters under the junta, pressured the PSLO to disarm. The effectiveness of the pressure was due to the PSLO facing dwindling popular support and financial constraints, compelling them to yield to the junta's demands. The History book also states that **PSLO was threatened with consequences akin to those experienced by Li Yamen and Mong Sala from Monekoe if they refused to surrender their arms**². Consequently, the PSLO/PSLA, estimated to have a force of 300-500 at the time, decided to surrender to the junta. Aik Mong, Chairman of PSLO, later became Chairman of a legal **Ta'ang National Party (TNP)** as well as becoming an elected member of the Myanmar parliament in the 2010 general election. Aik Mong was also bestowed with the honorary title *Wunna Kyaw Htin* by the State Administration Council (SAC). However, the TNP was arbitrarily dissolved by the SAC in 2023, along with many other political parties.

The current top leadership of the PSLF/TNLA is composed of former fighters who have harbored resentment since the PSLO surrendered to the junta. The TNLA's Central Executive Committee is composed of 11 members, with four in their 50s and the remaining members all younger. The next layer down, the Central Committee,

has 27 members, which includes all Central Executive Committee members. While lacking female representation at the executive level, the Central Committee features two female Majors. The current young leadership possesses experience, actively initiates, fosters innovation, and demonstrates agility. These attributes should be considered in comparison not only with the SAC but also with organizations with a long history, such as the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP/SSA), the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS/SSA), the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO/KIA) and the Karen National Union (KNU). As mentioned in "**The Rise of Princelings - 1**" the younger generation of leadership is more inclined to innovate, unlike the older generation that leans toward the status quo and is risk-averse.

The Chairman of the PSLF/TNLA, **Gen. Tar Aik Bong**, is a middle-aged leader. He was previously known as a youth leader "Mai Aik Phone," when he remained stationed at the DAB joint headquarters on the Myanmar-Thailand border of Manerplaw during the PSLO ceasefire, where he struggled to ensure the organization's survival and the continuity of the revolution. To realize his dreams, he returned to the Ta'ang (Palaung) region from the Myanmar-Thailand border around 2007 to reignite the revolution. Vice-chairman-1, **Lt. Gen. Tar Jok Jar**, formerly served as the private secretary of the former Chairman, Aik Mong, and as a signal officer. ▶

²This incident dates back to October 2000 in Monekoe, Hay Moe Lone, where a power struggle unfolded between Mong Sala, the leader of the Mongko Defence Army (MDA) - a splinter group from the MNDA, and Li Nimen. The Myanmar Armed Forces intervened, resulting in the arrest of Mong Sala and the death of Li Nimen, along with hundreds of his troops as well as the end of the MDA. Maj. Gen. Myint Hlaing was then a 16th Military Operation Command (MOC-16) commander who managed the Kokang internal conflict.

■ PSLF/TNLA Central Executive Committee

The Palaung State Liberation Front/Ta'ang National Liberation Army's (PSLF/TNLA) Central Executive Committee, headed by General Tar Aik Bong, is formed of 11 members, with four in their 50s, and the remaining members all under 50. The next layer down, the Central Committee, has 27 members, which includes all Central Executive Committee members. While lacking female representation at the executive level, the Central Committee features two female Majors.



Tar Aik Bong
General
Chairman



Tar Jok Jar
Lieutenant General
Vice-Chairman-1



Tar Khu Lang
Major General
Vice-Chairman-2



Tar Bone Kyaw
Major General
General Secretary



Tar Hol Plarng
Major General
Commander-in-Chief



Tar Om Tamaung
Brigadier General
Joint General Secretary - 1



Tar Gu Jar
Brigadier General
Head of Administration



Tar Nor Rein
Brigadier General
Department of War



Tar Lom Kyaw Mya
Brigadier General
Department of Taxation



Tar Parn La
Colonel
Joint General Secretary - 2



Tar Kone Khree
Colonel
Chief of Police

▶ Witnessing the surrender of the PSLO in 2005 firsthand, he has since harbored deep resentment towards the junta. The Vice-Chairman-2, **Maj. Gen. Tar Khu Lang** is renowned for his extensive experience, maturity, friendly demeanor, and strong external relations. He is also mostly associating with youth. **Maj. Gen. Tar Bone Kyaw**, the General Secretary and the brain of the TNLA, previously led a Ta'ang youth organization and attended a year-long Foreign Affairs course by the **National Council Union of Burma (NCUB)** on the Myanmar-Thailand border. Additionally, he possesses extensive experience in an open environment, residing along the Myanmar-Thailand border for several years, allowing him to foster relationships with various ethnic groups. The Joint General Secretary-1, **Brig. Gen. Tar Om Tamaung**, is known for his eloquence and humor. Like Maj. Gen. Tar Khu Lang, he shares a strong bond with the younger generation. The Joint General Secretary-2,

Col. Tar Parn La, is a young graduate of the Tealand School, a capacity-building institution that nurtures Ta'ang youth. Additionally, he holds the position of Head of External Relations at the TNLA.

This highlights the importance of the Tealand School, a political science institution aimed at enhancing the political awareness of the Ta'ang youth. The school was led by individuals educated on the Myanmar-Thailand border or abroad. During its early period from 2017 to 2018, the school operated in Pyin Oo Lwin before later relocating to Lashio. The school's curriculum spans years, culminating in awarding diplomas upon completion. The syllabus included Ta'ang language and literature, English language, computer skills, human rights, political science, law, international law, and leadership skills, with an emphasis on fostering critical thinking. These initiatives likely contributed to the development of higher education and

■ PSLF/TNLA Administration Districts

Five districts are under the PSLF/TNLA administration system, including the townships of Muse, Namhkan, Manton, Namhsan, Kutkai, Lashio, Kyaukme, and Mogoke. The TNLA was active in these townships before Operation 1027. After the operation, seven townships were fully seized, with seven others as partially controlled areas. The five administration districts under PSLF/TNLA are as follows.

1. Manaung District (Muse-Namhkan area)
2. Ruli District (Manton-Mong Wee area)
3. Salween District (Kutkai-Mong See-Monghum area)
4. Lashio District (Lashio-Mong Yaw area)
5. Namhsan District (Namhsan-Kyaukme-Mogoke area)

■ PSLF/TNLA and Contentious Environment

The Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA) is usually portrayed as seemingly inclined to adopt the Wa model for establishing a new state and formulating military-political strategies, influenced by their strong alliance with the United Wa State Party (UWSP). However, the Ta'ang leadership seems to hold a distinct ideology. The political stances of Ta'ang leaders revolve more around federal ideals such as self-determination, freedom, peace, and equality, which are prominently evident through the TNLA's declarations and the speeches of its leaders. The political will for preference of the establishment of a civilian-centric administrative structure over an autocratic leadership is also seen through the speeches. The PSLF/TNLA annual meeting, held between February 17 and 21, 2024, concluded with a resolution stating their commitment to establishing a local government based on the people's will by 2025. The new public administration will prioritize security, rule of law, education, health, and social development while also aiming to prevent other organizations from recruiting soldiers and collecting taxes in the Ta'ang region.

Grievances might remain in the PSLF/TNLA due to their past experience, perceiving themselves as being ignored and discriminated against for being a small organization. Reasons for this include the dissolution of the PSLO/PSLA by the former junta, being excluded as a signatory to the NCA despite having participated in the National Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) discussions along with the other EAOs, being excluded from the Union Peace Conference – 21st Century Panglong held in 2016 (despite being allowed to present their proposal) on the grounds of refusing the Myanmar Armed Forces' excessive request to surrender their arms. Other sources of possible grievances might be mistreatment by other EAOs, recruitment and cooptation of Ta'ang (Palaung) youth by other EAOs, as well as the growing drug-related problems for Ta'ang populations. At the same time, historical evidence demonstrates that the Ta'ang (Palaung) "Territorial Dream" is far from over. Ta'ang (Palaung) leaders who attended the National Convention sponsored by the former junta in 1993-94 demanded that ten townships be acknowledged as constituent entities of the Palaung Self-Administrative State. These townships are:

1. Namhkan
2. Kutkai
3. Namtu
4. Namhsan
5. Kyaukme
6. Western and Northern Hsipaw
7. Manton (new town)
8. Mongngawt (new town)
9. Mongmit and
10. Ta'ang (Palaung) village tracts from Mogoke Township.

- ▶ However, the demand was never acknowledged, and the 2008 Constitution only designated Namhsan and Manton Townships as being within the Palaung Self-Administrative Zone. The townships that the former leaders once demanded, excluding Mogoke, Kyaukme, Hsipaw, and Mongmit, have been either fully or partially seized by the PSLF/TNLA, and establishing administrative systems is underway. These establishments could spark inter-ethnic tension among the local communities.

According to the National League for Democracy's (NLD) government population data for 2019 of the townships that the PSLF/TNLA has now fully and partially seized since Operation 1027, the majority of the Ta'ang (Palaung) ethnic group population, **90.5 per cent**, is located in **Namhsan**. Of other townships under PSLF/TNLA control, **Namhkan** consists of **40.94 per cent** Shan people and **34.13 per cent** Ta'ang (Palaung). **Manton** is **64.8 per cent** Ta'ang (Palaung) people. **Namtu** is **42.53 per cent** Shan people and **15.4 per cent** Ta'ang (Palaung). **Kyaukme** is another majority Shan township with **58.6 per cent**, with **18.6 per cent** Ta'ang (Palaung). **Kutkai** consists of **28.9 per cent** Mong Wong people, with **24.9 per cent** Ta'ang (Palaung) and **23.9 per cent** Kachin people. Please refer to the details of population ratios for each township on **page 10**.

Northern Shan State comprises a diverse population, including Ta'ang (Palaung), Kachin, Shan, and Lishaw ethnic nationalities, and its history has been marked by territorial disputes and inter-ethnic tensions. The territories recently seized by the PSLF/TNLA are areas where the KIA, SSPP, other EAOs, and People's Militia are also active. The identification of Muse, Kutkai, Namtu, Namhkan, Lashio, Kyaukme, and Mogoke as Ta'ang (Palaung) regions by the Ta'ang political communities may lead to potential power struggles between ethnic groups, territorial disputes, and conflicts among the coexisting Shan, Kachin, other ethnicities, and Ta'ang (Palaung) people. One PSLF/TNLA leader stated to ISP-Myanmar that rather than referring to these areas as Ta'ang (Palaung) State area, they should be regarded as areas that liberated from the hands of the junta and TNLA is providing security to the people of the area.

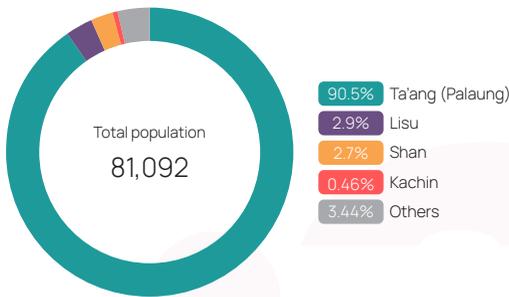
A report titled "*Treading a Rocky Path: The Ta'ang Army Expands in Myanmar's Shan State*," published on September 4, 2023, by the International Crisis Group (ICG), highlighted the potential for friction in the relationship between armed groups and non-Ta'ang ethnic groups due to simultaneous administrative imposition and territorial expansion efforts. The report also highlighted the challenges in building a nationwide alliance due to these circumstances.

Populations of PSLF/TNLA Controlled Territories

The following presents the populations and ethnic breakdowns of townships that have been either entirely or partially controlled by Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA) following Operation 1027. Of the six townships, only Namhsan and Manton have the Ta'ang (Palaung) people as the majority of their populations. The data are taken from the township reports from the 2019 inter-censal survey conducted during the former government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) party.

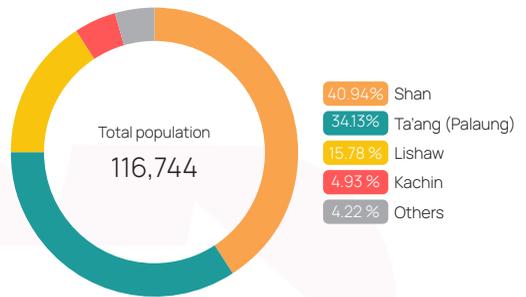
Namhsan Township

The majority of the township territory, including Namhsan town, was seized on December 15, 2023.



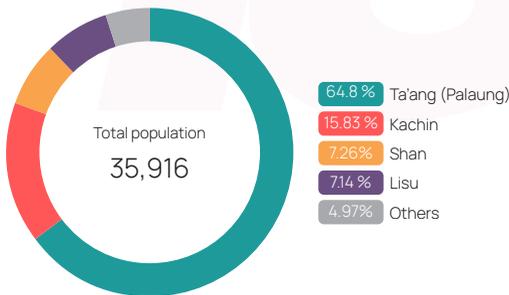
Namkhan Township

The majority of the township territory, including Namkhan town, was seized on December 19, 2023.



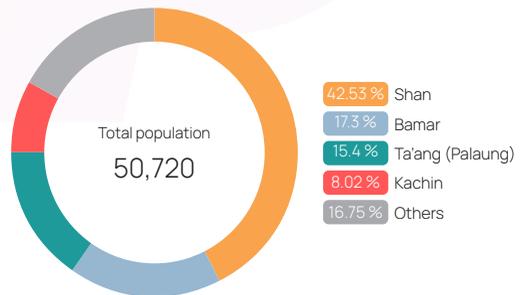
Manton Township

The entire township territory, including Manton town, was seized on December 22, 2023.



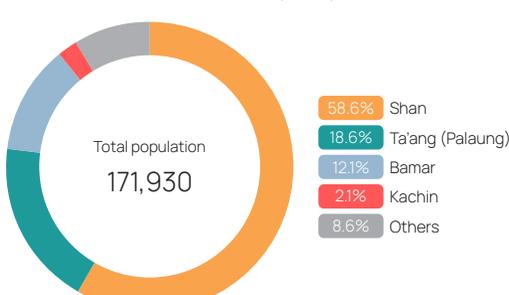
Namtu Township

The majority of the township territory, including Namtu town, was seized on December 28, 2023.



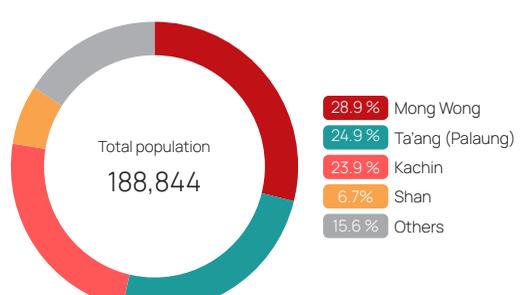
Kyuakme Township

The towns of Monglon and Monggawt within the township were seized on December 5, 2023, and December 31, 2023 respectively.



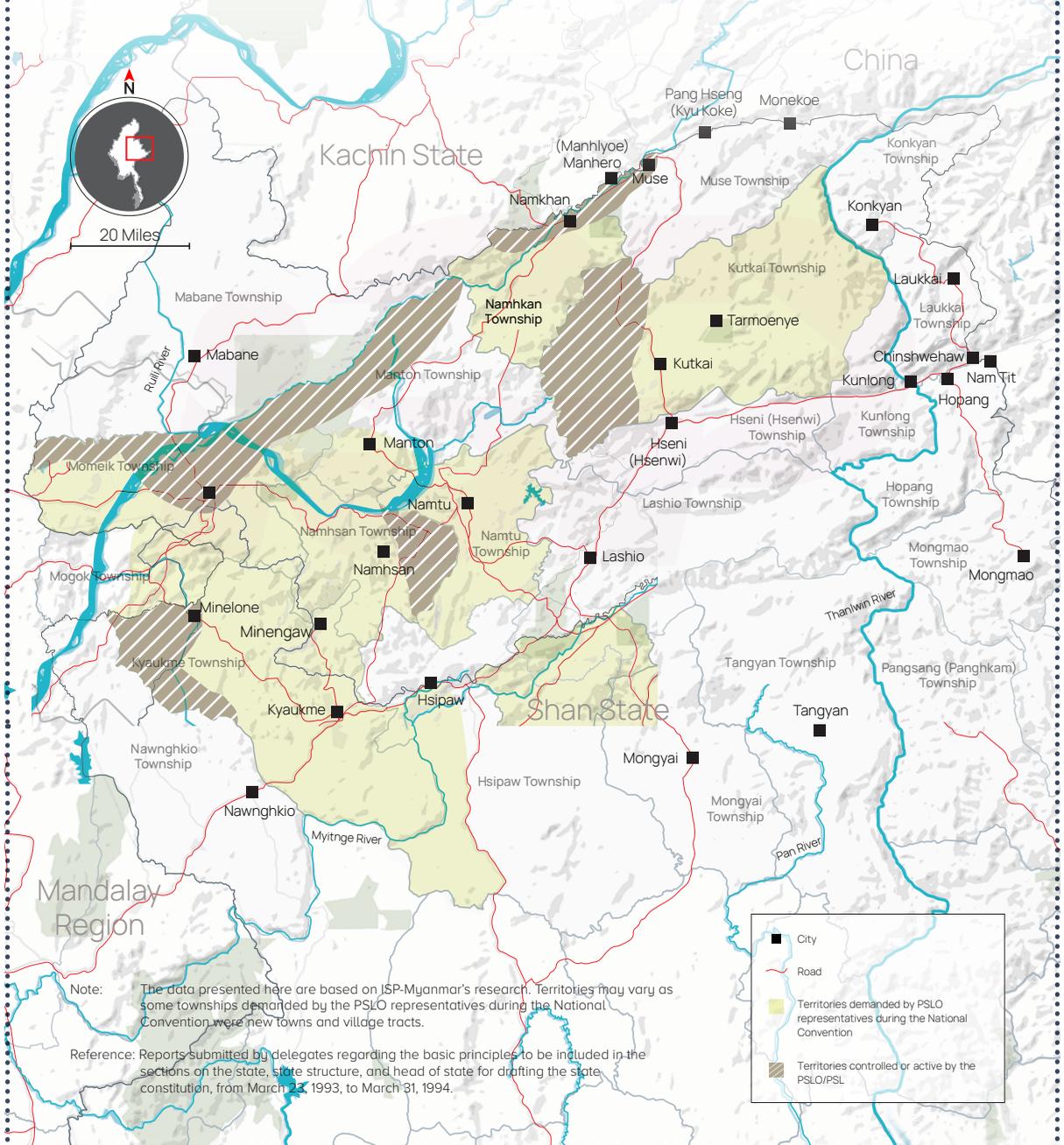
Kutkai Township

Some of the township territory, including Kutkai town, was seized on December 5, 2023.



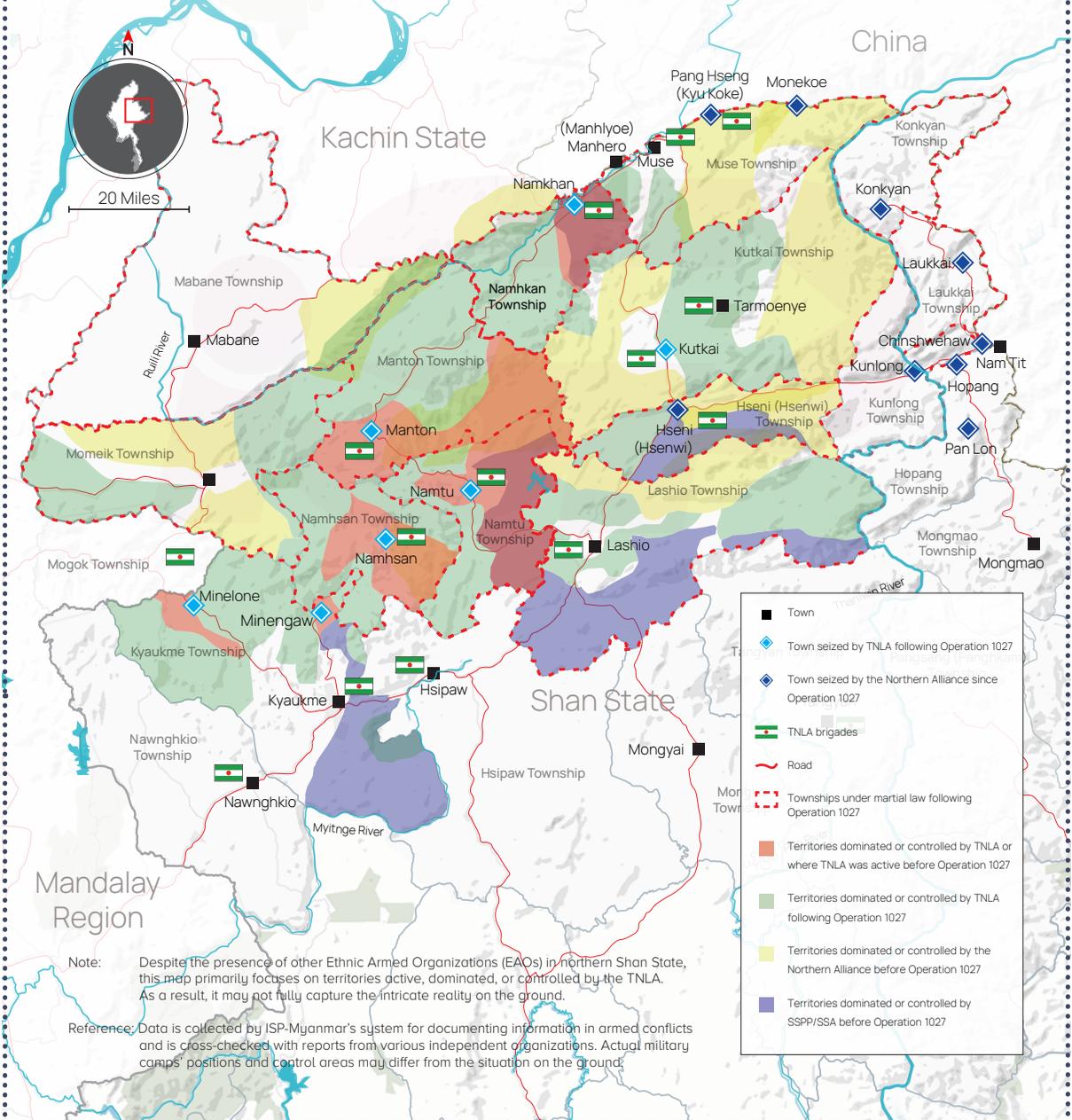
■ The Old Ta'ang (Palaung) "Territorial Dream"

The map presents the territories controlled or active by the Palaung State Liberation Organization/Palaung State Liberation Army (PSLO/PSLA) from 1963 to 1991, alongside the territories demanded by the ceasefire PSLO during the 1993-94 National Convention. The PSLO representatives demanded that 10 townships be acknowledged as the "Palaung Self-Administrative Zone", but the demand was never recognized by the former junta. The 2008 Constitution later acknowledged only **Namhsan** and **Manton** townships as the Palaung Self-Administrative Zone.



■ Territories Under PSLF/TNLA Control

The map outlines the territories dominated or controlled by the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF/TNLA), both before and after the Operation 1027, as well as territories under the control of the Northern Alliance forces and the Shan State Progress Party (SSPP/SSA). Currently, the territories under the PSLF/TNLA administrative system are divided into five districts, covering the townships of Muse, Namkhan, Manton, Namhsan, Kutkai, Lashio, Kyaukme, and Mogoke. Despite some reports identifying these five districts as the Ta'ang (Palaung) State area, a PSLF/TNLA leader stated to ISP-Myanmar that these areas are to be regarded as territories liberated from the junta control and where the PSLF/TNLA is providing security to the people of the areas.



▶ administrative training programs in subsequent years. Educational institutions have emerged in the PSLF/TNLA-controlled region, such as the Ta'ang Arts Academy, Ta'ang School of Political Science, Ta'ang Agricultural School, and Ta'ang Education Academy. The Ta'ang Land University is also scheduled to commence this year under the Ta'ang Land Educational Council (TLEC) leadership in collaboration with teachers who actively participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against the junta.

PSLF/TNLA leaders appear to have astutely prioritized building a public administration system and necessary institutions through the collective wits of youths prior to using military force to seize territory through Operation 1027. The Administrative Training Batch-1 commenced even during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is reported that the training of the second batch is currently underway. During Operation 1027, the TNLA Administration Department organized a graduation ceremony for Basic Police Training Batch-4 and General Administration Office Management Training Batch-8, resulting in 38 police officers and 48 administrative clerks completing these training programs. In total, the TNLA's Administration Department has trained 166 police officers and over 200 office staff for the General Administration Department. They are intended to be assigned to various administrative and law enforcement roles across different levels of Ta'ang administration, including districts, towns, and villages. On the other hand, over the past three years, the TNLA, in

collaboration with the Ta'ang political community and civil society organizations, has been preparing for the Ta'ang State Constitution. This constitution, currently in progress, is expected to serve as the governing law for the anticipated Ta'ang administration in 2025. Meanwhile, careful measures are being taken to address potential inter-ethnic conflicts among the region's diverse inhabitants.

Amidst the sensitive and contentious issues, the younger generation of leaders recognize the significance of the institutions through their own experiences. In such a scenario, it becomes imperative not to lose sight of the objectives to establish a free and inclusive society amidst concerns of territorial ambitions. Implementing a non-discriminatory, inclusive, and equitable administrative policy toward all ethnic groups is crucial. Additionally, prioritizing a free judiciary system, encouraging the involvement of women and youth in critical positions, and fostering the active role of civil society are equally important.

Meanwhile, the SAC announced martial law upon PSLF/TNLA-seized towns such as Namhsan, Manton, and Namtu on March 5, 2024, indicating that it intends to recapture these cities when the time is right. The ramifications of Operation 1027 brought humiliation to the SAC, with the loss of control over the entire Kokang region and a retreat of the entire Regional Operation Command (ROC). The TNLA's territorial seizure of seven cities included significant trade routes, mining ventures like the Bawdwin mine in Namtu, and tea ▶

▶ factories. Since February, the TNLA has reportedly gained control over the Bawdwin mine, allowing it to operate. The "Haigeng Agreement" brokered by China has caused a ceasefire in northern Shan State, but the interpretation of the terms could differ among the signatories. Announcing martial law in these fragile situations could tip the two sides back into conflict again in TNLA-controlled towns.

Nonetheless, the Ta'ang (Palaung) young and mid-aged leaders, just like *Ngattapa Min* in history, have witnessed some success in their pursuit of territorial aspirations by grasping opportunities they have carved out for themselves. Yet, challenges persist in achieving harmonious and cohesive socio-economic and political development in the Ta'ang region and the future federal union. ■

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