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Governance of Rare Earth Mining by the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/KIA)



Photograph 1: A rare earth mining site in Mai Ja Yang, Myanmar



Abstract

This report examines how the KIO/A governs rare earth mining. To explore this, we conducted 23 qualitative interviews with stakeholders in the KIO/A controlled territory between November 2024 and January 2025. Building on Pfeifer and Schwab's suggestion that emphasises temporal and spatial contextualisation in rebel governance research, we trace the KIO's governance since its formation in 1961. We identify when and how its resource governance intersects with nation-building efforts, while also considering the influence of external factors such as the Tatmadaw and China investors. Using a genealogical approach, we argue that the KIO/A's governance of rare earth mining has become politicised, as mining activities are embedded into broader nation-building efforts. However, this politicisation has been shaped by the economic interplay between KIO officials and Chinese investors, leaving the concerns of local villagers largely unaddressed, triggering discontent and protests. We aim to enhance the understanding of rare earth mining in Myanmar and contribute to the empirical research on rebel governance.

Keywords: Rare earth, KIO/A, Rebel governance, Myanmar, Kachin State

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Introduction

Since 2021, the number of rare earth mining sites in Kachin State, Myanmar, has increased dramatically. According to Global Witness (2022), by March 2022, Kachin State had over 2,700 mining collection pools, covering an area roughly the size of Singapore. The ongoing civil war, which was triggered by the 2021 coup, has been a significant contributing factor (Frontier Myanmar, August 4, 2021). Both pro-junta and anti-junta ethnic armed groups (EAGs) in Kachin State have expanded mining operations to increase their sources of income. The EAGs are the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/A) and the New Democratic Army-Kachin (NDA-K). The KIO/A was established in 1961. The NDA-K was formed in 1988 by Zahkung Ting Ying, who broke away from the KIO/A in 1968 to lead the Communist Party of Burma. Today, Myanmar has become the world's third-largest producer of rare earth elements, following China and the United States (The Irrawaddy, July 15, 2022).

According to the existing research conducted by international non-governmental organisation (NGO) (Global Witness, August 9, 2022; May 23, 2024) and academic team (Meehan et al., 2025), extraction of rare earth mining in Kachin State has caused negative impacts. First, the extraction process includes injecting chemicals like ammonium sulfate, followed by the precipitation of minerals into vivid blue collection pools. Wastewater and tailings ponds can leak acids, heavy metals and radioactive elements into soil, river and groundwater, thereby characterising rare earth mining as a hazardous industry (Global Witness, August 9, 2022; Meehan et al., 2025). Villagers could not cultivate the land, because soil and water are contaminated. Second, the mining sites can cause landslides. To extract rare earth, miners need to clear the ground and dig holes and pour chemical liquid into the holes. Abandoned mining sites are prone to landslides if the excavation holes are not filled (Meehan et al., 2025). For instance, in June 2024, two landslides occurred in Kachin State, resulting in the deaths of over 35 workers, with 14 others reported missing (Radio Free Asia, June 21, 2024). Third, people working in or living around mining sites were reported to have health problems including osteoporosis respiratory diseases, and gastrointestinal, skin and eye problems (Global Witness, May 23, 2024). Fourth, the mining male workers have been involved in gamble, drugs and alcohol. Moreover, some Chinese managers demand that female job applicants exchange sexual favors for job opportunities. These activities have characterised the mining sites highly masculinised (Meehan et al., 2025).

Patrick Meehan, Manday Sadan, and Dan Seng Lawn (2024) examined rare earth mining in Kachin State through the lens of a “just transition.” They argued that the global push for energy transition has spurred the expansion of rare earth mining in Kachin State, positioning the region as a new “green energy frontier.” Their research makes two key contributions. The first is normative. By identifying the link between the green energy transition and the growth of rare earth mining sites in Kachin State, their work helps us understand the challenges posed by this transition in the Global South. The second contribution comes from their fieldwork, which sheds light on the relationship between rare earth mining and local EAGs. They explore why the KIO/A and the NDA-K initiated mining operations and how they have managed them. In the present study, we aim to deepen our understanding of rare earth mining by examining how the KIO/A governs mining activities within its controlled territory and how local stakeholders have responded. We argue that the KIO/A’s governance has become politicised as the organisation integrates mining into its broader nation-building efforts. However, this politicisation has been shaped by the economic interplay between KIO officials and Chinese investors, leaving the concerns of local villagers largely unaddressed, triggering discontent and protests.

Our analytical framework is based on Hanna Pfeifer and Regine Schwab (2023)’s suggestion on the study of rebel governance. The first approach to analyse rebel governance surrounds the greedy characteristic of rebel groups (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Collier, 2007). Then, Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (2011) and other scholars (e.g., Brenner, 2017a; Furlan, 2023; South & Joll, 2016) deepened our understanding of rebel governance by exploring the interplay between rebel leaders and their grassroots. These works have shaped the current research paradigm on rebel governance particularly through the instrumentalist and functionalist perspectives. However, Pfeifer and Schwab argued that focusing solely on the interplay between rulers and the ruled is problematic. First, the research scope is too narrow as it excludes potential factors that could influence rebel governance. Second, by omitting these factors, this paradigm has depoliticised rebel governance, despite its inherently political nature. To re-politicise the research paradigm on rebel governance, Pfeifer and Schwab suggest that researchers situate their analysis within spatial and temporal contexts. Spatial contexts enable researchers to incorporate diverse factors from various levels into their analysis, while temporal contexts help uncover changes in rebel governance over time. Following Pfeifer and Schwab’s suggestion, we trace the relationship between the KIO/A’s natural resource governance and its nation-building efforts, starting from the KIO/A’s formation in 1961. This genealogical approach allows us to identify changes in the KIO/A’s governance and the factors influencing it, shedding light on how the KIO/A has managed rare earth mining within its controlled territory.

Our study makes two key contributions. First, it offers an insight to examine the KIO/A's governance of natural resources. Following the 2021 coup, the KIA began reclaiming key territories. In June 2024, the KIA recaptured Kanpiketi, a strategic trade town near the Chinese border in Waingmaw Township (The Irrawaddy, June 12, 2024), and Singtawn, located 5 km south of Hpakant Town, home to Myanmar's largest jade mining operations (The Irrawaddy, October 9, 2024). Of particular importance to this study is the KIO's September 2024 seizure of Chipwi, a rare-earth mining hub previously controlled by the NDA-K (The Irrawaddy, October 1, 2024). In November, the KIO spokesperson declared that the KIO/A would prepare to resume rare earth mining operations in this area (The Irrawaddy, November 18, 2024). Examining the KIO/A's governance of rare earth is especially significant, as since 2024, the KIO/A has become the primary manager of natural resources in Kachin State. Understanding this issue provides critical insights into KIO/A's broader natural resource management strategies in the post-coup conflict era.

Second, this report contributes to deepening the paradigm of rebel governance. Pfeifer and Schwab (2023) curated a special issue published by *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, in which the authors of eleven articles explored rebel governance within spatial and temporal contexts. However, of these eleven articles, only one focused on Myanmar. David Brenner and Enze Han (2021) analysed leading journals on civil war and armed conflict, revealing a significant underrepresentation of Southeast Asia compared to other regions, with even fewer articles focusing specifically on Myanmar. Both the *Small Wars & Insurgencies* special issue and Brenner and Han's (2021) findings highlight Myanmar's marginalisation in the study of civil war and armed conflict. Is Myanmar important? Our answer is a resounding yes, for two key reasons. First, Myanmar's history of civil wars spans over seven decades. Second, the country is home to 20 EAGs and over 100 local militias. By aligning our analysis with Pfeifer and Schwab's suggestions, we place Myanmar at the forefront of civil war and armed conflict studies. The uniqueness of Myanmar's historical and contextual dynamics offers significant potential to inform and expand theoretical debates in the future.

This research project comprises five researchers: three based in Kachin State (anonymized names: Mary, Peter and Joyce), and two based in Thailand (Ta-Wei Chu and Seng Li). The researchers in Kachin State are well-acquainted with KIO/A governance, while those in Thailand specialise in Myanmar's ethnic politics and the relationship between the KIO/A and China. The researchers in Kachin State conducted fieldwork at five villages—Nhkawng Pa, Kawng Ra Zup, Mung Hka, Loi Lung Mare, and Hpyi Di—and three internally displaced persons (IDP) camps: Pa Kahtawng, Dumbung, and Nhkawng Pa. Using a semi-structured interview method and the local Jinghpaw language, they conducted 23 interviews between November 2024 and January 2025. Interviews involved various stakeholders, including mining workers (MW), mining-impacted family members (MIF), village heads (VH), social activists (SA), community leaders (CL), and a high-ranking KIO officer (HKIO). A complete list of interviews and a map is provided in Appendix 1 and 2. With the interviewees' consent, the local researchers used smartphones to audio-record the interviews, which lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. The researchers then transcribed the recordings and translated them into English. The researchers based in Chiang Mai were responsible for analysing the data. To ensure the quality and security of the research, all researchers participated in a pre-fieldwork meeting in early October 2024 to optimise data collection methods and minimise potential risks to interviewees. Additionally, three post-fieldwork meetings were held in January 2025 to evaluate the credibility of the data and minimise misinterpretation. During these meetings, the researchers shared their fieldwork reflections, which were documented in writing. These reflections included perspectives on the interview data and observations from the mining sites. Given the sensitivity of rare earth mining in Kachin State, the identities of interviewees and researchers based there have been anonymised to protect their safety.

Despite our efforts to arrange interviews with multiple KIO/A officials, we were able to secure an interview with only one high-ranking official. As a result, we supplemented our analysis of the KIO's governance of rare earth mining with secondary sources, including news articles from various outlets, reports from NGOs, and academic publications.

This report comprises four sections in addition to the introduction and conclusion. In the first section, we review the literature on rebel governance and examine how research on rebel governance in the context of Myanmar has developed. In the second section, we discuss Pfeifer and Schwab's (2023) suggestions regarding rebel governance and explain how their suggestions help address the research question in this report. In the third section, we explore the intersection of the KIO/A's natural resource governance with its nation-building efforts prior to 2011. In the fourth section, we analyse how the KIO/A has embedded rare earth mining into its nation-building efforts, as well as villagers' responses to this governance.

Literature Review: Rebel Governance

The concept of rebel governance has undergone significant evolution. Initially, scholars argued that rebellion was primarily driven by economic interests (Collier & Hoeffler, 1998; Collier, 2007). To address civil wars, mediated states were urged to tackle the economic grievances of rebel groups (Wennmann, 2009). A notable example is the insurgency in Aceh, where the Indonesian government's failure to equitably share the benefits of oil and gas industries triggered the emergence of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) in December 1976 (McCarthy, 2007). GAM continued to fight for economic justice until a peace agreement was reached in 2005.

Zachariah Cherian Mampilly (2011) advanced the understanding of rebel governance by examining three case studies: Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army, and the Rwanda Patriotic Front. His work explored how rebel groups established systems of governance, which not only enhanced their legitimacy but also sustained their insurgent efforts. Mampilly's research offers two key contributions. First, it highlights that rebel groups can provide welfare and support to populations within their controlled territories. In other words, the notion that rebel groups operate solely as predatory actors is oversimplified (Keen, 2012). Second, it has inspired further scholarly inquiry into how rebel groups govern in diverse contexts (e.g., Brenner, 2017a; Chu et al., 2024; Furlan, 2023; South & Joll, 2016). This body of work has shaped an instrumentalist and functionalist paradigm to, and defined the nature of localism in the study of rebel governance and defined the nature of localism (Preifer & Schwab, 2023).

The literature on EAGs in Myanmar has observed a similar trajectory. Among the most prominent contributions are the works of Kevin Woods. Woods (2011; 2019) examined how the military junta leveraged ceasefire agreements to co-opt EAGs. He found that after signing ceasefire agreements with EAGs in the 1990s, the junta enticed EAG political elites into joint ventures, particularly in timber and cash crop plantations. Regional military commanders in the Myanmar's Union Armed Force (Tatmadaw) and relevant state agencies facilitated these ventures by granting logging and land concessions to Chinese investors (Woods, 2011; 2019). These transnational investments reconfigured power relations between the Tatmadaw and EAGs, transforming the latter into business partners. This "ceasefire capitalism" counterinsurgency strategy shaped EAGs in Myanmar as profit-driven entities.

Several scholars have situated their EAGs' governance in the instrumentalist and functionalist paradigm. Marie Lall and Ashley South (2014) examined ethnic education in Karen State and Mon State, offered by the Karen National Union (KNU) and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) respectively. Schools in Mon State adopted the Myanmar's government curriculum, supplemented with classes in local language, history, and culture, but schools in Karen State only developed its own curriculum based on a specific Karen dialect. Thus, they argued that the Mon experience provides "a useful model for education reform in a transitional Myanmar, as political and civil society leaders negotiate a more decentralized state" (2014: 298). In addition, Annika Pohl Harrison and Helene Maria Kyed (2019) explored how the KNU and NMSP generated legitimacy and constituted authority through building a judicial system in their controlled territory during the liminal phase (between signing of a ceasefire in 2012 and a political settlement). Many villagers supported and trusted these alternative systems. However, "core challenge for these systems is the jurisdictional ambiguities and competition for authority with the Myanmar state, reflecting "the fragility and liminal character of ceasefire state-making" (2019: 292).

David Brenner's earlier works focus on grassroots reactions, after the KIO and the KNU signed bilateral ceasefire agreements with Myanmar's military junta in 1994 and 2012, respectively (Brenner, 2017a; 2017b). The two rebel groups enjoyed a number of subsequent economic benefits: the KIO participated in state-sponsored joint ventures extracting natural resources, including timber and jade; and the KNU leadership received "gifts" from the military junta (Brenner, 2017a; 2017b). This transactionality, however, did not extend to the local populations governed by the rebel groups; that is, the ceasefire agreements brought about an armistice but did not address the political grievances and aspirations of the local populations. Not only did the economic benefits that enriched rebel rulers fail to trickle down to the governed communities, but also the transactional arrangements between the junta and the rebel leadership worsened such problems as environmental degradation, land grabbing, and general corruption. This "ceasefire capitalism" (Woods, 2011) demoralised rebel soldiers and created distrust between the rulers and their erstwhile grassroots supporters. Indeed, the distrust grew so pronounced that the previously stable insurgent social orders were now tottering on the verge of collapse. Young rebel soldiers in these two EAGs challenged the rebel leadership's reconciliation policies, and infighting ensued, leading to reconfigurations of the leadership (Brenner, 2017a; 2017b).

Brenner with Martina Tazzioli (2022) furthered our instrumental and functionalist understanding of rebel governance by conceptualising rebel governance as competition in the realm of biopolitics. Indeed, rebel rulers can establish schools and hospitals to improve the welfare of rebel-controlled populations. By contrasting their liberality with the illiberality of the country's established rulers, the rebel rulers "craft population bodies that stand in a conflicting relationship with the population body of the existing nation states" (2022: 4). Rebel biopower thus shapes people's conduct and subjectivities in ways that generate social mores distinct from "the ones prescribed by the existent nation state" (2022: 5).

The instrumentalist and functionalist paradigm has advanced our understanding of rebel governance in Myanmar in two significant ways. First, EAGs in Myanmar are not monolithic entities, as the relationships between rebel leaders and grassroots members are often complex and sometimes contentious. This internal dynamic makes EAGs highly fluid and adaptive. Second, scholars have applied the instrumentalist-functionalist approach to a variety of governance issues, including education (Lall & South, 2024), jurisdictional authority (Harrison & Kyed, 2019) and ceasefire agreements (Brenner, 2017a; 2017b). By broadening the research scope under this paradigm, recent studies have significantly enriched the understanding of rebel governance in the Myanmar context.

We must note that the KIO has incorporated rare earth mining into its nation-building efforts. Indeed, the KIO-led nation-building process has been deeply intertwined with its governance of natural resources, which has involved external factors such as the Tatmadaw and the Chinese investors. These factors have directly and indirectly influenced the KIO/A's natural resource governance since the organisation's formation in 1961. In other words, the governance of natural resources by the KIO, including rare earth mining, is highly politicised. However, the instrumentalist and functionalist approach falls short of fully capturing the complexities of the KIO's rare earth governance. This limitation stems primarily from the approach's narrow focus on interactions "between the rulers and the ruled in the locally confined context of rebel-held territory," which excludes external factors and depoliticises rebel governance (Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023).



Photograph 3: A rare earth mining site in Mai Ja Yang, Myanmar

Analytical Framework

Our analytical framework is based on Pfeifer and Schwab's (2023) suggestions of research on rebel governance. They acknowledge that extensive research on rebel governance from instrumentalist and functionalist perspectives has significantly broadened our understanding of the subject. However, they critique this approach for portraying rebel groups as quasi-states. But state and non-state actors are different. The resources available to rebel groups for governing their populations are far more limited than those of states. Moreover, it is significantly more challenging for rebel groups to gain international recognition. Pfeifer and Schwab (2023: 5) argue that "viewing rebels as quasi-states neglects the various practices and processes through which non-state actors attempt to rule, and it underestimates the contexts of overlapping and fluid authority we often find in conflict zones."

To move beyond the instrumentalist and functionalist paradigm, Pfeifer and Schwab suggest that the research on rebel governance should incorporate temporal and spatial contextualisation. First, the study of rebel governance can be situated within different phases—pre-conflict, conflict, and post-conflict. This approach can uncover overlapping and fluid forms of authority in rebel-controlled areas (2023: 8–10). Second, it can examine the interactions between non-state armed groups and various actors across different scales (2023: 10–12). By adopting temporal and spatial contextualisation, scholars can reintroduce the political dimensions into the study of rebel governance.

The temporal and spatial approach provides valuable insights into the KIO/A's governance of rare earth mining. First, the temporal context allows us to trace the evolution of the KIO/A's governance since its formation in 1961, highlighting when and why its natural resource governance has intersected with its nation-building efforts. This approach can help shed light on the KIO's governance of rare earth mining. Second, the spatial context enables the incorporation of external factors into the analysis of the intersection between the KIO/A's nation-building efforts and natural resource governance. Two particularly significant factors are the Tatmadaw and Chinese investors. The Tatmadaw undermined the KIO's nation-building efforts between the 1990s and early 2000s but indirectly revitalized them after 2010. Meanwhile, Chinese investments have been leveraged by the KIO/A to sustain or strengthen its nation-building initiatives, particularly in 2011 and following the coup in 2021.

The KIO/A: Nation-Building and Natural Resources

After Myanmar gained independence in January 1948, a group of Kachin nationalists revolted. These individuals included university students, intellectuals, and Kachin veterans of the Second World War. Their motivation stemmed from the Burma State's systemic discrimination against ethnic minorities. In response, they established the KIO/A in 1961 and began fighting for an independent Kachin state. During this period, the KIO/A relied on small-scale jade mining and commodity smuggling to fund its insurgent activities (Brenner, 2015). Members of Kachin society, including women, collectively resisted the Burman-dominated government, shaping the KIO/A into a formidable EAG (Hedström, 2017). By the late 1980s, the KIO/A controlled nearly the entirety of Kachin State and parts of northern Shan State.

The situation changed in the 1990s. In September 1988, the Tatmadaw staged a coup, seizing power from the weakened civilian government and establishing the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) to govern the country. Between 1988 and 1994, the military junta signed ceasefire agreements with many EAGs, including the KIO/A. In 1994, the KIO/A relinquished control of the jade mines to the Tatmadaw (Woods, 2011: 750). This decision allowed former SLORC leader Than Shwe, his associates, military-linked companies, and pro-junta EAGs to dominate the jade mining sector. According to Global Witness, in 2014, the value of Myanmar's official jade production reached US\$31 billion, representing 48% of the country's entire official GDP (Global Witness, 2015: 26). Additionally, KIO/A political elites collaborated with the military junta to form joint ventures in timber extraction and cash crop plantations (Woods, 2011). Regional Tatmadaw commanders and state agencies granted logging and land concessions to Chinese investors (Woods, 2011, 2018), enabling the junta to deploy additional battalions around these investment sites. Consequently, these foreign investments not only avoided undermining Myanmar's national sovereignty but also facilitated the junta's territorialisation efforts, expanding its authority into the restive Kachin ethnic borderlands.

Two key factors prompted the influx of Chinese investors into Kachin State. The first was the global war on drugs. In the 1990s, the United Nations Drug Control Programme, advocating for a drug-oriented alternative development approach, pressured Laos and Myanmar to eradicate their poppy plantations (Cohen, 2009). In response to the impact of opium production in these countries, the Chinese government encouraged private investors to support opium farmers, particularly in northern Shan State and Kachin State, by promoting the cultivation of cash crops (Tubilewics & Jayaruriya, 2015: 197–199; Woods, 2019). The second factor was the overaccumulation of domestic capital in China, which spurred the Chinese government to launch its Going Global Strategy in 2000. This initiative aimed to internationalise China's economy and direct investments abroad. Myanmar, with its geographical proximity to China and abundant natural resources, became a highly attractive target for both private investors and state-owned enterprises. Within this context, Kachin State emerged as a popular destination for Chinese investment.

During this period, the KIO/A took significant steps toward functioning as a quasi-state. Following the ceasefire agreement, the KIO established an administrative system comprising departments for health, education, agriculture, and women's affairs. In collaboration with local churches, particularly the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC), the KIO developed schools, hospitals, and academies to train teachers and nurses (Brenner, 2015). According to Brenner, "The development of physical infrastructure [was] often in cooperation with incoming mining companies" (2015: 347). The KIO also founded a development corporation, which engaged the Chinese company Jinxin to construct hydropower plants on the Mali and Dabak rivers in exchange for extensive logging rights in the area (Brenner, 2015: 347). Infrastructure development became a cornerstone of the KIO's nation-building efforts. By trading natural resources to finance infrastructure projects, the KIO integrated its nation-building strategy into China's economy. However, this ceasefire agreement failed to address the political grievances of the Kachin people and disproportionately benefited Kachin elites. Chinese investments also caused significant environmental and social harm. These issues fostered distrust among some grassroots communities and their social allies toward the KIO/A. Furthermore, younger KIO/A officers challenged senior generals who advocated for reconciliation with the military junta. In summary, the KIO/A's trade of natural resources with China under the ceasefire agreement contributed to infrastructure development but also deepened divisions within Kachin society.

By the late 2000s, relations between the KIO/A and the military junta began to shift. During this period, a faction of younger officers gradually consolidated their influence within the KIO/A. This younger leadership actively recruited new members and emphasised the KIO/A's political demands in their outreach efforts. They also fostered relationships with local churches, recognising the significant role of priests as "respected moral authorities" within Kachin society (Brenner, 2015: 352). Meanwhile, the military junta pressured EAGs to transform into Border Guard Forces (BGFs) under Tatmadaw control. In 2009, the NDA-K was the first EAG to this arrangement. However, the revitalised KIO/A rejected this demand, leading to a breakdown in relations. In June 2011, the ceasefire agreement collapsed, and hostilities resumed between the military junta and the KIO/A. This renewed conflict displaced thousands of people, forcing them to flee to the Myanmar-China border and creating a humanitarian crisis for IDPs.

During this period, the KIO/A demonstrated its commitment to protecting Kachin State's natural resources, as exemplified by its opposition to the Myitsone Dam project. Alongside several civil society groups, the KIO/A rejected plans for the dam, which was proposed by China Power International Corporation and intended to be built on the Irrawaddy River. Notably, 90% of the electricity generated by the dam was earmarked for export to China. The Irrawaddy River holds deep cultural, spiritual, and traditional significance for the Kachin people, who regard it as the source of their identity and heritage. The dam's construction threatened to devastate the environment and, by extension, the Kachin ethnic group itself. The KIO/A's firm stance against the Myitsone Dam underscores the intertwined relationship between natural resources and the aspirations of the Kachin Nation (Kiik, 2016).

The KIO/A: Rare Earth Mining and Governance

Rare earth mining began operating in Kachin State around the early 2010s, driven by two interconnected factors. First, global demand for products requiring rare earth metals surged, including smartphones, computer hard drives and monitors, home electronics, and clean energy technologies such as electric cars and wind turbines. Second, since 2015, China has implemented stringent measures to crack down on illegal domestic rare earth mining, leading to the closure of numerous mining sites (Ming Hwa Ting & Seaman, 2013). Consequently, Chinese businessmen outsourced rare earth mining to Myanmar, importing the extracted minerals to China for refining and processing. According to an interview by Frontier Myanmar (August 4, 2021), China state-owned rare earth companies China Southern Rare Earths Group, Chinalco, and Guangdong Rare Earths are the buyers of rare earths produced in Myanmar. Both the NDA-K and the KIO/A have served as business partners to Chinese rare earth investors. The NDA-K initiated mining operations in the Pangwa area of Chipwi Township in 2014 (Frontier Myanmar, August 3, 2021). Meanwhile, in 2011, the KIO/A began small-scale rare earth mining in Mai Ja Yang Town, Momauk Township, Bhamo District (MIF3, MIF5), later expanding its mining operations significantly after the 2021 coup. The number of mining sites increased from nine in 2021 to over 40 by the end of 2023 (Global Witness, May 23, 2024).

Desperation for funds to support its resistance against the brutal military junta, as well as to advance KIO/A-led nation-building projects, has been a key motivator for the KIO/A's actions (Meehan et al., 2025). Initially, following the coup, the KIO/A adopted a neutral stance, although it expressed concerns over the junta's violent repression of peaceful protesters (The Irrawaddy, April 30, 2021). However, the situation changed after the junta launched attacks on KIA bases in northern Shan State in March 2021, prompting the KIO/A to abandon its neutral policy. Between March and April 2021, the KIA carried out retaliatory attacks on junta-controlled military and police outposts in seven townships—Waimaw, Momauk, Hpakant, Tanai, Mogaung, Shwegu and Ingyangyang—in Kachin State (The Irrawaddy, April 30, 2021). By mid-2021, the KIO/A began cooperating with the parallel National Unity Government (NUG), which was formed in April 2021 by members of the former ruling National League for Democracy, civil society groups, and protest leaders from various minority communities. The KIO/A also provided training to the NUG's armed wing, the People's Defense Forces (PDFs). On August 10, 2021, KIO Chairman General N Ban La declared: "The KIO has decided to crush and uproot the Bamar military and racial supremacy doctrine together, hand-in-hand with the revolutionary alliance, Bamar public, and organizations, politically and militarily, through systematic preparation" (Shan Herald Agency for News, August 30, 2021). However, sustaining these military activities requires significant financial resources. The extraction of rare earths has emerged as a potential solution to address the KIO/A's fiscal shortages (Frontier Myanmar, December 4, 2024). This reliance on rare earth mining has imbued the KIO's governance of the sector with strong nation-building characteristics.

Some villagers welcomed rare earth mining, particularly those from Nhkawng Pa Village in Momauk Township, Bhamo District. Some landowners are willing to rent their lands out. A community leader (CL2) described the process:

“The renting process involves businessmen and village heads who come to request us to rent our land. The [KIO] government grants permission to operate rare earth mining in the village, and then the village committees and businessmen come to negotiate and arrange the rental. When we signed the contracts, [KIO] government officials and investors were also present to determine the duration and draft the agreement. The initial agreement was for three years ... For the land, they paid 4,000 yuan per acre ... We received our payment after we signed the agreement.”

Researcher Peter reflected on interviews with these villagers, noting, “They seem happy about the money earned from rare earth mining. They didn’t openly express their feelings, but when they made a lot of money, it seemed they weren’t concerned about losing their land or the environmental impacts of mining.” Furthermore, according to three local researchers’ observations, despite concerns about the potential injuries from mining work, some workers continued to choose employment at the mining sites. These workers, many of whom were IDPs facing economic hardship, were paid salaries ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 Yuan, which were considered decent wages. Dan Seng Lawn and Patrick Meehan’s research (2024) on rare earth mining in Kachin State supports similar findings.

According to the Frontier Myanmar and our fieldwork, many villagers strongly opposed rare earth mining activities. Opposition primarily came from residents of N’Ba Pa and Ding Sing Pa villages in Mansi Township, Bhamo District. On December 14, 2022, villagers, along with local church groups, submitted a petition to the KIO’s Bhamo District office, the regional headquarters in Mai Ja Yang, and the KIO’s central headquarters in Laiza. However, the responses from these offices only heightened tensions. The Bhamo District office summoned the villagers, urging them to cease their protests, while the regional headquarters informed them that the KIO central committee had already approved the mining (Frontier Myanmar, May 2, 2023). Angered by these dismissive responses, the villagers escalated their protests. In January 2023, they organised marches and voiced their opposition. In March 2023, the villagers marched again, this time taking direct action by destroying Chinese rare earth mining facilities (Voice of Asia, April 18, 2023). On April 13, 2023, Kachin CSOs issued a joint statement condemning the KIO/A for pressuring communities and failing to address local concerns constructively. The statement “called on the KIO to cease all rare earth mining across the state, respect community voices, and implement sustainable, resource-free systems” (Frontier Myanmar, May 2, 2023).

According to an article by local political analyst Shaba (April 2023), the villagers opposed the mining for three main reasons. First, they were concerned about the environmental and social impacts. Second, the KIO/A often failed to fulfill its commitments. For instance, the KIO introduced coal mining operations in the villages, convincing the locals that it would lead to improved development, such as providing electricity and creating infrastructure. However, by the time the mining operations ended, the villagers had seen no development in the area. Third, the villagers claimed that the son of KIO Chairman General N Ban La was involved in investing in rare earth mining. As a result, the profits from the mining were believed to be funneled to high-ranking officials rather than benefiting the villagers.

After the strong protest, the central KIO changed its policy. On April 15, 2023, KIO Chairman General N Ban La addressed a gathering of 1,500 people from 10 villages in Mai Ja Yang. He explained that the mining had initially been intended to fund development projects and procure weapons for the KIO's war against the military junta. However, after listening to the concerns of residents, who feared the mining would poison their water and destroy their land, the KIO decided to halt the mining operations (Frontier Myanmar, May 2, 2023).

The protest has problematised the KIO/A's governance. Indeed, according to our fieldwork, our interviewees shared their perspectives on the KIO/A's governance. First, the governance has been opaque. Some workers reported that they were unaware of the owners of the mining sites (MW2, MW1, MW4, MW7) and how rare earth minerals were transported (MW3, MW4, MW7). In other words, workers lack clarity about their channels for complaints and the working environment and processes. Second, the governance has been undemocratic. As demonstrated by the Frontier Myanmar mentioned earlier, the KIO attempted to silence villagers opposed to rare earth mining. The local researchers involved in this study also faced immense pressure and insecurity during the data collection period. Researcher Peter, who participated in an anti-mining protest, noted that the protest group received a warning from the KIO. Third, the governance has lacked enforceability (MW6, SA2). For example, according to the KIO's rare earth mining rules, investors are required to fill the holes left by mining activities. Many of our interviewees reported that they did not see investors fulfil this responsibility (MW1, MW3, MW5, MIF2, MIF3, MIF6, CL1, CL2, SA3, SA4). A social activist (SA4) said, "I think the government and the investors did agreement to refill the mining holes after they finished but after they did mining, they didn't refill the big holes so the cows and animal stuck in and died." Finally, the KIO/A's governance appears to favour the Chinese side (SA1). Some interviewees revealed that when they asked KIO officials to mediate disputes with Chinese investors and managers, the KIO officials hesitated to take action for fear of offending the Chinese investors (MW4, MW5, MIF3). When discussing a conflict between Kachin mining workers and the Chinese investors, the mining worker (MW5) said, "the Chinese knew that the KIA were on their side, so they disrespect and exploit the Kachin workers." Why has the KIO/A's governance been problematic?

We can understand this issue in the context of the KIO's bureaucratic system. Currently, the KIO is divided into nine regions. They are (1) the North Division (*Dingdung Ginwang Ginjaw*), (2) the Western Division (*Sinna Ginwang Ginjaw*), (3) U Ru Division (*U Ru Ginwang Ginjaw*), (4) the South Western Division (*Sinna Dingda Ginwang Ginjaw*), (5) the Eastern Division (*Sinpraw Ginwang Ginjaw*), (6) the Southern Division (*Dingda Ginwang Ginjaw*), (7) Headquarter Region (*Ginjaw Ginra*), (8) the Northern Eastern Division (*Sinpraw Dingdung Ginwang Ginjaw*), and (9) Nmau Division (*Nmau Ginwang Ginjaw*). The division offices have direct management authority over the lower-level offices: district offices, township offices, and village tract offices. The divisions are responsive for key issues, particularly economic activities such as mining extraction and developmental projects like infrastructure construction. However, the central KIO remains the primary power centre, retaining the final say in decision-making—a dynamic that the divisions are reluctant to challenge. As a result, the divisions function as quasi-decentralised entities, with true control firmly centralised under the KIO's leadership.

This peculiar governance style highlights the KIO's challenges in managing rare earth mining effectively. Chinese investors must first obtain permission and pay taxes to the central KIO to explore, extract, and transport rare earth minerals (HKIO1). They must then seek additional approvals from township and village-level offices (MW3, MW8, HV1). For example, Mai Ja Yang, located in the Eastern Division, illustrates this multi-tiered process. If a Chinese investor wishes to extract rare earth minerals in any village within Mai Ja Yang, they must secure approval from both the central KIO and the local KIO authorities at the divisions, township and village-track levels. Land-use arrangements are often negotiated jointly by KIO local officials and Chinese investors, as demonstrated in the earlier account of a community leader's experience. If the land contains rare earth mineral deposits, investors are required to contribute to a village fund, ostensibly meant to benefit the entire village. Despite their authority to oversee and manage mining activities, KIO local officials rarely challenge decisions made by the central KIO leadership. This clarifies why local officials told villagers to stop protesting while the central KIO approved the mining.

Furthermore, the process of granting permissions remains opaque, limiting public oversight and preventing scrutiny of the interactions between local officials and investors. According to the Global Witness, the interviewed KIO spokesperson said that the KIO has placed "strict rules" on rare earth mining companies in order to protect the environment. However, "local sources consulted by Global Witness were not aware of any legal frameworks put in place by the KIO to regulate the industry" (Global Witness, May 23, 2024). Indeed, there has been no public information about the "strict rules" and how the KIO would implement the rules. What we know is that the KIO has created a Rare Earth Management Committee. People who work on this committee usually have good relations with the KIO high-ranking officials. One task of this committee is to address problems in mining sites (HKIO1). When encountering problems, Kachin mining workers can report to the committee if mining managers, heads of villages, and township officers are unable to solve them. However, because the relations between KIO local officials and the Chinese investors have been opaque, some interviewees have alleged that patronage politics have existed between the Chinese investors and KIO officials. For example, interviewed KIO official (HKIO1) said,

“Investors pay taxes to KIO, and they [the investors] also give “pocket money” to both KIO officials and village leaders. Because of this, the leaders tend to support the investors. The investors know that they should pay more to higher-ranking leaders, sometimes even giving cars as gifts. KIO has instructed its departments not to raise any issues about rare earth mining. Since we are not a fully established government and lack transparency, many leaders are [sic] focused on money and corruption. The KIO administrators in this area have a close relationship with the investors and do not care about their followers.”

Shaba’s article, villagers’ experiences of renting out land, and the accounts of KIO official (e.g., CL2, HKIO1) suggest the presence of patronage politics in rare earth mining activities. In other words, the KIO’s governance of rare earth mining has been problematic: while the KIO claims to act as a mining regulator, some central and local officials have vested interests in the sector. This conflict of interest may explain why local officials have favoured Chinese investors and failed to enforce environmental restoration measures.

The central KIO’s use of revenue generated by the mining has been opaque as well. A social activist (SA4) statement reflects this situation:

“The [KIO] government and the Chinese businessmen and our leaders (from village) got more benefits from the mining. They said how many percent will go to the government, how many percent will go to the village but I think our leaders from the village get more. The government said last year they will build the road from Mai Ja Yang to Laiza but later they said the businessmen will build it. But the businessmen said that it’s the government work, and we can’t against the government.”

Some interviewees have similar narratives that the rare earth mining has not improved their livelihood (SA1, CL1, HV2). In other words, the opaque governance of rare earth mining has prevented people from equally sharing the benefits brought by mining.

Concluding Remarks

This research examines the governance of rare earth mining by the KIO/A. Drawing on Pfeifer and Schwab's suggestion that research on rebel governance should incorporate temporal and spatial contextualisation, we trace the KIO's governance since its formation in 1961. We identify when and why its natural resource governance has intersected with its nation-building efforts, and we explore the role of external factors—such as the Tatmadaw and China investors—in shaping this intersection. Using a genealogical approach, we argue that the KIO/A's governance of rare earth mining has become politicised as mining activities have been embedded into broader nation-building initiatives. However, this politicisation has been shaped by the economic interplay between KIO officials and Chinese investors, leaving the concerns of local villagers largely unaddressed, triggering discontent and protests.

We have three suggestions, each targeted at a specific group. The first is directed at international organisations. Traditionally, these organisations do not recognise the legitimacy of non-state armed groups, leading to the neglect of their contributions to conflict resolution (Cárdenas et al., 2023; South, 2018). We suggest that international organisations acknowledge the KIO/A's governance role and support efforts to strengthen its governance capacity. A relevant example is the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), which aims to “tackle development challenges associated with the resource curse and serve as a key driver for transparency and good governance in the resource sector” (Bünthe, 2018). Myanmar was previously an EITI member but was delisted on February 29, 2024, due to ongoing conflict and political instability (EITI, 2024). We propose that the EITI invite the KIO to participate as an observer, as EITI members include CSOs, extractive companies, development partners, and donors. As an observer, the KIO could receive essential support and guidance, helping to improve its governance of rare earth resources.

The second suggestion is directed at the KIO/A. The KIO/A must reform its current governance of rare earth mining by prioritising transparency in the development and management of mining activities. A crucial step is to make mining-related information publicly accessible, including details about investors, the number and location of mining sites, regulations governing these sites, and data on the extraction and export of rare earth minerals. Furthermore, the KIO should proactively express its intention to join the EITI. Taking these steps would not only enhance the KIO/A's governance capacity but also help address the problem of patronage politics.

The third suggestion is directed at the academic community. Since the 2021 coup, research on Myanmar has primarily focused on the anti-coup movement, as highlighted by the special issue published by the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* in 2024. This body of work has significantly enhanced our understanding of the trajectory of the anti-coup movement. However, many development projects in Myanmar continue to operate, affecting the livelihoods of numerous people. Research findings related to these ongoing projects can be published to draw attention from various stakeholders, encouraging them to contribute to practical solutions.

Photograph 4: A rare earth mining site in Mai Ja Yang, Myanmar



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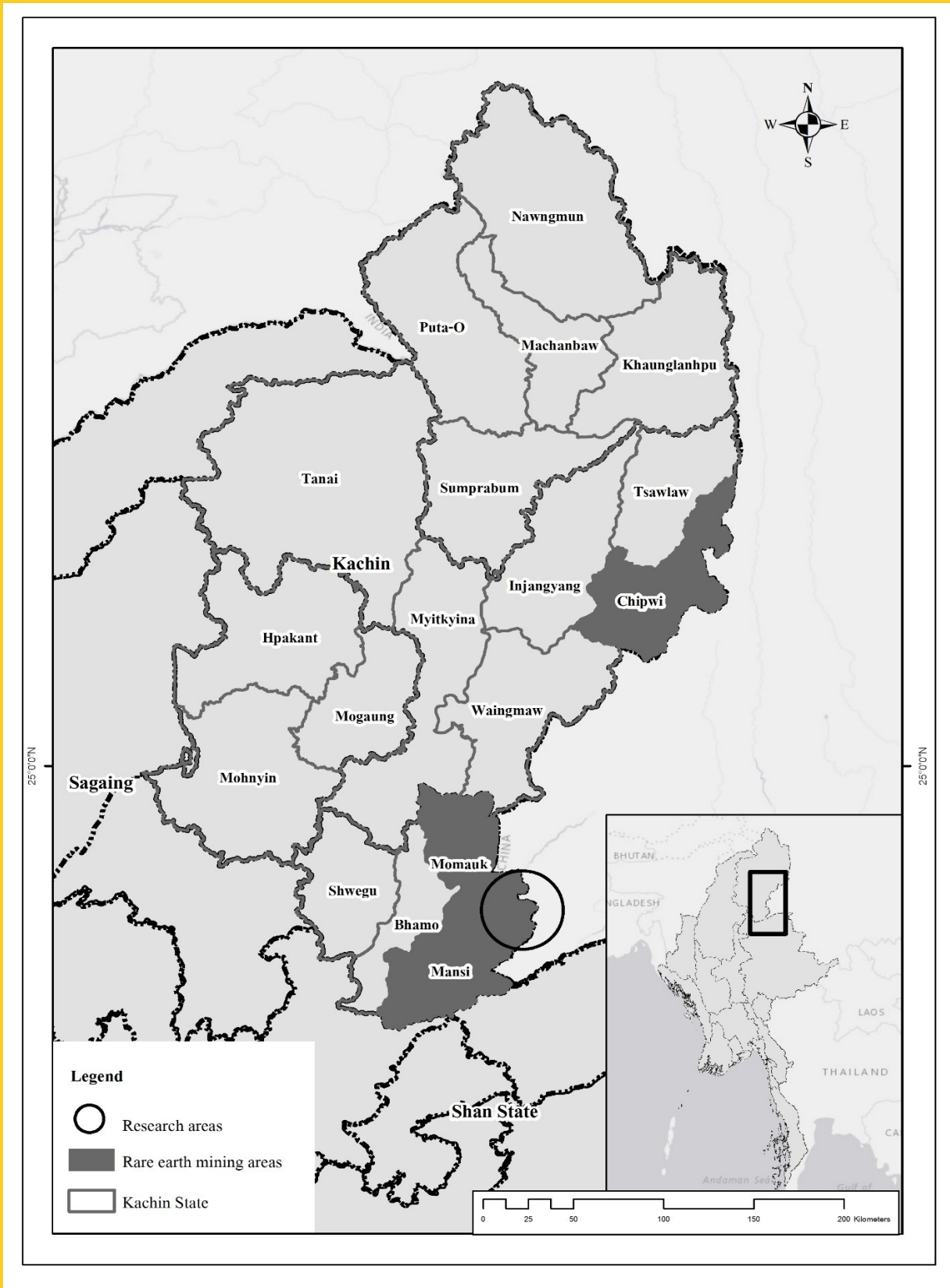
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Appendix 1: The Interview List 1

Code	Interview Date
Mining Workers (MW)	
MW1	November 23, 2024
MW2	November 24, 2024
MW3	November 22, 2024
MW4	November 22, 2024
MW5	November 23, 2024
MW6	November 23, 2024
MW7	November 24, 2024
MW8	January 22, 2025
Mining-Impacted Family Members (MIF)	
MIF1	November 28, 2024
MIF2	November 27, 2024
MIF3	November 27, 2024
MIF4	November 28, 2024
MIF5	November 28, 2024
MIF6	November 27, 2024
Heads of Villages (HV)	
HV1	November 25, 2024
HV2	November 26, 2024
Social Activists (SA)	
SA1	November 24, 2024
SA2	November 25, 2024
SA3	November 23, 2024
SA3	November 23, 2024
Community Leaders (CL)	
CL1	November 26, 2024
CL2	January 23, 2025
High Ranking KIO Officer (HKIO)	
HKIO1	November 24, 2024

Appendix 2: The Map of Research Sites and Mining Sites in Kachin State



Mr. Seng Li

Director

Shanan Foundation



Mr. Seng Li is the Director of the Shanan Foundation, where he works to promote freedom of expression and natural resource rights in Myanmar's northern Kachin State. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from Mandalay University, a diploma in Community Development Studies from the Myanmar Institute of Theology, and a Master's degree in Social Sciences from Chiang Mai University, Thailand. His research focuses on community resistance to Chinese investments in large-scale agriculture, particularly tissue-culture banana plantations in Kachin State.

With extensive experience in NGOs, Mr. Seng Li served as an office assistant and livelihood grant officer at the Kachin Baptist Convention's Community Development Department (2010–2014), where he focused on livelihood options for internally displaced people. As the Land Rights Coordinator at the Kachin State Farmers Network (2015–2017), he advocated for land rights and the protection of customary land against land grabbing. He also worked as the Land Rights Officer for People in Need (2018–2019) and as a Media Monitor for Internews (2021–2023).