



Policy Brief

Non-Taingyintha Identity in Myanmar's Post-Coup Ethno-Political Landscape

No. 12, March 2026
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Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the persistent problem of ethno-religious exclusion in post-coup Myanmar. It argues that the state's official "135 national races" (*Taingyintha*) framework: an enduring legacy of Ne Win-era ethno-nationalism continues to obstruct efforts to build a just and stable federal democracy. The paper highlights how this exclusionary logic is also being unintentionally reproduced within the pro-democracy movement's federalism discourse, which prioritizes territorial rights for officially recognized ethnic groups while overlooking non-territorial minorities such as Muslims, Hindus, and Sino-Burmese communities.

This Brief was funded by the International Development Research Centre, which supported much of the Ottawa Dialogue's Myanmar research and programming. We thank them for this support.

Key Takeaways

- The "135 National Races" Framework Drives Exclusion: The *Taingyintha* classification is a political construct that reinforces systemic discrimination and cannot serve as the basis for a future democratic Myanmar.
- Current Federal Proposals Overlook Non-Territorial Minorities: Territorial-based federalism risks sidelining Muslims and other minorities who lack designated ethnic homelands, potentially reproducing long-standing patterns of marginalization.
- Universal Individual Rights Are Essential: A durable and just democracy requires moving away from ethnicity-based citizenship and grounding rights in *jus soli* (birthright) principles that apply equally to all.



1. Post-2021: The Return of Military Power in Myanmar

The military coup on February 1, 2021, and the popular uprising called the Spring Revolution have created Myanmar's worst crisis since its independence (Amnesty International, 2025). However, this tragedy also presents a unique opportunity. For the first time in Myanmar's modern history, the barriers of mistrust and division built by decades of military rule are breaking down. Young Bamar people who previously viewed ethnic minority struggles as unrelated to them now join these groups in fighting for freedom (Lovett & Safi, 2021). This unity through resistance offers the possibility of dismantling the old oppressive system and creating a new Federal Democratic State.

Nevertheless, this revolutionary opportunity faces serious challenges. The risk is that in rushing to defeat the military government, Myanmar may accidentally rebuild a new state on the same flawed foundations that have caused problems since independence. If the focus remains only on removing the current military government without addressing the basic structural inequalities of the past, the resistance movement may defeat the military but fail to achieve lasting peace. This would cause future generations to face the same cycle of conflict and exclusion, similar to what happened after the 1988 uprising during Ne Win's rule (Thant Myint-U, 2008).

1.1. The Unresolved Question: "Who Belongs?"

Behind the hopeful ideas of the Spring Revolution lies a deep and still unanswered question: "Who truly belongs in Myanmar?" For many years, the government has answered this question using a state official list of 135 "national races," known as *Taingyintha*. This list was not based on clear facts but on political decisions. It created a strict system of inclusion, where only some groups were fully accepted, while many others were left out. This arbitrary and politically motivated classification created a rigid hierarchy of belonging, cementing a core of recognized ethnic groups while pushing millions to the periphery. Myanmar's Muslim communities, citizens of Chinese and Indian descent, and many others who fall outside this framework have been systematically treated as outsiders in their own homeland, facing legal, social, and economic discrimination (Rajah, 2016).

The Spring Revolution has promoted the idea of full inclusion for everyone. However, current plans for a future federal system reveal important gaps (IDEA, 2022). Most discussions focus on territorial federalism, where each major *Taingyintha* group would control its own state with some degree of self-rule (Kim, 2022). While this is a fair and necessary goal, the model often overlooks non-territorial minorities, that is, those who live within these ethnic states but are not part of the dominant group. As a result, their rights and roles in the proposed governance structure remain uncertain. There is a serious risk that they will once again be excluded from new systems of local and federal governance, citizenship, and social inclusion, continuing a long history of marginalization.



1.2. Scope and Objectives

This policy brief addresses a major challenge in Myanmar's current transition. It looks closely at the long-lasting effects of the *Taingyintha* categorization and how it continues to affect non-territorial minorities; , especially Muslim communities in areas controlled by ethnic forces after the 2021 coup (BHRN, 2023). By analysing the emerging local governance systems, this policy brief shows the urgent need for pro-democracy leaders to go beyond inclusive language and take real, practical action.

The main goals of this policy brief are:

- To clearly explain how past patterns of exclusion are being repeated in today's discussions about transitional governance.
- To show that any fair and lasting federal system must be built on a rights-based approach, with equal citizenship for every individual.
- To give practical policy advice for local administrations, Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), the National Unity Government (NUG), and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC).

This policy brief aims to help ensure that the revolution is inclusive. It aims to give decision-makers the tools they need to build a truly inclusive Federal Democratic State – one that belongs to all people in Myanmar. This is an opportunity to finally close a painful chapter of the country's history and fulfill the true promise of this revolutionary era.

2. The Genealogy of Exclusion: How the "Taingyintha" Identity Was Forged

The *Taingyintha* does not reflect a fixed or formal set of identities. Rather, it is a modern political idea shaped by General Ne Win, which has been entrenched and used over the past century to serve state interests. This concept has been used to build a narrow national identity, create a hierarchy of who belongs, and exclude many communities from full citizenship (Smith et al., 1994).

The roots of this system go back to British colonial rule. Between 1872 and 1931, colonial authorities in Burma carried out several population censuses. These censuses required people to identify their *ethnic affiliation, race, religion, and tribe*. These categories were imposed by the British, who grouped people in ways that ignored local identities and complexities. This helped colonial rulers control the population by dividing it into fixed categories (Sadan, 2013).

After independence, instead of rejecting this colonial framework, post-colonial governments in Myanmar expanded and institutionalized it. The *Taingyintha* framework was refined and formalized as an official list of 135 "national races." Rather than promoting unity, this list created a rigid system of inclusion and exclusion. Those officially recognized were seen as rightful citizens, while others, especially Muslims and those of Chinese or Indian descent, were excluded and treated as outsiders (Steinberg, 2013).



This long history of classification and exclusion continues to shape Myanmar's political and social systems today. Understanding how the *Taingyintha* identity was created is essential to dismantling it and building a more inclusive future.

2.1. From Colonial Categories to Post-Colonial Nationalism

One major result of this was the division between so-called “indigenous races” and “immigrant races.” The British treated some groups as native to the land, while labeling others, especially Indian and Chinese workers and merchants who came during colonial times, as outsiders. For the British, this system made governing easier (Charney, 2009). However, it also introduced the idea that some people naturally belong to the nation, while others do not.

After independence, Myanmar's new governments did not reject this way of thinking. Instead, they used it to shape a narrow form of nationalism, where only some groups were accepted as full citizens. This colonial-era division laid the foundation for later policies of exclusion that have harmed many communities to this day.

2.2. U Nu, Ne Win, and the Politicization of Race

After Myanmar gained independence in 1948, the government led by Prime Minister U Nu began shaping a national identity closely tied to Theravada Buddhism. This policy promoted a vision of the country centred around Bamar Buddhist culture, based on the refrain “To be Burma is to be Buddhist”. The effect of this was that it became more difficult for other ethnic and religious groups to feel included in the nation (Furnivall J. S., 1948).

The situation worsened under General Ne Win, who took power in a 1962 military coup. His government, through the “Burmese Way to Socialism,” codified this exclusion into official law and policy. One of the most damaging outcomes of Ne Win's rule was the 1982 Citizenship Law, which continues to have harmful effects on identity and citizenship (Walton, 2016).

This law created a three-level citizenship system: full citizens, associate citizens, and naturalized citizens. To be considered a full citizen, a person had to belong to one of the officially recognized 135 “national races” (*Taingyintha*) list. These groups were defined as those whose ancestors had lived in Myanmar prior to 1823, the year before the First Anglo-Burmese War. And this makes them, in effect, “natural-born citizens” under Myanmar's legal framework.

The decision to classify full citizens as those who resided in Myanmar prior to 1823 was a political one. It allowed the state to deny citizenship to many people, particularly those of Indian and Chinese background, whose families had migrated to Myanmar during British rule. The list of 135 national races compiled by the military was not based on historical fact. Instead, the decision of which group to list was taken by military intelligence to serve the political purpose of defining who was a “true” native and who was a “guest,” thereby creating a permanent underclass of citizens with restricted rights.



Associate citizens are individuals who obtained citizenship under the 1948 Union Citizenship Law but were unable to prove ancestry dating back before 1823. Naturalized citizens, on the other hand, are those who had been living in Burma prior to independence on January 4, 1948, and later applied for citizenship following the enactment of the 1982 law.

2.3. The Lived Consequences of Exclusion

This state-sanctioned genealogy of exclusion had devastating, tangible consequences for millions of people.

- **Systemic Discrimination:** The National Registration Card (NRC), Myanmar's main identity document, became a tool for separating people based on ethnic and religious identity. Individuals who followed Buddhism and belonged to one of the 135 officially recognized ethnic groups were considered full citizens and were issued the "pink card," which granted them full rights under the law. Others were given different types of IDs, such as the Naturalized Citizenship Scrutiny Card, commonly referred to as a "green card," the Foreigner Registration Cards, and the now-abolished "white cards," which indicated a lower status. These cards limited access to many important rights, such as attending university, working in certain jobs like medicine or engineering, joining the civil service, owning land, or traveling freely within the country.
- **Forced Assimilation and Cultural Erasure:** For those outside the 135 groups, survival often required a form of cultural erasure. To gain social mobility or avoid discrimination, many were forced to assimilate. On official documents, individuals would register as a member of the recognized group dominant in their region (e.g., a citizen of Chinese descent becoming "Shan-Chinese" or a Muslim adopting a Bamar/Buddhist identity). This process forced people to participate in the suppression of their own heritage.
- **The Creation of Statelessness:** The 1982 law provided the legal architecture for the ultimate act of exclusion: rendering an entire population stateless (Amnesty International, 2017). The Rohingya, despite having a documented history in the Arakan region for centuries, were systematically written out of the national narrative and stripped of their citizenship, culminating in their status as one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

This clear history reveals that the *Taingyintha* identity is the foundational pillar of the military's ethno-nationalist state. It is a weapon of division that has created deep-seated grievances and fueled conflict for generations. If Myanmar is to become an inclusive federal democracy, it must begin by rethinking and redefining the concept of belonging.



3. The Post-Coup Landscape: New Governance, Old Blind Spots

The 2021 Spring Revolution has deeply fractured Myanmar's political and administrative system. At the national level, the pro-democracy movement has rightly coalesced around the goal of establishing a Federal Democratic States. This represents a historic consensus, moving the demand for federalism from a long-held "ethnic issue" to a shared national aspiration. This model of territorial federalism is a necessary corrective to decades of centralized, Bamar-dominated military rule, promising self-determination and autonomy for the major *Taingyintha* groups.

However, this necessary focus on territorial group rights contains a critical blind spot. The model implicitly presumes that ethnic states are homogenous territories, which they are not. It struggles to account for the rights and status of individuals and communities who do not belong to the dominant ethnic group of a particular federal unit. The framework is designed to resolve the question, "What are the rights of the Karen people in Karen State?", yet it remains silent on the status of Muslim, Hindu, or Bamar populations residing within the same territory (Ko et al., 2024). This structural challenge is not confined to ethnic states. A parallel dynamic is emerging in Bamar-majority regions, particularly the central Dry Zone, historically known as "Anyar" – a traditional recruitment ground for the Myanmar Army. Following the coup, this region has become a center of resistance, giving rise to new political and military formations (ACLED, 2026). Notable among these developments are the emergence of the Bama People's Liberation Army (BPLA) and the establishment of federal councils and forces in regions such as Ayeyarwaddy and Tanintharyi. These developments, while revolutionary, indicate suggest that Bamar political actors are increasingly adopting the ethno-territorial logic of the EROs organizing to secure rights for their own majority population within a specific territory instead of individual rights.

3.1. The Non-Territorial Minority Dilemma

The current federal discourse presents a significant dilemma for Myanmar's non-territorial minorities. Communities such as Muslims, Hindus, and Sino-Burmese lack a designated "homeland" within the proposed federal structure, despite being integrated into society across the nation. This creates a dual vulnerability: having been historically marginalized as non-*Taingyintha* by the central state, these communities are now structurally overlooked by a new federal paradigm centred on territorial rights. Without a territorial claim, such groups lack formal representation in constitutional negotiations. As a result, fundamental rights become dependent on the discretion of local ethnic majorities rather than universal guarantees. This precarity is pronounced for Muslim populations in ethnic states like Karen or Kachin, as local governance becomes subject to new authorities focused primarily on securing rights for the dominant ethnic nationality.



4. Foundational Principles for an Inclusive Federal Democracy

The foundational flaw of Myanmar's ethno-nationalist state, built upon the *Taungyintha* system, is its core premise: that individual rights are derived from membership in a state-recognized collective group (International Crisis Group, 2018). To build a lasting and just federal states, this logic must be inverted. Worryingly, the current federal discourse, while revolutionary, continues to reflect an exclusionary thinking rooted in the ideology of Ne Win's regime, which instrumentalized race and citizenship to consolidate power (Cheesman, 2015).

A significant manifestation of this is the tendency within the pro-democracy movement to conflate the distinct issues of the Rohingya with those of other religious minorities, treating them as a single, homogenous problem category. This oversimplification often leads to their collective exclusion from substantive federalism discussions (USIP, 2022). Therefore, the transition cannot be limited to transferring power from a centralized Bamar military elite to various recognized ethnic groups. It must establish a new social contract grounded in universal principles that guarantee individual dignity and security as a precondition for any collective rights. The following three foundational principles must serve as the non-negotiable bedrock of the future Federal Democratic States.

4.1. The Primacy of Individual Right

A just and modern state must be founded on the recognition that fundamental rights are inherent to the individual, not privileges conferred by the state. Under the previous system, a person's rights were determined by their classification on an identity card; in a future state, rights must be understood as inalienable and belonging equally to every person. This principle means that a citizen's right to life, liberty, property, and freedom of expression and worship is absolute, independent of ethnicity or creed. It provides the ultimate safeguard against the tyranny of the majority, whether a national Bamar majority or a local ethnic majority within a federal state. Placing the individual at the center of the rights framework ensures that the state serves its people, not the reverse. This principle must be enshrined as the primary guiding value of any future constitution.

4.2. Universal Citizenship: From Bloodline to Belonging

A modern federal state must define its members based on universal, transparent, and inclusive criteria, not on outdated concepts of ethnic lineage or historical settlement. The 1982 Citizenship Law, with its reliance on *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) and an arbitrary historical cut-off date, is a legal instrument of exclusion that must be abolished entirely (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In its place, a new citizenship framework must be adopted, based primarily on *jus soli* (right of the soil), granting citizenship to any person born within the territory of Myanmar. This principle anchors belonging to the land and its political community rather than to a specific bloodline.



This should be supplemented by clear, fair, and non-discriminatory laws for the naturalization of long-term residents. Adopting this standard does not erase cultural identity; it separates rich cultural heritage from legal status, ensuring all citizens share a common and equal civic identity.

4.3. Equality Before the Law: Rejecting Differentiated Citizenship

A core principle of any democracy is that all citizens are equal before the law. The three-tiered system of “full,” “associate,” and “naturalized” citizenship created by the 1982 law constitutes a system of institutionalized discrimination designed to create a racial hierarchy (Cheesman, 2015). This structure must be completely dismantled. In the new Federal Democratic States, there can be only one class of citizen. This single status must guarantee the same political, social, and economic rights for all who hold it. This includes the equal right to vote and hold office, own property, pursue any profession, and access all levels of education and public service based on merit. Any law or regulation that grants preferential treatment to one group of citizens over another is fundamentally incompatible with the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the Spring Revolution.

These three principles – the primacy of the individual, universal citizenship, and equality before the law – are mutually reinforcing. They form the ethical and legal foundation for the actionable policy recommendations that follow and are the standards against which all transitional arrangements must be measured.

5. Policy Recommendations for Transitional Actors

Translating these foundational principles into practice requires targeted, coordinated action from all levels of the pro-democracy movement. Each actor, from national-level bodies to on-the-ground administrators and civil society groups, has a distinct role to play in dismantling the old structures of exclusion and building a new, inclusive foundation.

The National Unity Government (NUG), as the executive body of the revolution, bears the primary responsibility for developing the overarching legal and policy frameworks for a future state. The NUG must prioritize the drafting of a new, unified Citizenship Law, developed in close consultation with human rights experts and diverse community leaders. This law must be based on the principle of *jus soli* (birthright citizenship) and explicitly abolish the discriminatory 1982 Citizenship Law. Concurrently, the NUG should advocate forcefully within the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) for revisions to the Federal Democracy Charter, ensuring it incorporates robust protections for non-territorial minorities. In the interim, the NUG must issue a clear policy directive to decouple fundamental rights from identity documents, guaranteeing that access to essential services like humanitarian aid, healthcare, and education is based on human need alone.



For EROs, which function as the de facto state builders in liberated territories, the responsibility is immediate and practical. EROs must lead in establishing new systems of civil administration that are explicitly inclusive. This requires creating universal civil registration processes for all residents and issuing local identity documents based on residency, not ethnic affiliation, with discriminatory fields for “race” and “religion” removed. Furthermore, to ensure governance is not just for all but also by all, EROs must mandate the inclusion of representatives from non-territorial and religious minority populations on all newly formed administrative, justice, and security committees. These on-the-ground actions are crucial for building trust and setting an irreversible precedent for an inclusive future state.

Civil Society Actors serve as the vital connective tissue, ensuring that policy changes translate into lived reality. Their role is multifaceted. First, they must engage in sustained advocacy, lobbying both the NUG and EROs to adopt and implement the recommendations outlined in this policy brief. Second, they must function as independent monitors, systematically documenting instances of both exclusion and successful inclusion in local governance and civil registration. This evidence-based documentation is critical for holding leaders accountable. Finally, civil society must lead public education and awareness campaigns at the grassroots level, fostering a broader societal understanding of and support for a new, inclusive model of citizenship that moves beyond the legacy of the *Taingyintha* system.

Recommendations:

- EROs should begin practicing inclusive governance, including universal civil registration and minority representation in local bodies.
- The NUG should prioritize drafting a new, inclusive citizenship law.
- Civil society must champion these reforms and track their implementation.



6. Conclusion: Building a Revolution for All

The fight against the military junta is a fight against all forms of hierarchical oppression, and this must include the ethno-nationalism that the military perfected as its most potent tool of division. For decades, the *Taingyintha* framework has poisoned our social contract, defining who belongs and who does not, who is a "host" and who is a "guest." This policy brief has argued that a future federal states cannot be built on this discriminatory foundation. We must consciously choose to build it on the bedrock of universal individual rights, where the dignity and citizenship of every person are guaranteed, irrespective of their race, religion, or ancestry.

A failure to address the status of non-territorial minorities now is not a minor oversight; it is an act of embedding a critical flaw into the DNA of the future federal states. It would be a historic tragedy if, after so much sacrifice, we create a system that merely replaces one form of centralized tyranny with multiple forms of localized majority rule. A federalism that grants power to local majorities while marginalizing local minorities will simply replicate the injustices of the past on a smaller scale, sowing the seeds of future resentment and conflict. The rights of a Muslim shopkeeper in Myitkyina, a Hindu farmer in Hpa-an, or a Sino-Burmese teacher in Taunggyi must be as inviolable as those of any other citizen in the States.

The recommendations outlined in here – from instituting universal civil registration in liberated zones to drafting a new citizenship law and amending the Federal Democracy Charter – are not merely technical adjustments. They are practical steps toward realizing the revolution's highest ideals. They provide a roadmap to dismantle the architecture of exclusion, to rebuild our nation on a foundation of genuine equality, and to ensure that the promise of "freedom" extends to every person living within our borders.



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Acknowledgments

The development of this policy brief was made possible through the active support and thoughtful feedback of Jenna Sapiano and Esra Çuhadar, to whom the author extends sincere appreciation. Deep gratitude is also owed to Aung Ko Ko, Executive Director of Mosaic Myanmar, whose shared experiences and insights were instrumental in shaping this brief. Special thanks are extended to Professor Peter Jones and Mia Dubus for their guidance and facilitation throughout the process.

This brief was funded by the International Development Research Centre through the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar Initiative, which has generously supported much of the Ottawa Dialogue's Myanmar research and programming. The author gratefully acknowledges this support.