

Guest Column

# Can the Sagaing Forum Take Myanmar's Spring Revolution to the Next Level?

Tuesday 6 June 2023, by [Zaw Tuseng](#) (Date first published: 2 June 2023).

**Sagaing Region has seen some of the strongest and most widespread resistance to the Myanmar military's February 2021 attempted coup. In the face of the ongoing crisis in Sagaing, where villagers have been subjected to fear, violence and destruction of their villages at the hands of the military junta, a beacon of hope has emerged in the form of the Sagaing Forum as a regional political platform. This new political initiative can in the medium term address the pressing challenges faced by the region's communities, while aiming to build up local and subnational governance structures to build trust and support cohesion within Sagaing's pro-democracy movement.**

## Contents

- [Plight of villagers and \(...\)](#)
- [The birth of the Sagaing Forum](#)
- [Bottom-up approach](#)

The question here lies in whether the Forum can strengthen local and subnational networks to increase collaboration within Sagaing Region, which could help bring the resistance to the next level.

## Plight of villagers and political challenges

For more than two years, the people of Sagaing have endured unimaginable hardships. The military junta's "four-cuts" strategy, aimed at isolating and weakening resistance movements, has been deployed ruthlessly, leaving villagers trapped in a cycle of violence and oppression. The scorched-earth policy and arbitrary arrests have resulted in the destruction of thousands of villages, leaving communities devastated and displaced. As of Feb. 28, 2023, junta troops and affiliated groups have burned down 60,459 homes across the country, according to Data for Myanmar. In Sagaing alone more than 50,000 houses have been destroyed.

The major challenges faced by local actors and the National Unity Government (NUG) in countering military offensives are substantial, despite the individual strength of civil society and local People's Defense Forces (PDFs). The absence of involvement by civil society groups in regional policies, and district and township-level appointments, which are directly made by key ministries such as the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Home Affairs within the NUG, has resulted in a lack of ownership. This lack of ownership not only creates a lack of coordination, but also makes it increasingly difficult to counter the military's offensives. Moreover, in vast territorial regions like Sagaing, there is still a lack of a regional political body that can provide guidance to local PDFs and enable regional administrators to implement responsive and inclusive governance practices and

policies.

## **The birth of the Sagaing Forum**

After more than six months of dedicated deliberation, local community groups have come together in a series of bi-weekly Zoom and in-person meetings, totaling almost 20 gatherings. Their purpose has been to navigate through the political storms and remain resolute in their pursuit of establishing a political platform that fosters common ground and shared goals. These deliberations have involved representatives from over 25 out of the 37 townships, making it a comprehensive and inclusive process. Some township administrators directly appointed by the NUG have also attended the Forum. Interestingly, the name “Sagaing Forum” itself was coined by the participating groups.

The Forum’s leadership comprises a diverse range of individuals, including Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) teachers, campaigners, and local PDFs, who demonstrate a remarkable level of resilience, perseverance, and adeptness in navigating the complexities and obstacles that arise during discussions and message management.

As an observer, I have had the privilege of occasionally attending these meetings, including the groups’ informal discussions with the NUG and Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), exploring the group’s aspirations and envisioning their future path. They have had meaningful discussions, though the NUG and CRPH were not well informed enough in advance. It is worth noting that although invited, the Committee Representing Sagaing Hluttaw (CRSH), as a regional people’s elected body, was unable to participate due to their ongoing activities related to “important matters” surrounding politics, administration, defense, and humanitarian aid with the NUG, and they kindly requested an excuse. Though some NLD Sagaing representatives elected in the 2020 election attended individually, I wondered if the Forum (held May 30-31 for the first time) representing local stakeholders from more than 28 townships was not “important” enough for the CRSH to spend time with?

## **Bottom-up approach**

Amid the current chaotic circumstances, the emergence of the Sagaing Forum brings a ray of hope. It represents a fresh and bottom-up approach to addressing the challenges faced by the region. Instead of relying on conventional methods, the Forum aims to foster collaboration, dialogue, and inclusive decision-making processes. Its ultimate objective is to establish a federal unit, advocating the NUG, CRPH and CRSH to be inclusive and responsive, steering away from divisive approaches. The Forum’s efforts are essential in creating a positive path forward for Sagaing, offering a glimpse of optimism amidst the prevailing challenges.

Among political approaches, the Sagaing Forum could stand out as a zero-to-one innovation in a Buddhist Bamar-dominated region. It signifies a departure from the conventional top-down models and embraces a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the voices and needs of the local communities. By doing so, the Forum recognizes the importance of empowering those directly affected by the crisis and involving them in shaping their own future.

In the face of immense challenges and suffering endured by the people of Sagaing, the Sagaing Forum emerges as a beacon of hope, offering a pathway towards a brighter future. Its bottom-up approach, centered on inclusivity, local empowerment, and collaborative decision-making, signifies a profound shift in political engagement. By prioritizing the immediate needs of affected communities

and striving for sustainable solutions, the Sagaing Forum lays the groundwork for a more reconciled and resilient Sagaing Region. As we reflect on the transformative power of changing political dynamics, let us ponder the following questions: How can other regions draw inspiration from the Sagaing Forum? What lessons can we learn about the potential for inclusive approaches to shape a better future for the people of Myanmar? Additionally, we must consider whether the Sagaing Forum can propel the Spring Revolution to new heights, bringing about significant progress and positive change.

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- The Irrawaddy. 2 June 2023:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/can-the-sagaing-forum-take-myanmars-spring-revolution-to-the-next-level.html>
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