

# MYANMAR AFTER THE COUP

RESISTANCE, RESILIENCE,  
AND RE-INVENTION

edited by Giuseppe Gabusi & Raimondo Neironi



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**Myanmar After the Coup  
Resistance, Resilience, and Re-invention**

Editors: Giuseppe Gabusi & Raimondo Neironi

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# Foreword

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On 18 and 19 February 2022, one year after the military coup in Myanmar, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute hosted a hybrid international conference in partnership with the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin and with the support of the City of Turin and the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The conference, co-convened by Giuseppe Gabusi and Stefano Ruzza of the University of Turin, Nicholas Farrelly of the University of Tasmania, and Anja-Désirée Senz from Heidelberg University, was organized by Myanmar-Europe Research Network, which aims to promote mutual exchanges and build research capacities within the scholarly community for studies on Myanmar.

In this spirit and, in particular, to give “voice” to young scholars both in Europe and in Myanmar, the conference reflected on the political, social, and economic situation of the country under military rule. The coup had ended 10 years of the country’s political regime gradually and tentatively transforming into a semi-civilian, more inclusive, and less confrontational government but did not solve any of the major challenges the country faces going forward. The arrests of Aung San Suu Kyi and a large number of lawmakers from the National League for Democracy (combined with serious violations of human rights) have prompted resistance from all sectors of society, and Myanmar’s people have proved resilient in pursuing their ideals while muddling through their daily lives. It is also clear to anyone that – even in the case of a return to “disciplined democracy” with new elections in 2023 – the country’s entire institutional framework needs to be reinvented to avoid the fate of a North Korean-style “black hole” in one of the most thriving and economic successful regions of the world.

This book collects some of the papers that academics and practitioners alike presented at the conference. Although they deal with different topics (from the role of young people and social media in the protests to the state of the country’s education system to the situation in the borderlands, and from economic issues to the labor movement), they share common concerns about Myanmar’s future, address crucial issues, and sometimes offer suggestions for a possible way forward.

While its neighbors, despite many ups and downs and to different degrees, seem to be on a path toward modernization and prosperity, Myanmar is mired in political violence, economic insecurity, and social despair. At present, the international community is (rightly) focused on the devastating consequences of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and this book is a call not to forget the need of engaging Myanmar, its people, and its scholars to work toward a better future for us all.

In addition to the sponsors of the conference, this book has also been supported by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC – CRDI) and the Myanmar–Italy Chamber of Commerce (I.MY.B.C.). Our heartfelt thanks go to them too, as well as all the authors of the individual chapters: Without their supportive effort, this book would never have seen the light of day.

Turin, November 2022

*Giuseppe Gabusi & Raimondo Neironi*

## List of contributors

**Aung Kyaw Min** obtained a diploma in Computer Science in 2015. In 2018, he earned a BA from Yangon University of Foreign Languages, with a specialization on Japanese. His primary interests were political science and international relations. For this reason, he studied for a postgraduate diploma in Political Science at Yangon University in 2019. As he has decided to focus his study on South-East Asia, he is currently studying for a MA in South-East Asia Studies at Chulalongkorn University.

**Cecilia Brighi** is Italia-Birmania.Insieme Secretary General. She has been working with Myanmar democratic and labor representatives. She was also former CISL International Department's and ILO Governing Body's member. She took part in several WTO summits. She chaired the ICFTU (now ITUC) Health, Safety and Environment Committee, and negotiated ILO Conventions. She was the Worker Chair of the ILO Committee on Sustainable Enterprise Resolution (2007). She published several articles and books: *Aung San Suu Kyi challenges* (Eurilink, 2016); *Il pavone e i generali. Birmania: dalla dittatura alla rinascita* (Baldini Castoldi, 2015); *L'imperatore e l'elettricista. Il sogno di Dongfang, Tienanmen e i giorni del coraggio* (Baldini Castoldi, 2011).

**Francesco Buscemi** is postdoctoral researcher at the Department of History and Cultures, Geography Section, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna. His research focuses on the role of political violence, rebel movements, weapons, and control of the means of violence in conflict and political (dis)orders transformations. In the last years he has been working mostly on Myanmar's borderlands and frontiers. He holds a PhD in International Relations from Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies where is part of the Emerging Research on International Security (ERIS) research group. He is also affiliated with the School on Peace and Conflict at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), the Einaudi Foundation and the T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute in Turin.

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**Manabu Fujimura** is Professor at College of Economics, Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo. His research focuses mainly on development and international economics. He co-authored several publications on poverty and transport infrastructure. Fujimura also has extensive professional experience, having worked as an economist at the Asian Development Bank and the Japan External Trade Organization. Previous to teaching at Aoyama, he did research at the East-West

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**Giuseppe Gabusi** is Assistant Professor of International Political Economy and Political Economy of East Asia at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, University of Turin. He is among the co-founders of T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute, where he heads the “Asia Prospects” program and edits *RISE – Relazioni Internazionali e International Political Economy del Sud-Est asiatico*, the only quarterly open access journal in Italy on contemporary South-East Asia. His contributions to Myanmar studies include: (co-authored) “Authoritarian Resilience through Top-Down Transformation: Making Sense of Myanmar’s Incomplete Transition,” [*Italian Political Science Review* , 49(2): 193–209, 2019].

**Kaung Sett Wai** is a research enthusiast with strong interest in international relations, political theory, and philosophy. In 2013, he obtained a BA in International Relations at the University of Yangon. After graduating in 2017, he continued his studies for a master degree in Yangon where he worked as a part time tutor in the Department of International Relations until February 2021.

**Khaing Zar Aung** is President of the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFMM). In 2000 she started working in a garment factory. After moving to Thailand, she joined the union and in 2012 she was authorized to return to Myanmar to officially work as trade unionist organizing and educating workers on labor rights, freedom of association and industrial relations, including collective bargaining. As part of the Myanmar Labor Association, she is still committed to work on obtaining generalized sanctions, EBA suspension and brands responsible withdrawal from Myanmar.

**Andrew Laitha** is a PhD candidate at ETH Zürich, conducting research on the intersection of agricultural sector, rural transformation, and sustainable development, focusing on labor. Until the coup in 2021, Laitha worked with Prof. Sean Turnell at Myanmar Development Institute and International Food Policy Research Institute. Before that, he worked with UNHCR Malaysia, and volunteered for Burmese America Community Institute (BACI) in Indianapolis. Laitha received a MSc in International Development and Agricultural Economics from the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague and a BCom from the University of Delhi.

**Min Thang** obtained a B.Th. (2008-2012) and a B.D. (2013-2015) in Religious Studies at the Senate of Serampore University in India. He also earned a Th.M. (2017-2019) in Religious Studies at the Myanmar Institute of Theology in 2019. He wrote his Th.M. thesis on the concept of peace and its significance for establishing religious harmony in Myanmar. He was selected for the International Student Exchange Program at the Stockholm School of Theology in 2018. He served as lecturer in Shan State Baptist Theological Seminary (2019–2021). He currently works as Research Fellow at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. He is a freelance researcher and has published several articles in English mostly on ethnicity, religion, and politics of Myanmar.

**Min Zar Ni Lin** is a team leader of the Efficient and Sustainable Apparel Myanmar (ESAM) project of the University of Southern Denmark (SDU), a research project focuses on supply chain management, productivity, occupational safety and health, and leadership and employees' voice behavior. He is also a doctoral student in the Global Sustainable Production section of SDU. Prior to that, he had worked as a Deputy Director of Research for the Center for Economic and Social Development (CESD), Myanmar and as a Deputy National Coordinator for Myanmar Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (MEITI).

**Raimondo Neironi** is Research Fellow at the "Asia Prospects" program, T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute, where he coordinates the publication process of *RISE – Relazioni Internazionali e International Political Economy del Sud-Est asiatico*, the only quarterly open access journal in Italy on contemporary South-East Asia. He is also Adjunct Professor in History of Japan at the Department of Humanities, University of Turin, and in History of East Asia at the Department of Languages, Literature and Modern Culture, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna.

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**Manoj Potapohn** is an economist at Chiang Mai University, Thailand. He got into animal movement and disease control research in early 2010s when he was a deputy director of CMU EcoHealth-One Health Resources Center, a trans-disciplinary unit funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and supported by USAID. After being awarded a PhD in Agricultural and Resource Economics from University of Hawai'i at Manoa, Manoj had a stint in journalism, a development bank, and an NGO. He was a researcher affiliated to Competing Regional Integrations in South-East Asia (CRISEA) and Integration in South-East Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion (SEATIDE), EU-funded research projects, and used to teach CMU programs at Yangon University of Economics and National University of Laos.

**Licia Proserpio** is Adjunct Professor and Research Manager at the Department of History and Culture, Alma Mater Studiorum – University of Bologna.

She has an interdisciplinary background in social sciences with a focus on anthropology, education, development, and civil society. Her PhD thesis discussed how state authority, student movements and international actors shaped higher education in Myanmar.

**Megan Ryan** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Michigan and was a 2020 United States Institute of Peace Scholar. She studies democratization in military regimes and contentious politics with a focus on Myanmar.

**Maria Elena Sassaroli** holds a double MA in International Relations at the University of Turin and Beijing Foreign Studies University, and a BA in Chinese Language and Culture at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. After living in China as an exchange student in Suzhou and Chengdu, she worked as an intern at the Italian Consulate in Adelaide. She has been cooperating with international youth organizations such as European Guanxi, Equipo Europa, and the Young Indo-Pacific Forum. She currently lives and works in Brussels for an international masters network.

**Mai Van Tran** is a postdoctoral researcher at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) and at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen. Her research focuses on contentious politics and digital cultures under authoritarianism in Myanmar and beyond.

**Terdsak Yano** is Assistant Professor at the Department of Food Animal Clinics, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. He earned a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) and a MSc from Chiang Mai University in 2004 and 2010, respectively. He also got a diploma at the Thai Board of Veterinary Public Health. His major responsibilities are teaching and research in swine clinic. His interests are swine practice, participatory epidemiology, foot and mouth disease, and Geographic Information System in veterinary sciences.

**Yaw Bawm Mangshang** is a Yangon-based independent researcher and political analyst and an occasional contributor to local news outlets (e.g., *The Irrawaddy*, *The Myitkyina Journal*, *7Days*, *Frontier Myanmar*, *Church Magazines*) and Myanmar-focused forums like *The Tea Circle Oxford* and *New Mandala*.

# List of abstracts in Burmese language

## Kaung Sett Wai The competing hands behind Myanmar's 2021 democratic movement

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ၂၀၂၁ ဒီမိုကရက်တစ် လှုပ်ရှားမှုနောက်ကွယ်တွင် ပြိုင်ဆိုင်နေသော လက်များ။

၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၁ရက်နေ့တွင် တပ်မတော်က ၂၀၂၀ ရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် အနိုင်ရခဲ့သော NLD ပါတီအား အစိုးရ မဖွဲ့ဘဲ အာဏာသိမ်းခဲ့သည်။ တစ်ပတ်အကြာ ရှုပ်ထွေးမှုများနှင့် မသေချာမရေရာမှုများ အပြီးတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှ ပြည်သူများသည် စစ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှုအပေါ် မကျေနပ်မှုများကို လမ်းပေါ်ထွက်၍ ငြိမ်းချမ်းစွာ ဆန္ဒပြခြင်းနှင့် အာဏာဖိဆန်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုများဖြင့် နိုင်ငံလုံးဆိုင်ရာ လှုပ်ရှားမှုများကို ပြသခဲ့ကြသည်။ ထိုလှုပ်ရှားမှုသည် နိုင်ငံတစ်ဝှမ်း ပျံ့နှံ့သွားပြီး တပ်မတော်အစိုးရ၏ ဗျူရိုကရေစီစနစ်၏ ကဏ္ဍတိုင်းတွင် ကြီးမားသော ရပ်ဆိုင်းမှုများ ဖြစ်ပေါ်ခဲ့သည်။ သို့သော်လည်း ခေါင်းဆောင်များသည် 'ဒီမိုကရေစီအသွင်ကူးပြောင်းရေး' အတွက် မူလတိုက်ပွဲမှ မတူကွဲပြားသော ပန်းတိုင်များကို လိုက်ခဲ့ကြသဖြင့် ဤအကြမ်းမဖက်လှုပ်ရှားမှုသည် လက်နက်ကိုင်တော်လှန်မှုဆီသို့ တဖြည်းဖြည်း ကူးပြောင်းသွားခဲ့သည်။ ဤစာတမ်းတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဒီမိုကရေစီတိုက်ပွဲ၏ ရှုပ်ထွေးသောသဘောသဘာဝသည် အများပြောနေကြသကဲ့သို့ ထိန်းချုပ်မှုမဲ့သည့် လုပ်ငန်းစဉ်မဟုတ်ပဲ လှုပ်ရှားမှု၏နည်းလမ်းနှင့် ပန်းတိုင်များကို အပြိုင်အဆိုင်ပုံဖော်ရန် ကြိုးပမ်းသည့် အင်အားစုအသီးသီး၏ တွန်းအားဖြင့်မောင်းနှင်နေသည်ဟု စာတမ်းတွင် ဖော်ပြထားပါသည်။ လွှမ်းမိုးကြီးစိုးသော အဓိကနေရာအတွက် ကာလအတန်ကြာ အပြိုင်အဆိုင် ယှဉ်ပြိုင်ပြီးနောက် လက်ရှိ ခေါင်းဆောင်များသည် လက်နက်ကိုင် တော်လှန်ရေး လမ်းကြောင်းပေါ်တွင် လှုပ်ရှားမှုများကို လုပ်ဆောင်ခဲ့ကြသည်။ ဤသို့ဖြင့် သဘောထားကွဲလွဲသော အုပ်စုများသည် လှုပ်ရှားမှုမှ ဖယ်ထုတ်ခြင်းခံခဲ့ရသည်။ ဤဆောင်းပါးသည် အာဏာဖိဆန်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုကို မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဒီမိုကရေစီ တော်လှန်ရေး၏ အဓိက မောင်းနှင်အားအဖြစ်ယူဆထားပြီး၊ ဒီမိုကရေစီ လှုပ်ရှားမှု၏ အဓိက အပြောင်းအလဲ သုံးခုကို ထောက်ပြထားပါသည်။ အဆိုပါ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်းမှု၏ အဓိကပုံစံများကို ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာခြင်းဖြင့် အကြမ်းမဖက်သောလမ်းကြောင်းသည် အဘယ်ကြောင့် ကျဆုံးခဲ့ရကြောင်းနှင့် အနာဂတ်တွင် မြန်မာ့ဒီမိုကရေစီရေးအတွက် မျှော်လင့်ရမည့်အရာများကို ရှင်းပြထားသည်။

## Min Thang Unrest in Myanmar after the coup of 2021

၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ မငြိမ်သက်မှုများ

လွတ်လပ်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု အစောဆုံး ကာလကတည်းက တပ်မတော် (မြန်မာ့တပ်မတော်)သည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရေးတွင် အရေးပါသော အခန်းကဏ္ဍမှာ ပါဝင်ခဲ့သည်။ လွတ်လပ်ရေးမရမီက တပ်မတော်၏ အဓိက အခန်းကဏ္ဍမှာ တိုင်းတပါးသားတို့၏ လွှမ်းမိုးချုပ်ကိုင်မှုမှ တိုင်းပြည်ကို လွတ်မြောက်စေရန် ဖြစ်ပြီး၊ အထူးသဖြင့် ဗြိတိသျှနှင့် ဂျပန်တို့၏ လွှမ်းမိုးချုပ်ကိုင်မှုများမှ လွတ်မြောက်ရန်ဖြစ်သည်။ ယခင်က ဗြိတိသျှတို့ အုပ်ချုပ်မှုအောက်တွင် ရှိခဲ့ပြီး ၁၉၄၈ ခုနှစ်တွင် လွတ်လပ်ရေးရရှိခဲ့သည်။ ၁၉၅၈ ခုနှစ်တွင် စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေး စတင်ခဲ့သည်။ ထို့နောက် တိုက်ရိုက် စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးသည် ၁၉၆၂ခုနှစ် ဦးနေဝင်း အာဏာသိမ်းခဲ့ချိန်မှ စတင်ခဲ့ပြီး ၁၉၈၈ခုနှစ်တွင် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး သန်းရွှေနှင့် ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ်တွင် ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး မင်းအောင်လှိုင်တို့က တိုက်ရိုက် အုပ်ချုပ်ခဲ့သည်။ စစ်တပ်မှအစိုးရအပေါ် ချုပ်ကိုင်ခြင်းသည် မြန်မာပြည်သူများအတွက် ထူးဆန်းသည့်အရာ မဟုတ်တော့ပေ။ ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ၁ရက်နေ့တွင် စစ်တပ်က အာဏာသိမ်းရခြင်းမှာ ၂၀၂၀ ခုနှစ် အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် လိမ်လည်လှည့်ဖြားမှုကို တိုက်ဖျက်ရန် ဖြစ်သည်ဟု အကြောင်းပြခဲ့သည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီး နောက်ပိုင်းရက်များတွင် နိုင်ငံတဝှမ်းမှပြည်သူများသည် နည်းမျိုးစုံနှင့် ဆန္ဒထုတ်ဖော်ခဲ့ကြသည်။ အကြမ်းမဖက်သော ဆန္ဒပြပွဲများတွင် လူပေါင်းရာထောင်ချီ ပါဝင်ခဲ့ကြပြီး ဆန္ဒပြသူများကို စစ်တပ်နှင့် ရဲများက အင်အားသုံး၍ အကြမ်းဖက်ဖြိုခွင်းခဲ့သည်။ တုန့်ပြန်မှုအနေဖြင့် လူငယ်များသည် စစ်တပ်ကို တွန်းလှန်ရန် လက်လုပ်သေနတ်များ (မြန်မာလိုတူမီး)ကို အသုံးပြုလာကြသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းသည် ၁၉၆၂၊ ၁၉၈၈ နှင့် ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကို ပိုင်းခြားစိတ်ဖြာပြီး၊ လတ်တလော အာဏာသိမ်းမှု၏ သက်ရောက်မှုများနှင့် စိန်ခေါ်မှုများကို စီးမောင်းထိုးပြထားသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၌ COVID-19 ကပ်ရောဂါ ဖြစ်ပွားနေချိန်အတွင်း နိုင်ငံအတွင်းရှိ လူငယ်များကြုံတွေ့နေရသော စိန်ခေါ်မှုများနှင့် တပ်မတော်အပေါ်ခွံမှုတို့ကိုလည်း လေ့လာထားပါသည်။ နိဂုံးအပိုင်းတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၌ လက်ရှိဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသော အာဏာရှင်စနစ်အပေါ် ပြည်တွင်းနှင့် နိုင်ငံတကာ၏ တုံ့ပြန်မှုများကို ဆန်းစစ်သွားမည်ဖြစ်သည်။

### **Megan Ryan & Mai Van Tran Pro-democracy struggle in the age of social media: Evolution of military and resistance strategies in post-coup Myanmar**

ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာခေတ်တွင် ဒီမိုကရေစီလိုလားသော ရုန်းကန်မှု- အာဏာသိမ်းပြီး မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် စစ်ဘက်နှင့် ခုခံတော်လှန်ရေး အုပ်စုများ၏ ဗျူဟာများ ဆင့်ကဲပြောင်းလဲခြင်း။

ယခုလက်ရှိ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် တစ်နိုင်ငံလုံး တော်လှန်မှု ကာလတွင် စစ်တပ်နှင့် အာဏာသိမ်းမှု ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး အင်အားစု နှစ်ခုစလုံးသည် ၎င်းတို့၏ ပြိုင်ဘက်များကို သိက္ခာချရန်နှင့် ၎င်းတို့၏ လုပ်ရပ်များအတွက် ကျယ်ကျယ်ပြန့်ပြန့် ထောက်ခံမှု ရရှိရန် သမားရိုးကျနှင့် ဒစ်ဂျစ်တယ် ဗျူဟာများကို ခိုခိအားထားခဲ့ကြသည်။ ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာ ပလက်ဖောင်းများသည် ဒီမိုကရေစီလိုလားသူများ၏ တောင်းဆိုမှုများကို မည်မျှလွယ်ကူချောမွေ့စေပြီး လူကြိုက်များစေရန်အတွက် မည်သည့်အတိုင်းအတာအထိ ပံ့ပိုးလုပ်ဆောင်ပေးသနည်း။ ထို့အပြင် စစ်တပ်လိုလားသော အဖွဲ့နှင့် စစ်တပ်ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး အင်အားစုများသည် ၎င်းတို့၏ဗျူဟာများအား အချိန်နှင့်အမျှမည်ကဲ့သို့ ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲ နေကြပါသနည်း။ ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် မတ်လမှ မေလအတွင်း ထုတ်ဝေခဲ့သော Facebook ပို့စ်ပေါင်း ၅၂၀၀ နှင့် စစ်တပ်၏ သတင်းစာဆောင်းပါး ၇၀၈ခု၏ မူရင်းဒေတာအတွဲများကို အသုံးပြု၍ စာရင်းအင်းဆိုင်ရာ ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာမှုနှင့် အရည်အသွေးအခြေပြု အကြောင်းအရာ ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာမှုကို ပေါင်းစပ်ခြင်းဖြင့် ဤမေးခွန်းများကို ဖြေဆိုထားပါသည်။ စစ်တပ်မီဒီယာအား ရှင်းရှင်းလင်းလင်း ဖယ်ထုတ်ကြည့်လိုက်သောအခါတွင် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် Facebook ပို့စ်အများစုသည် စစ်တပ်ကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် သို့မဟုတ် ဘက်မလိုက်သော သတင်းများဖြစ်ကြောင်း တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ သို့သော်လည်း ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာတွင် စစ်ဘက်မီဒီယာ ဖော်ပြချက်များကို ခြုံငုံကြည့်သောအခါ ခုခံမှုဆိုင်ရာ အကြောင်းအရာများထက် အခြားအကြောင်းအရာများကိုသာ ပိုမိုဖော်ပြထားသည်ကို တွေ့ရသည်။ ၎င်းသည် အမှန်တကယ်ဖြစ်ပျက်နေမှုများမှ သွေဖီသွားစေရန် စစ်တပ်၏ထင်ရှားသည့် ကြိုးပမ်းမှုကို ထင်ဟပ်ပြသနေသည်။ မည်သို့ပင်ဆိုစေကာမူ မြေပြင်ရှိ တော်လှန်ရေးအင်အားစုများကို စစ်တပ်၏ ပြင်းထန်စွာ ဖိနှိပ်မှုသည် မြေပြင်ဆန့်ကျင်ကန့်ကွက်မှုများထက် အွန်လိုင်းမှ ဆန့်ကျင်တုံ့ပြန်မှုများကို တိုး၍ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေသည်။ နိဂုံးချုပ်အားဖြင့်၊ စစ်တပ်ဆန့်ကျင်ရေးလိုလားသော အကြောင်းအရာများသည် ပျမ်းမျှအားဖြင့် စစ်တပ်လိုလားသော အကြောင်းအရာများထက် သိသိသာသာ ပိုမိုမြင့်မားသော ထိတွေ့အသုံးပြုမှု နှင့် တုံ့ပြန်မှုကို ရရှိသော်လည်း၊ စစ်တပ်လိုလားသော အာဘော်များ နေရာယူလာချိန်တွင် တော်လှန်ရေးကို ထောက်ခံသော ပို့စ်များသည် တဖြည်းဖြည်း ကျဆင်းလာသည်ကို တွေ့ရှိရသည်။ ၎င်းသည် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုကို လိုလားသူနှင့် အာဏာသိမ်းဆန့်ကျင်ရေး အင်အားစုများကြား ပါဝါကွဲပြားမှုများအပြင် တိုး၍ဖြစ်လာသည့် ဒစ်ဂျစ်တယ်ဖိနှိပ်မှု ခြိမ်းခြောက်မှုများအပေါ် စစ်တပ်ဆန့်ကျင်သူများက လိုက်လျောညီထွေမှုရှိစွာ တုံ့ပြန်မှုတို့ကို သိသာထင်ရှားစေသည်။ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏စာတမ်းမှ တွေ့ရှိချက်များသည် နိုင်ငံတစ်ဝှမ်း အာဏာရှင်ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး ကြိုးပမ်းမှုများအပေါ် ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာ၏ ဆင့်ကဲပြောင်းလဲလာသော အသုံးချနိုင်မှုများနှင့် အကန့်အသတ်များက ကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏ နားလည်မှုကို ပိုမိုနက်ရှိုင်းစေပါသည်။

### **Cecilia Brighi & Khaing Zar Aung Economic and political challenges imposed on the Myanmar labor movement by the military junta**

မြန်မာစစ်အစိုးရ၏ အလုပ်သမားလှုပ်ရှားမှုအပေါ် ချမှတ်ခဲ့သော စီးပွားရေးနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးစိန်ခေါ်မှုများ

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီရက်နေ့ စစ်တပ်၏ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုနောက်တွင်ရှိ နိုင်ငံရေး နိုင်ငံရေးအကြောင်းပြချက်နှင့် နိုင်ငံတကာက တွန်းအားပေး ဆောင်ရွက်ပေးခဲ့သော လုပ်ဆောင်မှုများနှင့်ပတ်သက်သည့် အကျဉ်းချုပ်ဖော်ပြချက်အရ ဤစာတမ်းသည် အကျပ်အတည်း စတင်ပြီးနောက် ရက်သတ္တပတ်နှင့်လများအတွင်း နိုင်ငံ၏ အလုပ်သမားလှုပ်ရှားမှုအပေါ် သက်ရောက်ခဲ့သော စီးပွားရေးနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးစိန်ခေါ်မှု အများအပြားကို ပိုင်းခြားစိတ်ဖြာ ထားပါသည်။ ထို့အပြင် လိုအပ်သောနိုင်ငံတကာ လုပ်ထုံးလုပ်နည်း၊ ဥပဒေစံနှုန်း၊ ကျင့်ဝတ်များနှင့်အညီ လိုက်နာမှုရှိမရှိ ကြပ်မတ်စစ်ဆေးမှုကို အကောင်အထည်ဖော်ရန် မဖြစ်နိုင်သောကြောင့် နိုင်ငံတကာနှင့် EU အမှတ်တံဆိပ် ၁၀၀ကျော်ကို နိုင်ငံတွင်းမှထွက်ခွာရန် စည်းရုံးသိမ်းသွင်းခြင်း ဟူသောကျယ်ပြန့်သည့် နိုင်ငံတကာလှုပ်ရှားမှုကို စီးမောင်းထိုးပြထားသည်။ ထပ်မံ၍ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသို့ ရုရှားမှလောင်စာဆီ ပို့ဆောင်မှုကို တားဆီးရန် နိုင်ငံတော် အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကောင်စီမှ ထိန်းချုပ်ထားသော ဘဏ်များအပေါ် ဘဏ္ဍာရေး ပိတ်ဆို့ အရေးယူမှုများ အပါအဝင် အထွေထွေ ကုန်သွယ်မှု၊ ကန့်သတ်မှု အစီအမံများ အဆိုပြုခြင်းနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ စာတမ်းတွင် ဆွေးနွေး တင်ပြထားပါသည်။

### Francesco Buscemi Weapons and ethnonational geographies in the borderlands: The case of the Ta'ang rebel movements in Myanmar

နယ်စပ်ဒေသရှိ လက်နက်များနှင့် လူမျိုးစုအမျိုးသားရေးပထဝီ အနေအထား- မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ တအာင်းလက်နက်ကိုင် လှုပ်ရှားမှုအကြောင်း လေ့လာမှု

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် လူမျိုးစုအလိုက်အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒကို နိုင်ငံ၏ တစ်လျှောက်လုံးတွေ့ကြုံနေရသည့် အင်အားသုံးဖြေရှင်းမှုနှင့် လက်နက်ကိုင်ပဋိပက္ခများအတွက် ရှင်းလင်းချက်အဖြစ် မကြာခဏ အသုံးပြုခဲ့ကြသည်။ သို့ရာတွင် လူမျိုးစုအလိုက် လူမျိုးရေးဝါဒ၏ သဘောတရားကို နားလည်ရန်နှင့် ၎င်းကို ပြန်လည်ထုတ်ဖော်ရန် အရေးကြီးပါသည်။ ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုနောက်ပိုင်း လှုပ်ရှားမှုများကို ပိုမိုထင်ရှားစေရန် လက်တလောအဖြစ်အပျက်များ မတိုင်ခင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံနယ်စပ်ရှိ တအာင်း တော်လှန်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုဖြစ်စဉ်၏ အခြေအနေများကို တင်ပြထားပါသည်။ အထူးသဖြင့် ၂၀၀၃ခုနှစ်များ၏ ဒုတိယနှစ်ဝက်အတွင်း တအာင်းလက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့ ဖွဲ့စည်းခြင်း၊ လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း ပျံ့နှံ့သွားသည့် လက်နက်များ စုဆောင်းခြင်းနှင့် စစ်သားများကို အုပ်ချုပ်သည့် နိုင်ငံရေး ဆင်ခြင်တုံတရားများနှင့် နည်းစနစ်များဖြင့် ပုံဖော်ထားသည့် တော်လှန်ရေးအခြေပြုနိုင်ရေး ကို ဆန်းစစ်ထားပါသည်။ ကျယ်ပြန့်ပြီး နက်ရှိုင်းသော အရည်အသွေးအခြေပြု ကွင်းဆင်းလေ့လာမှုအရ လက်နက်ကိုင်လှုပ်ရှားမှုများသည် စုပေါင်း(လူမျိုးစု) ဝိသေသလက္ခဏာနှင့် ဆက်နွယ်သော လူမျိုးစုပထဝီနိုင်ငံရေး ဟောပြောချက်များနှင့် အလေ့အကျင့်များမှတစ်ဆင့် လက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့တစ်ဖွဲ့ဖွဲ့စည်းခြင်း လုပ်ငန်းစဉ်များကို ပိုမိုကျစ်လစ်စေခဲ့ကြောင်း ဖော်ပြထားပါသည်။

ဤသုံးသပ်ချက်ကို တအာင်းအမျိုးသားလွတ်မြောက်ရေး တပ်မတော်၏ စစ်တပ်စုံကို ဂရုပြုလေ့လာခြင်းဖြင့် သရုပ်ဖော်ထားသည်။ ယူနီဖောင်းသည် လက်နက်နှင့် လူများကြား ဆက်ဆံရေးကို ထိန်းချုပ်သည့် နည်းပညာဆိုင်ရာ အရာဝတ္ထုတစ်ခုအဖြစ် နားလည်ထားပြီး ၎င်း၏ဆက်စပ်ပထဝီနိုင်ငံရေးအနေအထားဖြင့် လူမျိုးစုအလိုက် တော်လှန်ရေးဝါဒကို ဆက်လက်ပေါ်ထွက်လာစေရန် ပံ့ပိုးပေးသည်။

### Maria Elena Sassaroli Drugs flow where the rivers meet: Myanmar's drug economy before and after the coup

မြစ်များဆုံရာနှင့် မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါးစီးဆင်းမှုများ- အာဏာသိမ်းမှုမတိုင်မီနှင့်နောက်ပိုင်း မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါးရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားမှု

လာအို၊ ထိုင်းနှင့် မြန်မာ နှစ်နိုင်ငံနယ်စပ်တွင် “မဲခေါင်” နှင့် “ရောက်” မြစ်နှစ်စင်းတို့ ဆုံမိရာ ကုန်းမြေသည် အလွန်မြေပြင်ဇာကောင်းသည်။

ရွှေကြိုကံဟု အမည်ပေးထားသည့် ဤနယ်မြေသည် ကမ္ဘာပေါ်တွင် ဘိန်းအများဆုံးထွက်ရှိသော ဒေသများထဲမှ တစ်ခုဖြစ်ပြီး အာရှအလယ်ပိုင်း ရွှေလခြမ်းပြီးလျှင် ဒုတိယဖြစ်သည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အထူးသဖြင့် ရှမ်းပြည်နယ် အရှေ့ပိုင်းသည် ရွှေကြိုကံဒေသ၏ အဓိက အချက်အချာနေရာဖြစ်ပြီး မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး ထုတ်လုပ်မှုနှင့် ကုန်သွယ်မှုသည် ၁၉၅၀ ခုနှစ်များကတည်းက နိုင်ငံစီးပွားရေး၏ အဓိကမောင်းနှင်အား အဖြစ်ရှိနေခဲ့သည်။ မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး ရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားမှုသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် နက်နက်ရှိုင်းရှိုင်း အမြစ်တွယ်နေသည့် ဖြစ်စဉ်တစ်ခုဖြစ်ပြီး ၂၀၀၀ ခုနှစ်များ၏ ပထမဆယ်စုနှစ် နှစ်ခုအတွင်း နိုင်ငံ၏ မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး စီးဆင်းမှုမှာ အနည်းငယ် ကျဆင်းသွားသော်လည်း အထူးသဖြင့် ဘိန်းထုတ်လုပ်မှုသည် စိတ်ကြွေးသွပ်ဆေး ဈေးကွက်ဖြင့် လျင်မြန်စွာ အစားထိုးလာသောကြောင့် ခြုံငုံကြည့်မည်ဆိုပါက ကိန်းဂဏန်းများမှာ မြင့်မားနေဆဲဖြစ်သည်။ ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် အစောပိုင်းတွင် စစ်တပ်က အာဏာသိမ်းမှု ဖြစ်ပွားပြီး ပြိုကွဲပျက်စီးလွယ်သော အခြေအနေမှာ ကပ်ရောဂါကြောင့် ပိုမို၍မတည်မငြိမ် ဖြစ်လာသည့်အတွက် မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး ရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားမှု အရှိန်အဟုန်မြင့်လာကြောင်း သုတေသီများက သတိပေးထားသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး ရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားမှု ဆင့်ကဲဖြစ်စဉ်၏ ယေဘုယျအကျဉ်းချုပ်ကို ဖော်ပြပြီး အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်တွင် အဆိုပါဖြစ်စဉ်၏ နယ်ပယ်အကျယ်အဝန်းနှင့် သဘောသဘာဝပြောင်းလဲမှုကို ဆန်းစစ်ထားပါသည်။ လက်တလောဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသော လူမှုရေး၊ နိုင်ငံရေး အပြောင်းအလဲများသည် ရှိရင်းစွဲ အခြေအနေများအပေါ် ပိုမိုဆိုးရွားစေခြင်း သို့မဟုတ် အားနည်းသွားခြင်း ဖြစ်စေပါသလား၊ ဘယ်လိုဖြစ်နေပါသလဲ? ဤမေးခွန်းအားဖြေဆိုရန် နိုင်ငံတကာ သတင်းစာများအား သုံးသပ်၍ သတင်းစာ ဆောင်းပါးများ၏ ဤအကြောင်းအရာနှင့်ပတ်သက်သည့် ဖော်ပြချက်များကို ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာကြည့်ကြပါစို့။

ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာရန် ချဉ်းကပ်သည့် ပင်မရင်းမြစ်များမှာ အိမ်နီးချင်း တရုတ်နိုင်ငံနှင့် ထိုင်းနိုင်ငံ၏ သတင်းစာများဖြစ်ပါသည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်ပိုင်း အွန်လိုင်းသတင်းအရင်းမြစ်များမှ သတင်းရယူရန် ခက်ခဲခြင်းကြောင့် မြန်မာ့စီဒီယာများကို ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာမည်မဟုတ်ပါ။

**Licia Proserpio & Antonio Fiori**  
**Myanmar universities in the post-coup era:**  
**The clash between old and new**  
**visions of higher education**

အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်ပိုင်းကာလ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတက္ကသိုလ်များ- အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရေး၏ မျှော်မှန်းချက်အဟောင်းနှင့် အသစ်များကြား ထိပ်တိုက်တွေ့မှု။

၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ ၁ ရက်နေ့ စစ်တပ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှုအပြီးတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ တက္ကသိုလ်များသည် အမျိုးမျိုးသော ပဋိပက္ခများရောနှောရပ်ထွေးရာ နေရာများ ဖြစ်လာခဲ့သည်။ မက်ခရိုအဆင့်တွင် စစ်တပ်သည် ရှေ့တန်းမှ ဆရာများနှင့် ကျောင်းသားများ၏ ကြီးမားသောဆန္ဒပြမှုများကို တနိုင်လုံးအတိုင်းအတာဖြင့် ရင်ဆိုင်ခဲ့ရသည်။ တက္ကသိုလ်ဝန်ထမ်းများကို အစုလိုက်အပြုံလိုက် ပစ်ခတ်ခြင်း၊ ကျောင်းသား တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများကို ထောင်သွင်းအကျဉ်းချခင်းနှင့် ဆယ်စုနှစ်တစ်ခုကျော်ကြာ လုပ်ဆောင်ခဲ့သော အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရေး ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများကို ရပ်တန့်ခြင်း အပါအဝင် ပြင်းထန်သော ဖိနှိပ်ရက်စက်ခြင်းများနှင့် လူမှုရေးထိန်းချုပ်မှုစနစ်များကို ဖော်ပြပါ အထူးထူးအပြားပြားသော ဆန့်ကျင်သူများက ကြုံတွေ့ခံစားခဲ့ရသည်။ ယခုအခါ နိုင်ငံတော် အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကောင်စီ (SAC)သည် ခေတ်ဟောင်းနှင့် ဖိနှိပ်ချုပ်ချယ်ထားသော တပ်မတော်၏ မူဝါဒများနှင့် ဗျူဟာများကို ပုံတူကူးထားသည့် အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရေးဆိုင်ရာ အမျိုးသားအဆင့် မျှော်မှန်းချက်အမြင်ဖြင့် လျင်မြန်စွာ ရှေ့သို့တိုးလာနေပြီဖြစ်သည်။ သဘောထားကွဲပြားမှု၏ တစ်ဖက်တွင် အာဏာဖီဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) နှင့် အခြားသော လူမှုရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုများတွင် ပါဝင်သူများသည် ပညာရေးစနစ်သစ်ကို ဖက်ဒရယ်နှင့် တရားမျှတသော လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းဆီသို့ ဦးတည်သော အယူအဆ၌ အမြစ်တွယ်သော အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရေးစနစ်ကို ပြန်လည် စိတ်ကူးကြည့်နေကြသည်။ မိဆီအဆင့်တွင် မတူညီသော တက္ကသိုလ်အဖွဲ့အစည်းများအတွင်းရှိ ပညာရေးဝန်ထမ်းများသည် ရာထူးများကို ထိန်းသိမ်းထားသူများ၊ ယခု စစ်ဘက်ပညာပေးမှုတောင်အသစ်တွင် (သူတို့၏ပညာရပ်နယ်ပယ်နှင့် သူတို့၏ကျောင်းသား/သူများ ကိုထောက်ထားပြီး) ဆက်လက်အလုပ်လုပ်နေကြသူများ၊ ရာထူးများကိုစွန့်ခွာသွားသူများ သို့မဟုတ် ၎င်းတို့၏ အလုပ်အကိုင်များကို ကြီးကြီးမားမား ကိုယ်ရေးကိုယ်တာပေးဆပ်ရမှုများဖြင့် စွန့်ပယ်ခဲ့ကြသူများ စသည်ဖြင့် ဆန့်ကျင်ဘက် နှင့် ပေါင်းစပ်ရန် မဖြစ်နိုင်သောသူများအဖြစ် ရှေ့တန်းမျက်နှာစာများတွင် ကွဲပြားစွာရှိနေကြပါသည်။ မိုက်ခရိုအဆင့်တွင် စစ်တပ်၏ ယခုအာဏာသိမ်းမှုသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုမတိုင်မီ ဆယ်စုနှစ်များအတွင်း မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ အသွင်ပြောင်းရေးတွင် အဓိကအခန်းကဏ္ဍမှ ပါဝင်ခဲ့သည့် အထက်တန်းပညာရေးဝန်ထမ်းများနှင့် ကျောင်းသားများအား လျော့တွက်ထားခဲ့မိသည်။ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့၏ ဆောင်းပါးသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအပေါ် အာဏာသိမ်းမှု၏ အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုကို အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာရေးကဏ္ဍကို ကြည့်ခြင်းဖြင့် ထိုးထွင်းသိမြင်စေပါသည်။ ယခုအကျပ်အတည်းကာလတွင် ကျောင်းသားများနှင့် တက္ကသိုလ်ဝန်ထမ်းများအား အွန်လိုင်းအင်တာဗျူးများမှတစ်ဆင့် စုဆောင်းရရှိထားသော အရည်အသွေးအခြေပြု အချက်အလက်များကို အခြေခံပြီး နိုင်ငံ၏သမိုင်းနှင့် ၎င်း၏ပညာရေးစနစ်အတွက် စိန်ခေါ်မှုအများဆုံးသော ကာလကို ခွဲခြမ်းစိတ်ဖြာ သုံးသပ်ထားသည်။

**Yaw Bawm Mangshang**  
**Mother tongue-based multilingual education:**  
**A vehicle for building Myanmar into**  
**an equal and fair federal democratic union**

မိခင်ဘာသာစကားအခြေပြု ဘာသာစကားစုံပညာရေး - မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို ခွင့်တူညီမျှ၍ မျှတသော ဖက်ဒရယ်ပြည်ထောင်စုအဖြစ် တည်ဆောက်နိုင်ရန် မောင်းနှင်အား။

ဤစာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် အရပ်သားအစိုးရအမည်ခံမှ ၂၀၁၁ ခုနှစ်တွင် စတင်ခဲ့သော ပညာရေးဆိုင်ရာ ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများကို ပြန်လည်သုံးသပ်ထားပါသည်။ ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများသည် တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုး အားလုံးအတွက် မိခင်ဘာသာစကား အခြေခံ ဘာသာစကားစုံ ပညာရေး (MTB-MLE)ကို အကောင်အထည်ဖော်ရန် လမ်းခင်းထားခြင်းရှိမရှိ အထူးဆန်းစစ်ထားပါသည်။ အစိုးရမူလတန်းကျောင်းများတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသား ဘာသာစကားများကို သင်ကြားခွင့်ပြုသော်လည်း MTB-MLEသည် ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများတွင် တိုင်းရင်းသား လူမျိုးအားလုံးကို ခွင့်ပြုရန် ပျက်ကွက်ခဲ့ကြောင်း စာတမ်းတွင် ဖော်ပြထားသည်။ တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးအားလုံးအတွက် MTB-MLE သည် အားလုံးပါဝင်နိုင်သော MTB-MLE ကို ပံ့ပိုးထိန်းသိမ်းရန် အရေးကြီးကြောင်း အဆိုဖြင့် နိဂုံးချုပ်ပြီး ထိုသို့လုပ်ဆောင်ခြင်းဖြင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို တန်းတူညီမျှ၍ တရားမျှတသော ဖက်ဒရယ်ဒီမိုကရေစီ ပြည်ထောင်စုအဖြစ် တည်ဆောက်နိုင်မည်ဖြစ်သည်။

### Samu Ngwenya-Tshuma & Min Zar Ni Lin

## The impact of the double crisis on the garment sector in Myanmar

### မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ အထည်ချုပ်ကဏ္ဍအပေါ် နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းအကျပ်အတည်း၏ သက်ရောက်မှု

၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ ၁ ရက်နေ့က စစ်တပ်၏ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုသည် COVID-19 ကပ်ရောဂါ၏ သက်ရောက်မှုများကြောင့် တုံ့နှေးရပ်ဆိုင်းနေပြီဖြစ်သော စီးပွားရေးအား ထပ်မံရိုက်ခတ်ခဲ့သည်။ နိုင်ငံအတွင်း စီးပွားရေးနှင့် ပတ်သက်သော ပြင်းထန်သည့် ရိုက်ခတ်မှုကိုဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့သည်။ မှတ်ကျောက်တင်နိုင်မည့် တိုးတက်မှုများအတွက် ယခင်က ကြိုတင်ပြင်ဆင်ထားသော်လည်း ယခုအခါ မြန်မာ့စီးပွားရေးသည် ကပ်ရောဂါနှင့် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုကြောင့် နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းအကျပ်အတည်းနှင့် ရင်ဆိုင်နေရသည်။ ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် စက်တင်ဘာလတွင် မြန်မာ့အထည်ချုပ်လုပ်ငန်း တင်ပို့မှုမှာ ၃၀ ရာခိုင်နှုန်းခန့် အထိ ကျဆင်းခဲ့ပြီး ဥရောပသမဂ္ဂသို့ တင်ပို့မှုတွင်လည်း အများဆုံးကျဆင်းခဲ့သည်။ အကြီးမားဆုံး ဈေးကွက်တစ်ခုဖြစ်သော အီးယူသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံနှင့် စီးပွားရေးလုပ်ငန်းများ ဆက်လက်လုပ်ဆောင်ရန် သင့်၊မသင့် နှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ ဒွိဟများ ဖြစ်ပေါ်နေလျက်ရှိသည်။ ပို့ကုန်ဦးတည်သည့် အထည်ချုပ်ကဏ္ဍ၏ နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းအကျပ်အတည်းသည် နိုင်ငံ၏ အလုံးစုံစက်မှုဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်မှုတွင် အခြေခံကျသော ဖြေရှင်းရမည့်အရာတစ်ခုဖြစ်သည်။ ဖော်ပြပါ အချက်အလက်များသည် အရည်အတွက်စံပြု စက်ရုံစစ်တမ်းများမှ ရရှိခြင်းဖြစ်သည်။ ထိုစက်ရုံစစ်တမ်းရှိ အချက်အလက်များသည် စက်ရုံအလုပ်သမားများ၏ သက်ဆိုင်ရာအုပ်စုအလိုက် ကိုယ်စားပြုသည့် ကျပန်းနမူနာကောက်ယူခြင်းနည်းပညာကို အသုံးပြုခြင်းနှင့် ရွေးချယ်ထားသော သက်ဆိုင်သူများနှင့်ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့သည့် အရည်အသွေးစံပြု အင်တာဗျူးများမှ ရရှိခဲ့ခြင်းဖြစ်ပါသည်။ ဤစာတမ်းသည် စစ်တပ်အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်ပိုင်းနှင့် COVID-19 တတိယလှိုင်း ရိုက်ခတ်ခြင်း ခံနေရသော အချိန်ကာလအတွင်း စက်ရုံများ၏ ထုတ်လုပ်မှုအဆင့်၊ အလုပ်ရက်များနှင့် အချိန်ပိုကာရံများ၊ လုပ်ခအသုံးစရိတ်နှင့် လုပ်သားအင်အားများနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် သိသာထင်ရှားသော ပြောင်းလဲမှုများကို စူးစမ်းလေ့လာထားခြင်းဖြစ်သည်။ စက်ရုံများသည် ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဇန်နဝါရီလမှ ဇွန်လအတွင်း အကြီးမားဆုံး ကျဆင်းမှုကို ရင်ဆိုင်ခဲ့ကြောင်း အစီရင်ခံတင်ပြခဲ့ကြပါသည်။ အကြီးစားစက်ရုံများနှင့် တရုတ်ပိုင် စက်ရုံများသည် ထုတ်လုပ်မှုလှိုင်း (-၂၀%) အထိကျဆင်းမှုကို ကြုံတွေ့ခဲ့ရပြီး အချို့စက်ရုံများသည် အချိန်ပိုအလုပ်ချိန် (-၆၄%) ကျဆင်းမှုကို ကြုံတွေ့ခဲ့ရသည်။ မြန်မာနှင့် ဖက်စပ်ပိုင်ဆိုင်သည့် စက်ရုံများသည် လုပ်ခလစာနှင့်ပတ်သက်သည့် အသုံးစရိတ် (-၄၅%) ကျဆင်းသွားခဲ့ပြီး အကြီးစားစက်ရုံများတွင်လည်း အသုံးစရိတ် (-၃၆%)အထိကျဆင်းသွားခဲ့သည်။ ထို့အပြင် အချို့သောစက်ရုံအလုပ်ရုံများသည် ၎င်းတို့၏ လုပ်သားအင်အား (-၂၄%) ကျဆင်းလာသည်ကို တွေ့ရှိခဲ့ရသည်။ ထိခိုက်မှုအရှိဆုံးစက်ရုံများနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ဖော်ပြရမည့် ဆိုပါက အသေးစားစက်ရုံများနှင့် တရုတ်ပိုင်စက်ရုံများသည် သိသာထင်ရှားသော အပြုသဘောဆောင်သည့် တိုးတက်မှုမရှိသောကြောင့် ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် ဇွန်လမှစတင်၍ ပြန်လည်ကောင်းမွန်သော အနေအထားသို့ရောက်ရှိရန် အများစုရန်ကန်နေရကြပါသည်။ နိုင်ငံရေး မတည်မငြိမ်ဖြစ်မှု၊ ဘဏ်များမှ ငွေထုတ်ယူမှုကို ကန့်သတ်ခြင်းနှင့် အမှာစာများ မသေချာမရေရာမှုများကြောင့် စက်ရုံလုပ်ငန်းလည်ပတ်မှုကို အနုတ်သဘောဆောင်သည့် သက်ရောက်မှုရှိကြောင်း ဖြေဆိုသူအများစုက ထောက်ပြကြသည်။ အထည်ချုပ်ကဏ္ဍတွင် အပြုသဘောဆောင်သော အကြောင်းပြချက်အချို့ကို တွေ့ရသော်လည်း အများစုမှာ စိုးရိမ်စရာ မသေချာမရေရာမှုများကို ဆက်လက်ရင်ဆိုင်နေရဆဲဖြစ်ပါသည်။

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Myanmar's experiment with trade in live cattle  
with China: Breakthrough, collapse and resurgence?**

တရုတ်နိုင်ငံနှင့် ကျွဲနွားများ ရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားရာတွင် မြန်မာ၏ စမ်းသပ်လုပ်ဆောင်မှု- အောင်မြင်မှု၊ ဆုံးရှုံးမှု နှင့် ပြန်လည်ရှင်သန်နိုင်မှု။

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသည် တရုတ်နိုင်ငံ ယူနန်ပြည်နယ် အပါအဝင် မဟာမဲခေါင်ဒေသခွဲရှိ နိုင်ငံများသို့ ကျွဲနွားအရှင်များ ထောက်ပံ့ နေသည်မှာ ကြာမြင့်နေပြီဖြစ်ပြီး လူတစ်ဦးချင်းစီ၏ ပင်မဝင်ငွေမှာ စဉ်ဆက်မပြတ် တိုးမြှင့်လာသော်လည်း စားကျက်မြေ များမှာ ရှားပါးလာပါသည်။ လအနည်းငယ်ကြာ မွေးမြူပြီးနောက် မြန်မာ့နွားအချို့ကို ထိုင်းနှင့် လာအိုမှတစ်ဆင့် တရုတ် နိုင်ငံသို့ ပြန်လည်တင်ပို့ခဲ့သော်လည်း မကြာသေးမီနှစ်များအတွင်း လမ်းပန်းဆက်သွယ်ရေး တိုးတက်ကောင်းမွန်လာခြင်း ကြောင့် စိုက်ပျိုးမွေးမြူရေးနှင့် အသက်မွေးသောအိမ်ထောင်စုများတွင် ခိုင်းနွားလိုအပ်မှု လျော့နည်းလာသဖြင့် တရုတ် နိုင်ငံသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ ကျွဲနွားများကို တိုက်ရိုက်ဝယ်ယူခဲ့သည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ကျွဲနွားများသည် ခိုင်းစေရန်အသုံးပြု သော တိရစ္ဆာန်ဖြစ်သည်သာမက တင်ပို့ရောင်းချသော ကုန်စည်များလည်းဖြစ်သည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ဆန်စပါး အဓိက စိုက်ပျိုးသည့် ဒေသဖြစ်သည့် ရော့ဝတီမြစ်ဝကျွန်းပေါ်ဒေသတွင် ခိုင်းနွားများကို သိသိသာသာ အသုံးပြုမှု များပြားသည် ကိုတွေ့ရသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအလယ်ပိုင်းရှိ ကျွဲနွားများနှင့် နှိုင်းယှဉ်လျှင် ပြည်ပသို့ တင်ပို့နိုင်မှု နည်းပါးလာ ပါသည်။ ကျွဲနွားတင်ပို့နိုင်မှုသည် မြို့တွင်းသို့ ကျေးလက်လုပ်သား ရွှေ့ပြောင်းမှုနှင့် စက်မှုလယ်ယာသို့ ကူးပြောင်းခြင်း ဖြစ်စဉ်တို့နှင့် ဆက်စပ်နေကြောင်းကိုလည်း တွေ့ရှိရပါသည်။ အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးဘက်တွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ မွေးမြူရေး ဦးစီးဌာန သည် ဒေသဆိုင်ရာ အာဏာပိုင်များထံမှ ကျွဲနွားများ တင်ပို့မှုနှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ ၂၀၁၇ခုနှစ်တွင် တရားဝင် အာဏာရရှိခဲ့ သည်။ ထိုအရာက တရုတ်နိုင်ငံသို့ တရားဝင် ကျွဲနွားတင်ပို့မှု ပမာဏကို ကြီးမားစွာ မြင့်တင်စေခဲ့သည်။ သက်ဆိုင်ရာ တာဝန်ရှိသူများသည် ကျွဲနွားကုန်သွယ်မှုကို ပံ့ပိုးရန် “Standard Operating Procedure” (SOP) ကို ရေးဆွဲရန် အဆင်သင့် ဖြစ်နေခဲ့သော်လည်း နိုင်ငံသည် COVID-19 ကူးစက်ရောဂါနှင့် စစ်တပ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှု၏ “နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းရိုက်ခတ်မှု” ဒဏ်ကို ခံစားခဲ့ရသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် အိမ်နီးချင်းနိုင်ငံများသာမက အခြားကုန်သွယ်မှုနိုင်ငံများနှင့် စွမ်းဆောင်ရည်များ တည်ဆောက် ရန်၊ ရောဂါထိန်းချုပ်ရေး၊ အခြေခံအဆောက်အအုံများ ဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်ရန်နှင့် ခွာနာလျှာနာ (FMD) ရောဂါ၊ ကြက်ငှက်တုပ် ကွေးနှင့် အခြားရောဂါများကို ကိုင်တွယ်ဖြေရှင်းနိုင်သည့် နိုင်ငံ၏စွမ်းရည်ကို အဆင့်မြှင့်တင်ရန် ကြိုးပမ်းမှုများအား ခက်ခဲ စေပါသည်။

ထို့ကြောင့် နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းရိုက်ခတ်မှု၏ အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုကို တွက်ချက်ရာတွင် အချက်အလက်များ ရှားပါးမှု နှင့် ကန့်သတ်ချုပ်ချယ်ထားခြင်း များစွာရှိနေခဲ့ပါသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် အဓိကအားဖြင့် လယ်သမားများ၊ မြေပြင် အချက်အလက်ကောက်ယူသူများ၊ ဒေသဆိုင်ရာ ကျွမ်းကျင်သူများသာမက အတွေ့အကြုံရှိသူများနှင့်လည်း အကြံညှ ဖော်ပြမှုများ ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ပါသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ဤစာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာ့ကျွဲနွား ကုန်သွယ်မှုအပေါ် နှစ်ထပ်ကွမ်းရိုက်ခတ် မှု၏ အကျိုးသက်ရောက်မှုကို ထိုးထွင်းသိမြင်စေပါသည်။ အဖြစ်အပျက်များကို တင်ပြရာတွင် တဆင့်ခံအရင်းမြစ်များမှ အချက်အလက်များကို ဖြည့်စွက်အသုံးပြုထားပါ သည်။

## **Aung Kyaw Min** **Comparative study of ASEAN’s roles in the Cambodian conflict of the Third Indochina War and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar**

တတိယအင်ဒို-ချိုင်းနားစစ်ပွဲအတွင်း ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခနှင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ် စစ်တပ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှုတို့တွင် အာဆီယံ၏အခန်းကဏ္ဍကို နှိုင်းယှဉ်လေ့လာခြင်း

၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလ ၁ရက်နေ့တွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၌ စစ်တပ်၏ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုသည် ဒေသတွင်း စိုးရိမ်ဖွယ်ရာ အချက်ပေးခေါင်းလောင်းသံ တစ်ခုကိုဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့သည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက် စစ်တပ်သည် ရက်စက်ကြမ်းကြုတ်မှုများနှင့် လူသားမျိုးနွယ်အပေါ် ကျူးလွန်သည့် ရာဇဝတ်မှုများစွာ ကို ကျူးလွန်ခဲ့ပြီး အာဆီယံသည် အဆိုပါပြဿနာကို ကိုင်တွယ်ဖြေရှင်းရန် တာဝန်ရှိသည်။ တတိယအင်ဒို-ချိုင်းနားစစ်ပွဲအတွင်း ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခကို နှိုင်းယှဉ်လေ့လာခြင်းဖြင့် ဤစာတမ်းသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ရှေးမတိုးနေကုန်သော ဖြစ်နေသော လက်ရှိအနေအထားကို ရုန်းထွက်နိုင်ရန် အကောင်းဆုံးဖြစ်နိုင်ချေရှိသော ရွေးချယ်မှုများကို အာဆီယံအတွက် ရှာဖွေဖော်ထုတ်ရန် ရည်ရွယ်ပါသည်။ ဤလေ့လာမှုသည် ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခအတွင်း အာဆီယံ၏ အခန်းကဏ္ဍကို အသားပေးဖော်ပြပြီး မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် အကျပ်အတည်းနှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် အာဆီယံက ဦးဆောင်ဦးရွက်ပြုသည့် ယန္တရားများကြောင့် ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာသော တိုးတက်မှုများကို လေ့လာထားပါသည်။

ဤလေ့လာမှုသည် ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခတွင် အာဆီယံပါဝင်လာပုံ၊ ၎င်း၏အခန်းကဏ္ဍ၊ မြန်မာ့အကျပ်အတည်းအပေါ် မဟာမိတ်အဖွဲ့၏ လက်ရှိတိုးတက်မှု၊ ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခမှ သင်ခန်းစာယူသင့်သည့် သင်ခန်းစာများနှင့် ယနေ့မြန်မာ့အကျပ်အတည်းအပေါ် ၎င်းတို့၏အခန်းကဏ္ဍကို ပြန်လည်သုံးသပ်သင့်သည်တို့ကို ပိုမိုနားလည်သဘောပေါက်ရန် လေ့လာထားပါသည်။ အာဆီယံအနေဖြင့် တာဝန်များစွာယူရခြင်းနှင့် အသင်း၏ဂုဏ်သတင်းကို ထိခိုက်စေခြင်းမှ ရှောင်လွှဲနိုင်ရန် အခြားရွေးချယ်စရာများကို စဉ်းစားသင့်ပါသည်။ နိဂုံးချုပ်အနေဖြင့် ဖော်ပြရမည်ဆိုပါက အချက်ငါးချက် သဘောတူညီမှုကို ကျော်လွန်ပြီး ကုလသမဂ္ဂနှင့် လက်တွဲလုပ်ဆောင်ခြင်းသည် အသင်းအတွက် ပိုမိုထိရောက်သော ရွေးချယ်စရာများ ဖြစ်နိုင်ပါသည်။

# Giuseppe Gabusi & Raimondo Neironi Myanmar after the coup

## အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်

၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ်၊ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီလတွင် ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည် ဦးဆောင်သည့် ရွေးကောက် တင်မြောက်ထားသော အစိုးရကို မြန်မာစစ်တပ်(တပ်မတော်ဟုလူသိများသော)မှ ရုတ်ချည်း ဖြုတ်ချခဲ့သည်မှာ တစ်နှစ်ခွဲကျော် ကြာခဲ့ပြီဖြစ်သည်။ ထိုအချိန်မှစ၍ တိုင်းပြည်၏ နိုင်ငံရေး အခြေအနေသည် ဆိုးရွားပြီး ရှည်လျားသော ပဋိပက္ခများအဖြစ်သို့ ပြောင်းလဲသွားခဲ့သည်။ ဗိုလ်ချုပ်မှူးကြီး မင်းအောင်လှိုင် ဦးဆောင်သော စစ်အစိုးရ၏ တရားဝင်အမည်ဖြစ်သည့် နိုင်ငံတော် အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးကောင်စီ (SAC)သည် ၎င်း၏ အုပ်ချုပ်မှုကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် မည်သည့် ပုံစံကိုမဆို ဖိနှိပ်ရန် ရက်စက်ကြမ်းကြုတ်စွာ ဖြိုခွင်းခဲ့ပြီး နိုင်ငံရေး အတိုက်အခံများ၊ အရပ်ဘက်နှင့် ပြည်သူ့ဝန်ထမ်းများ၊ အရပ်ဘက်အဖွဲ့အစည်းများ၊ လူ့အခွင့်အရေး လှုပ်ရှားသူများကို ကွယ်လွန်ကြည့်မှု အသီးသီးမှ ဆက်နွယ် လှုပ်ရှားသူများ၊ သတင်း ထောက်များ အားလုံးကို အခြေအမြစ်မရှိသော စွပ်စွဲချက်များဖြင့် တရားစွဲဆိုခြင်း၊ ဥပဒေမဲ့ဖမ်းဆီးခြင်း သို့မဟုတ် နေအိမ်အကျယ်ချုပ်ချခြင်းများ ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့သည်။ အထူးသဖြင့် ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်နှင့် ၎င်း၏ သစ္စာရှိနိုင်ငံရေး မဟာမိတ်များသည် အဂတိလိုက်စားမှု၊ နိုင်ငံတော်ပုန်ကန်မှုနှင့် အခြားသော အခြေအမြစ်မရှိသည့် စွဲချက်များဖြင့် တရားစွဲခံရပြီး ဥပဒေဆိုင်ရာ အကူအညီ ရယူခွင့်မပြုဘဲ သီးသန့် တရားရုံးတွင် တံခါးပိတ် အမှုရှင်ဆိုင် နေကြရသည်။ လက်ရှိအချိန်အထိ ရန်ကုန်၊ မန္တလေးနှင့် အခြားမြို့ကြီးများတွင် အရပ်သား ၂,၀၀၀ ကျော် သေဆုံးခဲ့ပြီး ယခုအခါ သူတို့၏လမ်းမများသည် စစ်အစိုးရကို ဆန့်ကျင်ကန့်ကွက်မှုအတွက် ပေးဆပ်ခဲ့မှုများကို ပြသနေပါသည်။

လွန်ခဲ့သည့် စက်တင်ဘာလတွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံဆိုင်ရာ ကုလသမဂ္ဂ အထူးကိုယ်စားလှယ်က လူသားချင်း စာနာထောက်ထားမှု အခြေအနေများသည် အိုးမဲ့အိမ်မဲ့ဖြစ်ခဲ့ရသူ ၁.၃သန်းနှင့် စနစ်၏ မတရားအကြမ်းဖက်မှုဒဏ်ကို လပေါင်းများစွာ ခံစားခဲ့ရသော အခြား ထိခိုက်လွယ်သော အုပ်စုများအတွက် “ဆိုးရွားသော အခြေအနေမှ ပိုမိုဆိုးရွားလာပြီး ထိတ်လန့်ဖွယ် အခြေအနေသို့ ပြောင်းလဲသွားသည်”ဟု သတိပေးခဲ့သည်။ နေရပ်စွန့်ခွာ ရွှေ့ပြောင်းလာသူ ၄၅၃,၀၀၀ ကျော်တွင် အများစုမှာ အမျိုးသမီးများနှင့် ကလေးများ ဖြစ်ကြပါသည် (UN, General Assembly 2022)။ မည်သို့ပင်ဆိုစေကာမူ စစ်အစိုးရ၏ ပြင်းထန်သော နည်းပရိယာယ်များကို ပြည်ထောင်စုတဝှမ်း ခိုတင်းနေထိုင်နေကြသော တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးစုများ ဆက်လက် တွေ့ကြုံ ခံစားနေကြရပါသည်။ ရှမ်း၊ ကရင်နှင့် ရခိုင် ပြည်နယ်တို့မှ ဒေသခံများသည် စစ်အစိုးရ၏ ပိတ်ဆို့ထားမှုကြောင့် စားနပ်ရိက္ခာနှင့် ဆေးဝါးပြတ်လပ်သော ကျေးရွာများတွင် ပိတ်မိနေကြပါသည်။ ကာလရှည်ကြာ ပဋိပက္ခများ ပြန်လည်၍ ပြင်းထန်နေချိန်တွင် စစ်အစိုးရမှ အဓိကဆက်သွယ်ရေး လမ်းကြောင်းများနှင့် အရင်းအမြစ်များ အားလုံးကို ပိတ်ဆို့ထားခြင်းကြောင့် ဖြစ်ပါသည်။

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် တော်လှန်ရေးဆိုသည်မှာ အသစ်အဆန်းတော့ မဟုတ်ပါ။ ၁၉၈၈ခုနှစ် ဩဂုတ်လနှင့် စက်တင်ဘာလတွင် ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ကြသည့် လူထုစုဝေးပွဲများ၌ တပ်မတော်က ဆန္ဒပြသူများကို ရာနဲ့ချီ သတ်ဖြတ် ခဲ့သည့်အတွက် ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်အား ပထမဆုံး အကြိမ်အဖြစ် စစ်အာဏာရှင် ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှု၌ ရှေ့တန်းတင်ခဲ့သည်ကို ပြန်တွေးကြည့်ပါ။ လွန်ခဲ့သည့်ဆယ်စုနှစ် အနည်းငယ်အတွင်း စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအပေါ် အခိုင်မာဆုံးသော ခုခံမှုပုံစံသည် တိုင်းရင်းသား လူနည်းစု ဒေသများ(Farrelly2013:313)တွင် တည်ရှိနေခဲ့သည်။ သို့သော်လည်း ယခုအခါတွင် အဆိုပါတိုက်ပွဲသည် အာဏာ ဖိဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု(CDM)တွင် ဗဟိုချက်ပြုနေပြီး လူထုလှုပ်ရှားမှုသည် နည်းပညာ တတ်မြောက်ထားသော လူငယ်များ၊ စက်မှုဇုန်အတွင်းရော အပြင်၌ပါ သပိတ် မှောက်ကြသော အလုပ်သမားများ၊ ဆရာ၊ ဆရာမများနှင့် စားသုံးသူများသည် အစိုးရအပေါ် မကျေနပ်မှုများကို ပြသလိုသော ရည်ရွယ်ချက်ဖြင့် စစ်တပ်နှင့် ဆက်နွယ်နေသော စီးပွားရေး လုပ်ငန်းများအား သပိတ်မှောက်ခြင်း စသည်ဖြင့် ပါဝင်နေကြပါသည်။ ပို၍အံ့ဩစရာ ကောင်းသည်မှာ ထိုကဲ့သို့အရည်အသွေးရှိသော လှုပ်ရှားမှုသည် အစိုးရဝန်ထမ်းများ ကြားတွင်ပါ ပျံ့နှံ့အောင်စည်းရုံးနိုင်ခဲ့ပြီး ဗဟိုဘက်၊ ပုဂ္ဂလိက ဘဏ်များနှင့် ဝန်ကြီးဌာနများမှ ညွှန်ကြားရေးမှူးများနှင့် ဝန်ထမ်းအရာရှိများသည် တရားမဝင် အာဏာသိမ်းယူမှုနှင့် ဆန္ဒပြသူများအား စစ်အင်အားအသုံးပြုမှုကို ပြတ်ပြတ်သားသား ဆန့်ကျင်ခဲ့ကြသည်။ ယင်းသည် ဗျူရိုကရေစီနှင့် လက်နက်ကိုင် တပ်ဖွဲ့များကြား မကြုံစဖူး ကသောင်းကနင်း ဖြစ်စေပြီး ရှုပ်ထွေးသော ဆက်ဆံရေးကို ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့သည်။ တစ်ချိန်တည်းတွင်ပင် ၂၀၂၀ခုနှစ်၊ နိုဝင်ဘာလ အထွေထွေရွေးကောက်ပွဲတွင် ရွေးကောက် တင်မြောက် ခံထားရသော လွှတ်တော် ကိုယ်စားလှယ်များသည် အမျိုးသား ညီညွတ်ရေးအစိုးရ (NUG)ကို ဖွဲ့စည်းပြီး ပြည်ပတွင် ကိုယ်စားလှယ်ရုံးများ ဖွင့်လှစ်ခဲ့သည်။ ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ်၊ မေလတွင် NUGသည် ၎င်း၏ လက်နက်ကိုင်တပ်ဖွဲ့များအဖြစ် ပြည်သူ့ကာကွယ်ရေးတပ်ဖွဲ့(PDF)ကို ဖန်တီးခဲ့သည်။ သို့သော်လည်း လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း နက်နဲသော သဘောထား ကွဲလွဲမှုများနှင့် တိုင်းရင်းသားကြားရှိ အကဲကွဲကြောင်းများသည် PDFနှင့် တိုင်းရင်းသား လက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့ အစည်းများအား တပ်မတော်ကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် တစ်ခုတည်းသော အတိုက်အခံ အင်အားအဖြစ် စုစည်းဖွဲ့စည်းရန် အတားအဆီးကို ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့သည် (Sun 2022)။

အာဏာသိမ်းမှုကို ပြင်းပြင်းထန်ထန်တုံ့ပြန်ပြီးနောက် နိုင်ငံအများအပြားက မြန်မာနိုင်ငံနှင့် သံတမန်ဆက်ဆံရေး အဆင့် နိမ့်ချရေး၊ စစ်လက်နက်နှင့်စက်ပစ္စည်းများ ပိတ်ဆို့အရေးယူမှုနှင့် တပ်မတော်နှင့် နီးကပ်စွာဆက်စပ်မှုရှိသော လူပုဂ္ဂိုလ်

စာရင်းကို ပိတ်ဆို့အရေးယူခြင်း အပါအဝင် အရေးယူဆောင်ရွက်မှုများ ချမှတ်ခဲ့သည်။ ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ်၊ မတ်လတွင် အတည်ပြုခဲ့သော ဥရောပပါလီမန်၏ ဆုံးဖြတ်ချက်သည် စစ်အစိုးရအား ၂၀၂၀ခုနှစ်၊ နိုဝင်ဘာလတွင် ကျင်းပခဲ့သည့် ဒီမိုကရေစီရွေးကောက်ပွဲ ရလဒ်အား အပြည့်အဝ လေးစားလိုက်နာရန်၊ အရပ်သားအစိုးရကို ပြန်လည်အာဏာလွှဲပေးရန်နှင့် အရေးပေါ်အခြေအနေ အဆုံးသတ်ရန် တောင်းဆိုထားသည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ တိုင်းရင်းသား လက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့အစည်းများအပေါ် အကြမ်းဖက်မှုနှင့် စစ်ဆင်ရေးအားလုံးကို ချက်ချင်းရပ်တန့်ရန်နှင့် ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်နှင့် အခြားနိုင်ငံရေးအကျဉ်းသားများ အားလုံးကိုလွှတ်ပေးရန် (EU Parliament 2022)ကိုလည်း တောင်းဆိုထားသည်။ အလားတူပင် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီ၂၀၂၂တွင် အတည်ပြုခဲ့သော အမေရိကန် အထက်လွှတ်တော် ဆုံးဖြတ်ချက်သည် တပ်မတော်၊ စစ်တပ်ပိုင် သို့မဟုတ် ထိန်းချုပ်ထားသောလုပ်ငန်းများနှင့် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုတွင် တာဝန်ရှိသူများကို အရေးယူ ကန့်သတ်ချက်များ ထပ်မံချမှတ်ရန်နှင့် CDM အာဏာဖိဆန်းရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှုအား နည်းလမ်း မျိုးစုံဖြင့်ကူညီရန် ဘိုင်ဒန်အစိုးရအား ထပ်မံတောင်းဆိုခဲ့သည် (US Congress 2022)။ ဒေသတွင်း ငွေကြေး အဖွဲ့အစည်းအချို့ပင်လျှင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံနှင့် ချိတ်ဆက်မှု ဖြတ်တောက် ခဲ့ကြသည်။ ဥပမာအားဖြင့် အာရှဖွံ့ဖြိုးရေးဘဏ်သည် အခြေခံအဆောက်အအုံဆိုင်ရာ ပရောဂျက်များအတွက် ငွေကြေးလွှဲပြောင်းပေးခြင်းနှင့် မြန်မာ့စီးပွားရေးဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်မှုကို အထောက်အကူပြုမည့် စာချုပ်အသစ်များ ချုပ်ဆိုခြင်းများကို ယာယီဆိုင်းငံ့ထားသည်။ ဤနောက်ခံမြင်ကွင်းကို ဆန့်ကျင်၍ အရှေ့တောင်အာရှနိုင်ငံများအသင်း(အာဆီယံ)သည် မည်သို့မှမစွာစွမ်းသာသော်လည်း တင်းမာမှုများကို ဖြေလျှော့ရန် ကြိုးစားခဲ့သည်။ ထိုကဲ့သို့သော အခြေအနေများ ထပ်ဆင့်ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာပြီးနောက် ၂၀၂၁ခုနှစ် ဧပြီလတွင် “အချက်ငါးချက် သဘောတူညီမှု” ကို ထိထိရောက်ရောက် အကောင်အထည်ဖော်ရန် ခိုင်မာသော အရေးယူဆောင်ရွက်မှုများ ပြုလုပ်ရန် အဖွဲ့ဝင်နိုင်ငံများက မြန်မာစစ်တပ်အား တိုက်တွန်း ခဲ့ကြသည်။ တပ်မတော်အား ဖော်ပြခြင်းမပြုပဲ အပြုသဘောဆောင်သော တွေ့ဆုံဆွေးနွေးမှု၊ လူသားချင်းစာနာမှု အကူအညီနှင့် အကြမ်းဖက်မှုများ ရပ်တန့်ရန်စသည်တို့ကို တောင်းဆို ထားသည်(ASEAN 2021) ။ သီအိုရီအရ ဆိုလျှင် အသင်းအနေဖြင့် အကျပ်အတည်းဖြေရှင်းရေး အစီအစဉ်ကို စကားလုံးများထက် ပိုမိုအကောင်အထည်ဖော်ရန် ကတိကဝတ်ပြုထား သော်လည်း COVID-19 ကပ်ရောဂါသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ နိုင်ငံရေးအခြေအနေများကို ဦးစားပေး အခြေအနေမှ လျော့ကျစေသောကြောင့် ဒီမိုကရေစီ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်းရေး လမ်းကြောင်းသို့ ပြန်သွားရန် နည်းလမ်းရှာမတွေ့ခဲ့ပေ။

ဤပြဿနာများအားလုံးကို T.wai - Torino World Affairs Institute နှင့် တူရင်တက္ကသိုလ်၏ ယဉ်ကျေးမှု နိုင်ငံရေးနှင့် လူမှုအဖွဲ့အစည်းဆိုင်ရာဌာနတို့မှ တူရင်မြို့၌ ဖေဖော်ဝါရီ ၁၈ ရက်မှ ၁၉ ရက်အထိ ပူးပေါင်းကျင်းပခဲ့သည့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံဆိုင်ရာ အပြည်ပြည်ဆိုင်ရာ ညီလာခံတစ်ခုတွင် ဆွေးနွေးခဲ့ပြီး Turin မြို့နှင့် Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo တို့မှ ပံ့ပိုးပေးခဲ့ကြပါသည်။ အဆိုပါ ညီလာခံသည် မြန်မာ-ဥရောပ သုတေသနကွန်ရက် (MyERN)မှ ဆောင်ရွက်သော လှုပ်ရှားမှုများ၏ တစ်စိတ်တစ်ပိုင်းဖြစ်ပြီး မြန်မာနိုင်ငံမှ သုတေသနပညာရှင်များအား ဥရောပနှင့် ကမ္ဘာလုံးဆိုင်ရာ သုတေသနပညာရှင်များနှင့် ပညာရပ်ဆိုင်ရာ ထိတွေ့ ဆက်ဆံမှုမှ တဆင့် မြန်မာသုတေသီများ၏ တင်ပြချက်များကို ထုတ်ဖော်နိုင်ရန် ရည်ရွယ်ပါသည်။ ဤစာအုပ်သည် တိုင်းပြည်၏အနာဂတ် နိုင်ငံရေး၊ စီးပွားရေးနှင့် လူမှုရေး အပေါ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှု၏ အကျိုးဆက်များကို ရောင်ပြန်ဟပ်သည့် ညီလာခံမှ စာတမ်းများကို ရွေးချယ် စုစည်းထားခြင်းဖြစ်သည်။ ခေါင်းစဉ်များ၊ ရှုထောင့်များနှင့် ချဉ်းကပ်မှုများ အမျိုးမျိုးရှိသော်လည်း အခန်းများ၏ ခေါင်းစဉ်များသည် ခုခံမှု၊ ခံနိုင်ရည်ရှိ မှုနှင့် ပြန်လည်ဆန်းသစ်မှုစသည့် အယူအဆသုံးခု အပေါ်တွင် အခြေခံ ထားပါသည်။

အာဏာရှင်အစိုးရများ၏ စိန်ခေါ်မှုများကို အာဏာဖိဆန်းမှုနှင့် ခုခံမှုဖြင့် ပြည်သူများက မတုံ့မဆိုင်း တုံ့ပြန်ပုံနှင်ပတ်သက်၍ အရှေ့တောင်အာရှတွင် မြန်မာ၏ဖြစ်ရပ်သည် ဥပမာ တစ်ခုအဖြစ် ထင်ရှားပါသည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်ပိုင်းတွင် ပါဝင် ပတ်သက်နေသည့် အဖွဲ့အစည်းအားလုံးအတွက် အာဏာဖိဆန်းရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု CDMသည် ဆန္ဒပြမှု၏ ကျောရိုးအဖြစ် သရုပ်ဖော်ထားသည်။ SACကို ဆန့်ကျင်သူများ အတွက် CDMသည် စစ်အာဏာရှင် ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှု၏ ရှေ့တန်းတွင်ရှိနေသည်သာမက စစ်တပ်မှ ထိန်းချုပ်ထားသော အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးယန္တရားများကို ရပ်ဆိုင်းသွားရန် ဦးတည်ပါသည် (အမည်မသိ 2021)။ အချို့သောသူများအတွက်မူ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုကြောင့် ရုတ်ခြည်းရပ်တန့်သွားသည့် ဆယ်စုနှစ် တစ်ခုကြာ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်းရေး ဒီမိုကရေစီလုပ်ငန်းစဉ်ကို ပြန်လည်ထူထောင်ရန်ပင် အဓိကမဟုတ်တော့ပါ။ ၎င်းတို့သည် မျှော်လင့်ချက်မဲ့စွာ သစ္စာဖောက်ခံခဲ့ရသည်ဟု ခံစားရပြီး ၎င်းတို့အတွက် တပ်မတော်ကို လုံးလုံးလျားလျား ဖြုတ်ချဖယ်ရှားရေးသည်သာ အဓိက ကိစ္စဖြစ်လာပါသည်။ အာဏာပိုင်များ၏ ဖိနှိပ်ချုပ်ချယ်မှု ခုခံရာတွင်လည်း နိုင်ငံရေးနှင့် လူမှုရေးအရ ချန်လှပ်ထားမှုဒဏ်ကို ခံခဲ့ရသော တိုင်းရင်းသား အစုအဖွဲ့များအား ဖိနှိပ်မှုဗျူဟာကို ဆက်လက်၍ အသုံးပြုနေပြီး အာဏာသိမ်းမှုနှင့် ၎င်း၏ နောက်ဆက်တွဲ အကျိုးဆက်ကို ဗမာအချင်းချင်း အာဏာပြိုင်မှု ဇာတ်လမ်းနောက်တစ်ခုအဖြစ် မြင်နေရပါသည်။ မြန်မာစစ်အစိုးရသည် နယ်စပ်ဒေသများတွင် ပြင်းထန်သောစစ်ပွဲများ ပြန်လည်စတင်နေချိန်တွင် ကချင်လွတ်လပ်ရေးတပ်မတော် KIA နှင့် ရှမ်းပြည်မြောက်ပိုင်းရှိ MNDA တို့ကဲ့သို့ တိုင်းရင်းသားလက်နက်ကိုင် အဖွဲ့အချို့တို့သည် တပ်မတော်စခန်းများကို ပြင်းထန်စွာ ထိုးစစ်ဆင်ရန် ဖိအားပေးခံနေရသည်။ ရခိုင်ပြည်နယ်ရှိ ရိုဟင်ဂျာများသည် ဖိနှိပ်မှုမှ လွတ်မြောက်ရန် ၂၀၁၇ ခုနှစ်မှစ၍ အစုလိုက်အပြုံလိုက် ထွက်ပြေးခြင်း အပါအဝင် (Nabuco Martuscellii Ahmed and Sammonds 2022 ကိုကြည့်ပါ) အမျိုးမျိုးသော ခုခံမှု ပုံစံများကိုလည်း လက်ခံကျင့်သုံးခဲ့သည်။

ခံနိုင်ရည်ရှိမှုသည် စိတ်ပညာနှင့် လူမှုဗေဒနယ်ပယ်များမှ ဆင်းသက်လာသော အဓိကကျသည့် အယူအဆတစ်ခုဖြစ်ပြီး လူတစ်ဦးချင်း သို့မဟုတ် အဖွဲ့အစည်းများသည် အကျပ်အတည်းအခြေအနေတွင် ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာသည့် စိန်ခေါ်မှုများကို

တွန်းလှန်ရန် ၎င်းတို့၏ စွမ်းရည်နှင့် အရည်အချင်းများကို ဖော်ထုတ်ပြီး သက်သေပြလာနိုင်မှုပင်ဖြစ်သည်။ အာဏာ သိမ်းခြင်း မတိုင်မီကပင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်းမှုကို ဒီမိုကရေစီ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်း ရေးထက် “အာဏာရှင်ဆန်မှု”မှ အသွင်ကူးပြောင်း နေရသည့် ဖြစ်ရပ်တစ်ခု အဖြစ် ပိုမို နားလည်နိုင်သည် (Ruzzai Gabusi and Pellegrino 2019)။ တူညီသော တိုင်းရင်းသား အုပ်စုများသည် ဆယ်စုနှစ်များတစ်လျှောက် ပြည်တွင်းတိုက်ပွဲများတွင် ခံနိုင်ရည် ရှိခဲ့ကြသည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီး နောက်ပိုင်းကာလတွင် CDMအတွက်ခံနိုင်ရည်ရှိခြင်းသည် ယဉ်ကျေးမှု၊ ဘာသာတရားနှင့် ဘာသာစကား ကွဲပြားမှုများကို အသိအမှတ်ပြုခြင်းဖြင့် ဖက်ဒရယ်နှင့်ဒီမိုကရေစီ ပြည်ထောင်စုကို တည်ဆောက်ရန် စိတ်ဓာတ်နှင့်သန္နိဋ္ဌာန် ကို ဆက်လက်ရှင်သန်စေခြင်း ဖြစ်သည်။ လူ့အများစုခံစားနေရသည့် စနစ်တကျ လူ့အခွင့်အရေး ချိုးဖောက်မှုများကို အဆုံးစွန်ဆုံး တန်ပြန်ရန် စစ်အာဏာရှင်အစိုးရကို ဆန့်ကျင်သည့် စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်သော အင်အားစုများကို ပုံဖော်ရန် မြို့ပြနှင့် ကျေးလက်လူထု ဆန္ဒပြပွဲအား ပြန်လည်ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့ကြသည်။

စာတမ်းအားလုံးသည် ပြည်ထောင်စုအခြေအနေ၏ ယေဘုယျ အဆင်မပြေမှုများနှင့် ပက်သက်၍ မီးမောင်းထိုး ဖော်ပြထားခြင်း ဖြစ်သည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို နိုင်ငံတစ်ခုအဖြစ် ရပ်တည်လည်ပတ်နိုင်ခြင်းမရှိသော Failed State နိုင်ငံတစ်ခုအဖြစ် သတ်မှတ်ခြင်း မပြုနိုင် သေးသော်လည်း မြန်မာအစိုးရသည် မိမိနိုင်ငံသားများအတွက် ကျန်းမာရေးနှင့် ယေဘုယျအမြင် ရှိနေကြပါသည်။ မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသည် အာဆီယံ အဖွဲ့ဝင်နိုင်ငံများဖြစ်သည့် မလေးရှားနှင့် ဗီယက်နမ်တို့ကဲ့သို့ ခေတ်မီတိုးတက်ရေး လမ်းကြောင်းပေါ်သို့ ရောက်ရှိရန် အလမ်းပေးကွာနေဆဲဖြစ်သည်။ ဥပမာအားဖြင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံသည် ပြည်တွင်း ပဋိပက္ခများ၊ အထီးကျန်ဆန်မှုနှင့် ဖွံ့ဖြိုးတိုးတက်မှု အားနည်းသော လမ်းကြောင်းပေါ်တွင် ပိတ်မိ နေပုံရသည်။ နိုင်ငံရေး အခြေအနေများ ဘယ်လိုပဲ တိုးတက်ပြောင်းလဲနေပါစေ။ နယ်စပ်ဒေသရှိ ဗမာအများစုနှင့် တိုင်းရင်းသားလူမျိုးများကြား ဆက်ဆံရေးမှ စတင်၍ တိုင်းပြည်ကို အမျိုးမျိုးသော ကဏ္ဍပေါင်းစုံမှ ပြန်လည် တည်ဆောက်ဖို့ လိုအပ်ကြောင်း ရိုးရှင်းစွာ ကောက်ချက်ဆွဲနိုင်ပါသည်။ ၂၀၂၂ MyERN ညီလာခံ၏ အဓိကမိန့်ခွန်းတွင် Trento တက္ကသိုလ်မှ ဂုဏ်ထူးဆောင် ပါမောက္ခ Roberto Toniatti က တပ်မတော်နှင့် တိုင်းရင်းသား လက်နက်ကိုင်အဖွဲ့ အစည်းများကြားတွင် အခြေခံအားဖြင့် ဖယ်ဒရယ်စနစ်အပေါ် အဓိပ္ပာယ်ဖွင့်ဆိုရာတွင် နားလည်မှုလွှဲမှားသော အယူအဆများ ရှိနေနိုင်ကြောင်း ထောက်ပြ ခဲ့သည်။ နိုင်ငံတည်ဆောက်ရေး လမ်းစဉ်ကို လိုက်လျှောက်ရန်မှာ သမိုင်းပေးတာဝန် တစ်ရပ်ဟု ရှေးယခင်က ထင်မြင်ခဲ့သော်လည်း နောက်ပိုင်းတွင် ပြည်နယ်တစ်ခုချင်းစီက ဖက်ဒရယ်ပြည်ထောင်စု အဖွဲ့ဝင်ဖြစ်ခြင်းကို ရွေးချယ်နိုင်သည့် ပြည်နယ်တည်ဆောက်ရေး လုပ်ငန်းစဉ်ကို ဦးစားပေးအနေဖြင့် ထည့်သွင်းစဉ်းစားရန် ပိုမိုလိုလားခဲ့ကြသည်။ စာတမ်း တင်ပြသူများသည် ၎င်းတို့၏ တင်ပြမှုများတွင် မကြာခဏ မှတ်ချက်ချလေ့ရှိသည့်အတိုင်း ပြန်လည်တည်ဆောက်မှုအပေါ် ခုခံမှု၏ မတူညီသော “စိတ်ဆန္ဒများ” အကြား ရှုပ်ထွေးသော ဆက်ဆံရေး၊ အနာဂတ်အတွက် ၎င်းတို့၏ စိတ်ကူးများ၊ ပညာရေး စနစ်၊ စီးပွားရေးအပြင် အာဆီယံရပ်၏တည်ချက် နှင့် စိတ်ပျက်စရာ အဖွဲ့ဝင်အဖြစ်ရှိနေမှုများအပေါ် စိုးရိမ်မှုများ ရှိနေကြပါသည်။ ဤစာအုပ်၏ များပြားပြီး စုံလင်လှသော ပြောဆိုချက်များသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ပြည်သူ့စာတိုက်ပြုသည့် ဆင့်ကဲဖြစ်စဉ်အပေါ် ဆွေးနွေးငြင်းခုံမှုများအတွက် ပိုမို ထိုးထွင်းနားလည် နိုင်ရန် အထောက်အကူ ဖြစ်စေပါသည်။

**စာအုပ်တွင်ပါဝင်သော အခန်းများ**

လျင်မြန်စွာ ဖြစ်ပေါ်နေသော ပြောင်းလဲမှုများသည် အခြေအနေအားလုံးကို ခန့်မှန်းရ ခက်စေသော်လည်း ဤစာအုပ်တွင် အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးကာလ၏ နိုင်ငံရေး၊ စီးပွားရေးနှင့် လူမှုရေးဆိုင်ရာ ပြဿနာအချို့ကို စူးစမ်းတင်ပြထားသည်။ ၎င်းတွင် အာဏာသိမ်းမှုအပေါ် တုံ့ပြန်မှုကို ရှင်းပြရန်နှင့် စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအောက်တွင် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ အဖြစ်မှန်ကို နားလည်သဘောပေါက်စေရန်အတွက် အမျိုးမျိုးသော တိုက်ရိုက်နှင့် တဆင့်ခံ အရင်းမြစ်များဖော်ပြသည့် အချက်အလက်အများပေါ်အခြေခံပြီး တင်ပြထားသော အကြောင်းအရာ ၁၁ခု ပါဝင်ပါသည်။ ဤကဲ့သို့စဉ်တင်ပြမှုဖြင့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ လတ်တလော အသွင်ကူးပြောင်းမှု အသေးစိတ်ကို မတူညီသော နယ်ပယ်ရှုထောင့်များမှ နားလည် သဘောပေါက်နိုင်ရန် ကျွန်ုပ်တို့ မျှော်လင့်ပါသည်။

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို အတိတ်ကာလသို့ နောက်ပြန်လှည့်စေခဲ့သော ပြည်တွင်းပြဿနာများကို မီးမောင်းထိုး တင်ပြထားခြင်းဖြင့် အစပြုလိုပါသည်။ အာဏာဖီဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု “CDM” သည် အကြမ်းမဖက် လှုပ်ရှားမှုအဖြစ် မအောင်မြင်ခဲ့ကြောင်း Kaung Sett Wai က အလေးပေးပြောကြားခဲ့သည်။ အာဏာဖီဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု “CDM”၏နောက်ကွယ်ရှိ “ပြိုင်ဆိုင်နေသောလက်များ”သည် “တော်လှန်ရေး၏ ဝန်ထုပ်ဝန်ပိုးတစ်ခုလုံးကို ပြည်သူ့ဝန်ထမ်းများ၏ပုခုံးပေါ်သို့ တွန်းပို့ခဲ့သောဖြစ်ရပ်”သာ ဖြစ်သွားခဲ့ပြီး၊ နောက်ဆုံး ရလဒ်အနေဖြင့် သာမန်ပြည်သူလူထုသည် စစ်တပ်ထက် ပို၍ပျက်စီးသွားခဲ့ရသည်။ အာဏာဖီဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု “CDM”တွင် လုပ်ဆောင်နိုင်သည့် ဉာဏ်ရည်ပြည့်ဝသော အရင်းအမြစ် များစွာရှိသော်လည်း အနာဂတ်မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ဒီမိုကရေစီနည်းကျ တက်လာမည့် အစိုးရများအတွက် တစ်ခုတည်းသော ရေရှည်တည်တံ့ခိုင်မြဲသည့် အခြေခံအုတ်မြစ်ကို ကိုယ်စားပြုနိုင်မည့် လစ်ဘရယ်နိုင်ငံရေး တွေးခေါ်နားလည်မှု အားနည်း နေသေးကြောင်း Kaung Sett Wai က ငြင်းချက်ထုတ် ဖော်ပြထားပါသည်။

၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ်တွင် တပ်မတော်မှ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုသည် အသစ်အဆန်းမဟုတ်သော်လည်း ထင်ရှားသော သမိုင်းဝင် အဖြစ်အပျက်များ၏ လတ်တလောအဖြစ်ရပ်တစ်ခု ဖြစ်ကြောင်း Min Thang က အသိပေးထားပါသည်။ အဆိုပါ အခန်းတွင် ဖေဖော်ဝါရီ ၁ ရက်မှစပြီး နိုင်ငံအတွင်း ဖြစ်ပျက်ခဲ့သည့် အဖြစ်အပျက်များကို နိုင်ငံတွင်းရှိပြည်သူလူထုများ (အထူးသဖြင့် လူငယ်)အနေဖြင့် COVID-19 ကပ်ရောဂါကြားတွင် စစ်အာဏာရှင်အား ခုခံမှု၌ ကြုံတွေ့ရသော စိန်ခေါ်

မူများအပေါ် ဆန်းစစ်ခြင်းဖြင့် ခြုံငုံဖော်ပြထားသည်။ လက်ရှိတွင် ရှား၏ ပိုင်နက်ကျူးကျော်မှုကြောင့် ယူကရိန်းသို့ အာရုံလွှဲသွားသည့် နိုင်ငံတကာ အသိုက်အဝန်းအနေဖြင့် ပိတ်ဆို့အရေးယူမှုများ ချမှတ်ခြင်းနှင့် ပြစ်တင်ရှုတ်ချခြင်းထက် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံရှိ လူငယ်များအား ကူညီပံ့ပိုးပေးရန်နှင့် နိုင်ငံရေး အကျပ်အတည်းများသည် နိုင်ငံတကာ၏ ထိရောက်သော ပါဝင်မှုမရှိပဲ အဆုံးသတ်နိုင်မည် မဟုတ်ကြောင်း စာရေးသူက အလေးပေးဖော်ပြထားပါသည်။

Megan Ryan နှင့် Mai Van Tran တို့သည် အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက် စစ်တပ်၏ သတင်းစာများနှင့် ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာ ပလက်ဖောင်းများ၏ အခန်းကဏ္ဍနှင့် လူထု သဘောထား အပေါ် လွှမ်းမိုးရန် ကြိုးစားမှုများကို ဆန်းစစ်ထားပါသည်။ အများအားဖြင့် ခုခံတော်လှန်ရေး အကြောင်းအရာများသည် စစ်တပ်လိုလားသော အကြောင်းအရာများထက် သိသိသာသာ လူအများ၏ ဖတ်ရှုမှုဝေမှု ရှိနေသော်လည်း Facebook နှင့် Twitter ပေါ်ရှိ ဒီမိုကရေစီ တက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများ၏ ပို့စ်များသည် စစ်တပ်လိုလားသော အဘော်များ နေရာ ယူလာချိန်တွင် တဖြည်းဖြည်း ကျဆင်းလာကြောင်း ၎င်းတို့က ဆွေးနွေးထားသည်။ အထူးသဖြင့် ခုခံမှုတွင် အားလုံးမျှဝေလက်ခံထားသော အယူဝါဒဆိုင်ရာပုန်းတိုင် မရှိသောအခါတွင် အာဏာရှင်အစိုးရများသည် ဆိုရှယ်မီဒီယာပေါ်ရှိ အဘော်များကို မည်သို့စီမံထိန်းချုပ်လေ့ရှိသည်ကို ဤအခန်းက တစ်စုတစ်စောင်း မီးမောင်းထိုးပြထားသည်။

Cecilia Brighi နှင့် Khaing Zar Aung တို့သည် အာဏာဖိဆန်ရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှု CDM တွင်ပါဝင်ရန် ၎င်း၏အဖွဲ့ဝင် ၁၁၀,၀၀၀ ကိုလျှင်မြန်စွာ စည်းရုံးစုစည်းနိုင်ခဲ့သည့် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ အလုပ်သမားသမဂ္ဂများ အဖွဲ့ချုပ်၏ တုံ့ပြန်ဆောင်ရွက်မှုများကို ဖော်ပြထားသည်။ ဤကဲ့သို့လုပ်နိုင်ခြင်းမှာ သမဂ္ဂများ၏ ဆယ်စုနှစ်များစွာကြာ လျှို့ဝှက်စွာ စီစဉ်ပြုလုပ် ခဲ့ကြသည့် အစည်းအဝေး အတွေ့အကြုံများ၏ အကျိုးကျေးဇူးကြောင့်ပင် ဖြစ်သည်။ ထို့အပြင် နိုင်ငံတစ်ဝှမ်းနှင့် စီးပွားရေး ကဏ္ဍအများစုတွင် သပိတ်များနှင့် ဆန္ဒပြပွဲများ စတင်စီစဉ်ခဲ့ကြသည့် အစုအဖွဲ့များနှင့် အစိုးရဝန်ကြီးဌာနများ၏ လုပ်ငန်း ဆောင်ရွက်မှုများကို ရပ်တန့်စေသည့် အလုပ်သမားတက်ကြွလှုပ်ရှားသူများ၏ ကွန်ရက်ကြီး ရှိနေခြင်းကိုလည်း ထည့်သွင်းဖော်ပြထားပါသည်။

အခြားသော အထူးဂရုပြုမှုများစွာလိုအပ်သော အရာတစ်ခုမှာ လူမျိုးစုအခြေပြု အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒ ဖြစ်သည်။ တအာင်း တော်လှန်ရေး လှုပ်ရှားမှုများ၏ လက်နက် ဖျက်သိမ်းခြင်းနှင့် လက်နက် ပြန်လည်တပ်ဆင်ရေး၊ အပစ်အခတ် ရပ်စဲရေး၏ ရှုပ်ထွေးသော သမိုင်းကြောင်းကို ဆန်းစစ်ကြည့်ရာတွင် Francesco Buscemi မှ လူမျိုးစုအခြေပြု အမျိုးသား ရေးဝါဒသည် နိုင်ငံရေးလှုပ်ရှားမှုကို အခြေခံထားခြင်းထက် လူမှုစရိုက် လက္ခဏာအပေါ် အခြေခံထားသော ဖြစ်စဉ်တစ်ခု ဟု ကောက်ချက်ဆွဲထားပါသည်။ ၎င်းတွင် လက်နက်ကိုင်အုပ်ချုပ်မှုအပေါ် အကြောင်းပြချက်၊ ပြည်သူလူထုနှင့် ၎င်းတို့၏ ဆက်ဆံရေး စသည်ဖြင့် လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းအတွင်း သွတ်သွင်းထားသော နိုင်ငံရေး ကောက်ချက်တစ်ခု ရှိပါသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် လူမျိုးစုအခြေပြု အမျိုးသားရေးဝါဒသည် လူမှုအသိုင်းအဝိုင်းတွင် အမြစ်တွယ်လာပြီး “ပြင်ပတွင်” မည်သို့ပင် ဖြစ်ပျက်နေသော်လည်း ၎င်း၏တို့၏ ကိုယ်ပိုင် ၁၀၀အဖြစ် ခံယူထားကြပုံရပါသည်။

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံတွင် မတည်ငြိမ်မှုများ တိုးလာခြင်းကြောင့် အရှေ့တောင် အာရှနှင့် ပြင်ပသို့ မူးယစ်ဆေးဝါး ထုတ်လုပ်မှုနှင့် ရောင်းဝယ်ဖောက်ကားမှု မြင့်တက်လာစေခဲ့သည်။ ထိုင်း၊ တရုတ်နှင့် အနောက်နိုင်ငံ သတင်းရင်းမြစ်အချို့ကို ကြည့်ရှုခြင်းဖြင့် Maria Elena Sassaroli မှ အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက်ပိုင်း တစ်နှစ်အတွင်း ကမ္ဘာ့ခုတ်ယအကြီးဆုံး ဘိန်းစိုက်ပျိုး ထုတ်လုပ်ရာ နေရာဖြစ်လာသည့် ဖြစ်စဉ်အကျဉ်းချုပ်နှင့် ပတ်သက်သည့် တွေ့ရှိမှုကို တင်ပြ ထားပါသည်။

လက်ရှိ စစ်အာဏာရှင် အုပ်ချုပ်မှု မတိုင်မီနှင့် နောက်ပိုင်းကာလများတွင် ကြီးကြီးမားမား ပေးဆပ်ရမည့် ကဏ္ဍမှာ ပညာရေး ဖြစ်သည်။ Licia Proserpio နှင့် Antonio Fiori တို့၏ လေ့လာမှုသည် အစိုးရအရာရှိများနှင့် တက္ကသိုလ် သင်ကြားရေး ဝန်ထမ်းများနှင့် ပြုလုပ်ခဲ့သော အင်တာဗျူးများမှတစ်ဆင့် စုဆောင်းရရှိထားသော အရည်အသွေးအခြေပြု အချက်အလက်များအပေါ် အခြေခံ၍ ကျောင်းသားများနှင့် လူ့အဖွဲ့အစည်းကြား ကွဲပြားမှုကိုဖြစ်စေခြင်းဖြင့် SAC သည် NLD အစိုးရ၏ ပညာရေး ပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများကို ထိခိုက်ချုပ်ချယ်သည့်ပုံစံအဖြစ်သို့ မည်ကဲ့သို့ နောက်ကြောင်းပြန်သွား နေပုံကို ရှာဖွေဖော်ထုတ် ထားပါသည်။ SAC ၏ လုပ်ဆောင်ချက်သည် CDM တွင် ပါဝင်ခဲ့ကြသော ပညာရေးဆိုင်ရာ ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များနှင့် သင်ကြားရေးဆိုင်ရာ လုပ်ဆောင်မှုများကို ဆက်လက်ပြီး လုပ်ဆောင်ရန် ရွေးချယ်ထားသူများအကြား ကွဲပြားမှုများကို ဖြစ်ပေါ်စေခဲ့ပါသည်။ ထိုကဲ့သို့ ဆိုးရွားသော အခြေအနေမျိုးတွင် နိုင်ငံရေးအခြေနေတစ်ခု ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာပါက ဖက်ဒရယ်စနစ်ကို အခြေခံသော ပညာရေးစနစ် ပြန်လည် ဖန်တီးနိုင်မှုနှင့် ပတ်သက်၍ လက်ရှိ ဆွေးနွေး ငြင်းခုံမှုများအတွက် စာတမ်းရေးသားသူများက မျှော်လင့်ချက်အချို့ကို ရှာဖွေပေးခဲ့ပါသည်။ သို့ရာတွင် ဤအခန်း၌ ယခင်က အတည်ပြုခဲ့သော ပညာရေး ပြုပြင်ပြောင်းလဲမှုများသည် တိုင်းရင်းသားအားလုံးအတွက် မိခင်ဘာသာစကား အခြေခံ ဘာသာစကားစုံ ပညာရေးကို ခွင့်ပြုခြင်းနှင့်ပတ်သက်သော ရည်မှန်းချက် မအောင်မြင်ခဲ့ကြောင်းနှင့် သင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်း ပါ အကြောင်းအရာများသည် ဗမာယဉ်ကျေးမှုနှင့် ဗုဒ္ဓဘာသာ အပေါ် ဆက်လက် အခြေခံထားကြောင်းကို Yaw Bawm Mangshang မှဖော်ထုတ် တင်ပြထားပါသည်။ ထို့ကြောင့် ဘာသာစကားစုံ ပညာရေးသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ကွဲပြားခြားနားသော ယဉ်ကျေးမှု ဓလေ့ထုံးတမ်းများ ကြွယ်ဝမှုကို လေးစားစေရုံသာမက မြန်မာနိုင်ငံကို ဖက်ဒရယ် ပြည်ထောင်စုအဖြစ် ပြန်လည် တည်ဆောက်ရန်တွင် ခွန်အားအရင်းအမြစ်တစ်ခု ဖြစ်စေ နိုင်ကြောင်း စာတမ်းပြုစု သူက တင်ပြထားပါသည်။

မြန်မာနိုင်ငံအနေဖြင့် လက်ရှိတွင် အာဏာသိမ်းပြီးနောက် နိုင်ငံရေးအခြေအနေ၊ ကပ်ရောဂါဖြစ်ပွားပြီးနောက် ကျန်းမာရေးဆိုင်ရာ ပြတ်လတ်မှုများနှင့် စီးပွားရေးအရ သိသိသာသာ အားနည်းခြင်းစသည့် အကျပ်အတည်း သုံးထပ်ကွမ်းနှင့် ရင်ဆိုင်နေရသည်။ ၎င်းတို့၏ အရည်အသွေးအခြေပြုနှင့် ကိန်းဂဏန်းအခြေပြု သုတေသနများအရ Samu Ngwenya-Tshumaနှင့် Min Zar Ni Linတို့သည် နိုင်ငံရေးမတည်ငြိမ်မှုနှင့် မရေရာသော အမိန့်ညွှန်ကြားစာများကြောင့် စက်ရုံအလုပ်ရုံများ လည်ပတ်မှုကို ထိခိုက်စေသည်ဟု တင်ပြထားကြပါသည်။ အထည်ချုပ်ကဏ္ဍသည် ခံနိုင်ရည်ရှိမှုကို ပြသနေပြီး အများအားဖြင့် အပြုသဘောဆောင်သော အကြောင်းပြချက်များ ရှိနေနိုင်သော်လည်း ဥရောပသမဂ္ဂကဲ့သို့ ကြီးမားသောတင်ပို့သူများသည် မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ၏ ကမ္ဘာနှင့်ချီ၍ ပြိုင်ဆိုင်မှုနေရသော အမျိုးသမီး အများစုကို အလုပ်အကိုင် ပေးထားသည့် အသေးစားနှင့် အလတ်စား လုပ်ငန်းများ ပါဝင်နေသည့် ထုတ်လုပ်မှုကဏ္ဍကို ပိတ်ဆို့အရေးယူရန် သင့်၊မသင့် နှင့်ပတ်သက်၍ ဒွါယများ ဖြစ်ပေါ်နေခြင်းစသည့် စစ်အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအောက်တွင် မသေချာ မရေရာသော စိုးရိမ်စရာ အခြေအနေတွင် ရှိနေပါသည်။

စီးပွားရေးကဏ္ဍအပိုင်း တင်ပြမှုသည် မြန်မာနှင့် တရုတ်ပြည်သူ့သမ္မတနိုင်ငံကြား ကျွဲနွား ကုန်သွယ်မှုကို ပံ့ပိုးကူညီခြင်း အကြောင်းအရာဖြင့် အဆုံးသတ်ထားသည်။ Andrew Laithai Terdsak Yanoi Manabu Fujimura နှင့် Manoj Potapohn တို့ ပါဝင်သော ပညာရှင်အဖွဲ့တစ်ဖွဲ့သည် တရုတ်နိုင်ငံသို့ ကျွဲနွားမှောင်ခိုကူးခြင်း၏ အကျိုးကျေးဇူး အများစုကို တရုတ် ဝယ်လက်များ၊ ပြည်တွင်းကုန်သည်များနှင့် တရုတ်နှင့်ကွန်ရက် ချိတ်ဆက်ထားသော သြဇာအာဏာရှိသည့် ပုဂ္ဂိုလ်များ ကသာ ရရှိနိုင်သည်ဟု ထောက်ပြကြသည်။ ကျွဲနွားများကို တင်ပို့ကြသည့် မြန်မာလယ်သမားများမှာ အကျိုးအမြတ် အနည်းငယ်သာ ခံစားကြရပါသည်။ အာဏာသိမ်းမှုနှင့် COVID-19 ကပ်ရောဂါသည် တရားဝင်ကုန်သွယ်မှုကို ထိန်း ကြောင်းရန် တရုတ်နှင့် မြန်မာကြား ပူးပေါင်းကြိုးပမ်းမှုများကို ရှုပ်ထွေးစေခဲ့ပါသည်။ စာတမ်းပြုစုသူများမှ နယ်စပ်ဖြတ် ကျော် စိုက်ပျိုးရေးကုန်သွယ်မှုတွင် မြန်မာ၏လုပ်နိုင်စွမ်းကို ပြန်လည်ဖော်ဆောင်ရန် အထောက်အကူပြုမည့် မူဝါဒအကြံပြု ချက် အချို့ကိုလည်း တင်ပြထားပါသည်။

စာအုပ်၏နိဂုံးပိုင်း စာမျက်နှာအနည်းငယ်တွင် နောက်ဆုံးအနေဖြင့် တင်ပြထားသည်မှာ အာဆီယံအနေဖြင့် မြန်မာ့ နိုင်ငံရေး အကျပ်အတည်းအတွက် တပ်မတော်နှင့် ရွေးကောက်ခံအရပ်သား ခေါင်းဆောင်များကြား ဖြစ်နိုင်ချေရှိသော အဖြေကိုရှာဖွေနိုင်ရန် ကြားဝင်ဖျန်ဖြေရာတွင် အရေးပါပြီး ထိရောက်သော အခန်းကဏ္ဍမှ ပါဝင်နိုင်ပုံကို တင်ပြထားသည်။ အာဆီယံအနေဖြင့် ၁၉၉၀ခုနှစ်များ အစောပိုင်းတွင် ကမ္ဘောဒီးယားပဋိပက္ခ အဖြေရှာခဲ့ခြင်းမှ သင်ခန်းစာများကို အခြေခံ ပြီး အချက်ငါးချက် သဘောတူညီမှုကို ကျော်လွန်ပြီး ကုလသမဂ္ဂနှင့် လက်တွဲလုပ်ဆောင်ခြင်း ပြုလုပ်သင့်သည်ဟု Aung Kyaw Min က ထောက်ပြထားသည်။

# Myanmar after the coup

**Giuseppe Gabusi & Raimondo Neironi**

More than a year and a half has passed since the Myanmar military (known as the *Tatmadaw*) abruptly deposed the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021. Since then, the political situation in the country has deteriorated into a long and crippling conflict. The State Administration Council (SAC) – the official name of the ruling military junta led by General Min Aung Hlaing – has carried out a ruthless crackdown to suppress any form of opposition to its rule: Political opponents, civil and public servants, civil society representatives, human rights practitioners, religious actors, and journalists have all been charged with baseless allegations, unlawfully detained or put under house arrest. More specifically, Aung San Suu Kyi and her loyal political allies have been convicted on corruption, sedition, and other phony charges after trials in closed courts without proper access to legal counsel. To date, more than 2,000 civilians have died in Yangon, Mandalay, and other cities whose streets now represent a distillation of resistance and protest against the regime.

Last September, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on Myanmar warned that humanitarian conditions have “gone from bad to worse to horrific” for 1.3 million displaced people and other weak categories of persons who have been suffering months of systematic abuses. Most of the over 453,000 newly displaced persons are women and children (UN General Assembly 2022). Nevertheless, among those who continue to experience the military regime’s heavy-handed tactics are the multitudes of ethnic groups scattered across the union: Residents in Shan, Karen, and Rakhine states are trapped in their villages without food and medicine as the regime’s military forces have blocked access to all of the major communication routes and resources while longstanding conflicts have been fully re-ignited.

Resistance in Myanmar is nothing new: We think back to the mass rallies of August and September 1988, when the *Tatmadaw* killed hundreds of protesters, thereby putting Aung San Suu Kyi at the forefront of the anti-military campaign for the first time. While the most solid form of resistance to military rule over the past few decades has lain in ethnic minority regions (Farrelly 2013: 313), the struggle is now concentrated around the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a mass movement comprised of tech-savvy youth, workers who strike inside and outside industrial parks, teachers, and consumers boycotting military-affiliated business activities in a bid to show their dissatisfaction with this unpopular regime. More surprisingly, such a fluid movement has managed to gain popularity among civil servants: Directors and staff officers from the Central Bank, commercial banks, and ministries have clearly rejected the illegal power grab and the use of military force against the demonstrators. This has thrown the complex relationship between bureaucracy and the armed forces into unprecedented upheaval. Meanwhile, a group of lawmakers elected in the November 2020 general election have formed the National Unity Government

(NUG) in exile and opened representative offices abroad. In May 2021, the NUG also created the People's Defence Force (PDF) as its armed forces. However, deep divisions in the society and alongside ethnic fault lines prevent the PDF and ethnic armed organizations from joining forces to form a common opposition front against the *Tatmadaw* (Sun 2022).

After reacting to the coup with outrage, several countries have enacted a string of measures that include downgrading diplomatic relations with Myanmar, imposing an arms and equipment embargo, and sanctioning a list of designated persons and entities closely connected to the *Tatmadaw*. The European Parliament resolution approved in March 2021 calls on the junta to fully respect the outcome of the democratic election of November 2020, reinstate the civilian government and end the state of emergency. It also demands the immediate cessation of all violence and attacks against Myanmar's ethnic groups and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners (EU Parliament 2022). By the same token, the US Senate resolution passed in February 2022 asks the Biden administration not only to impose further restrictions on the *Tatmadaw*, military-owned or controlled enterprises, and those responsible for the coup but also to provide all manner of assistance to the CDM (US Congress 2022). Even some regional financial institutions have disavowed connections with the country: The Asian Development Bank, for example, has temporarily put on hold infrastructural project disbursements and new contracts that would facilitate Myanmar's economic development. Against this backdrop, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has tried to ease tensions, albeit in vain. As the situation snowballed, member states urged Myanmar's military to take concrete actions to effectively implement the "Five-Point Consensus" that had hastily been reached in April 2021. While failing to mention the *Tatmadaw*, the official statement calls for constructive dialogue, humanitarian assistance, and an immediate cessation of violence (ASEAN 2021). Even though, albeit theoretically, the association is committed to implementing a crisis resolution plan more in deeds than in words, it is unlikely to find a way back on the path towards democratization, since the COVID-19 pandemic meant reducing the political situation in Myanmar to a footnote on its agenda.

All these issues were addressed in a hybrid international conference on Myanmar hosted by T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute on 18–19 February 2022 in Turin and organized in partnership with the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society of the University of Turin, with the support of the City of Turin and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo. The conference is part of the activities conducted by MyERN – Myanmar-Europe Research Network which aims to give a voice to Myanmar's scholars through intellectual engagement with European and global academics and practitioners. This book is a collection of selected papers from the conference, all reflecting on the consequences of the coup for the country's political, economic, and social future. The themes of the chapters, notwithstanding the variety of topics, perspectives, and approaches, revolve around three overarching concepts: resistance, resilience, and re-invention.

The case of Myanmar stands out as an example in South-East Asia of how people promptly respond to the challenges of authoritarian regimes through disobedi-

ence and resistance. The CDM epitomizes the backbone of protest for all parties involved in the post-coup era. To those opposing the SAC, the CDM is not only at the forefront of the anti-regime campaign but also poised to overthrow the military-controlled administrations (Anonymous 2021). For some, it is not even a case of restoring the decade-long transitional democratic process abruptly interrupted by the coup: They feel hopelessly betrayed, and for them, it is a matter of getting rid of the *Tatmadaw* entirely. Resistance to the authorities' repressive strategy has also continued from the various ethnic groups affected by political and social exclusion, which see the coup and its aftermath as yet another episode in an inter-Bamar contestation of power. As the junta has resumed its turf war in the borderland areas, some ethnic armed organizations, like the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance in Northern Shan State have been forced to launch a string of offensives on the *Tatmadaw*'s positions. The Rohingyas in Rakhine state have also adopted various forms of resistance (see Nabuco Martuscelli, Ahmed and Sammonds 2022), including fleeing to Bangladesh *en masse* since 2017, to survive persecution.

Resilience is a key concept derived from the fields of psychology and sociology and comes into play when individuals or organizations prove their abilities and competencies to resist the challenges generated in a condition of crisis. We might argue that – even before the coup – Myanmar's transition could be better understood as a case of “authoritarian resilience” rather than democratization (Ruzza, Gabusi and Pellegrino 2019). The same ethnic groups have been resilient throughout the decades of domestic in-fighting. As for the post-coup era, resilience for the CDM means keeping spirits and determination alive to build a federal and democratic union by recognizing diversity in culture, religion, and language; re-organizing the protest in urban and rural communities to shape a cohesive bloc against the military government; and ultimately, countering the systematic human rights violations that a large part of the population has been suffering.

Underlying all the papers is a general sense of discomfort about the state of the union. Even if Myanmar may not technically be regarded as a failed state (at least, not yet), there is a general perception that Myanmar's government is failing its own people. Far from following the modernization path of fellow ASEAN members like Malaysia and Vietnam, for example, Myanmar seems to be stuck on a path of internal strife, isolation, and underdevelopment. No matter how the political situation evolves, we can easily argue that the country has to be re-invented in several respects, starting from the relationship between the Bamar majority and the ethnic populations in the borderlands. In his keynote speech at the 2022 MyERN conference, Roberto Toniatti – an emeritus professor at the University of Trento – pointed out that there might be a fundamental misunderstanding between the *Tatmadaw* and the ethnic armed organizations regarding the meaning of federalism. While the former thinks they have a historical duty to pursue a path of nation-building, the latter prefer to talk about a process of state-building, where single states can choose whether or not to be members of a federation. As the authors often remark in their contribution, re-invention also concerns the complicated relationship among the different “souls” of the resistance and their ideas for the future, the education system, the economy, and even the ASEAN posture vis-à-vis an embarrassing member.

This book's many and varied voices contribute significantly to the debate over a more enlightened – and people-centered – evolution of Myanmar.

### Structure of the book

Although the rapid changes make the situation all the more difficult to predict, what the book explores here are some political, economic, and social issues of the post-coup era. It consists of 11 contributions that draw on a variety of primary and secondary sources to explain the reaction to the coup and offer an understanding of Myanmar's reality under military rule. We hope that this structure allows for a detailed comprehension of Myanmar's recent transformation in different fields.

We begin by focusing on the domestic difficulties that have brought Myanmar back to the past. Kaung Sett Wai stresses that the CDM has failed as a nonviolent movement. The “competing hands” behind the CDM have only managed to “push the whole burden of the revolution onto the shoulders of public servants,” with the final result that the general public was, in the end, more damaged than the military. Kaung Sett Wai argues that, even though there are many intellectual roots in the CDM, there is also a lack of understanding of liberal political thought, which could represent the only sustainable foundation of any possible democratic regime in Myanmar in the future.

Min Thang reminds us that the *Tatmadaw's* coup in 2021 was nothing new but the latest event in a well-known historical pattern. The chapter sums up what has happened in the country since 1 February by examining the challenges facing people in the country (especially the youth) and their resistance to the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The author stresses how the international community, which unfortunately is now distracted by Russia's territorial invasion of Ukraine, has to do more than adopt sanctions and issue condemnations to support the youth of Myanmar because the political crisis will not end without engagement from abroad.

Megan Ryan and Mai Van Tran scrutinize the role of military newspapers and social media platforms since the coup, as they were fighting for influence over public opinion. They argue that, despite pro-resistance content enjoying a significantly higher rate of engagement on average than pro-military content, democratic activists' posts on Facebook and Twitter gradually declined while pro-military rhetoric gained ground. The chapter sheds some light on how authoritarian regimes manage to control the narrative on social media, especially when resistance does not share a common ideological goal.

Cecilia Brighi and Khaing Zar Aung deal with reactions from the Confederation of Myanmar Trade Unions, which promptly mobilized its 110,000 members to take part in the CDM. This happened thanks to the unions' decades-long experience of organizing clandestine meetings. Furthermore, they could count on a large labor activist network that began organizing strikes and demonstrations *en bloc* throughout the country and, in most economic sectors, even halting the government ministries' operations.

Another factor that requires a great deal of attention is ethnonationalism. By sketching out the complex history of ceasefire, disarmament, and re-armament of the Ta'ang rebel movements, Francesco Buscemi considers ethnonationalism not

merely an ideology being mobilized by a political movement but a phenomenon that has a societal character. It has a political logic that infuses society with narratives and practices of justifying weapons and governing them and their relationship with the people. Thus, ethnonationalism becomes entrenched in communities and seems to take on a life of its own, notwithstanding what happens “outside”.

The increase in instability in Myanmar has seen a surge in narcotics production and trafficking into South-East Asia and beyond. By looking at some Western, Thai, and Chinese press sources, Maria Elena Sassaroli contributes to the literature on the topic by providing a summary of the evolution of the world’s second-largest producer of opium in the years leading up to and following the coup.

A sector that has undoubtedly paid a high price before and after the current military rule is education. Licia Proserpio and Antonio Fiori’s study, based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with governmental officials and university teaching staff, investigates how the SAC is reversing the NLD government’s education reforms to a model of repression and control aimed at keeping a space of separation between students and the society. The SAC’s action has also generated divergences between academics who have joined the CDM and those who have chosen to safeguard at least their teaching activities. In such a grim situation, the authors find some hope in the ongoing debate about the re-invention of the education system in a federal way, if and when a political space opens up. In his chapter, however, Yaw Bawm Mangshang demonstrates that the education reforms approved in the past have failed to achieve their objective of allowing mother tongue-based multilingual education for all ethnic nationalities because the content of the curricula has continued to rely on Bamar culture and Buddhism. Therefore, the author argues that multilingual education could help to re-invent Myanmar as a federal union where the wealth of different cultures and traditions could not only be respected but also become a source of strength.

Myanmar is now facing a triple crisis: the post-coup political setting, the post-pandemic sanitary shortcomings, and considerable economic weakness. In their qualitative and quantitative research, Samu Ngwenya-Tshuma and Min Zar Ni Lin argue that political instability and the uncertainty of orders have negatively affected factory operations. The garment sector shows some resilience, and for the most part, there are reasons for optimism; however, it continues to present worrying levels of uncertainty under military rule, not least because large importers like the European Union still face the dilemma of whether or not to sanction Myanmar’s world-competitive industrial sector, which consists mostly of small and medium-sized enterprises employing women.

The economic section ends with a contribution to the cattle trade between Myanmar and the People’s Republic of China. A team of scholars comprising Andrew Laitha, Terdsak Yano, Manabu Fujimura, and Manoj Potapohn points out that most of the benefits of cattle smuggling to China would accrue to Chinese buyers, local traders, and influential individuals connected to the Chinese network, while Myanmar’s farmers who supply the surplus cattle would gain little. As the coup and the COVID-19 pandemic have complicated joint efforts between China and Myanmar to regulate the legal trade, the authors also put

forward some policy suggestions to re-invent Myanmar's capacity in cross-border agricultural trade.

In the final few pages of the book, the last contribution considers how ASEAN could tentatively play a significant and effective role in mediation between the military and the elected civilian leaders to find a possible solution to Myanmar's political crisis. Aung Kyaw Min argues that ASEAN could draw on lessons learned from the solution to the conflict in Cambodia in the early 1990s by moving beyond the Five-Point Consensus and involving the UN.

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# The competing hands behind Myanmar's 2021 democratic movement

**Kaung Sett Wai**

*On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power before the NLD party, which had won the 2020 election, could form a government. After a week of confusion and uncertainty, the people of Myanmar showed their dissatisfaction with the military takeover through peaceful protest on the street and a nationwide movement of civil disobedience. The movement spread across the country, resulting in major suspensions to every sector of the military government's bureaucratic system. However, this nonviolent movement gradually shifted toward armed struggle as the leaders pursued different goals from the original struggle for a 'democratic transition.' This paper argues that the complex nature of the 2021 democratic struggle in Myanmar is not a process of invisible hands, as many have claimed, but driven by the competing hands of various actors who try to shape the means and goals of the movement. After a period of competition for the role of dominant actor, the current leadership put the movement on a path of armed struggle; as a result, groups with different opinions have been forced out of the movement. This article treats the Civil Disobedience Movement as the central driving force of the 2021 democratic struggle in Myanmar and points to three major shifts in the democratic movement. By analyzing these major patterns of transformation, the paper explains why the nonviolent path has failed and what to expect of Myanmar's democracy in the future.*

**KEYWORDS:** CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT; DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION; NONVIOLENT CAMPAIGN.

## Introduction

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military seized political power by detaining the leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and accusing them of fraud in the 2020 election. Despite a decade-long military-monitored democracy, Myanmar had fallen into the hands of the military once again. The military started making formal accusations on 28 January 2021, when it claimed to have tangible evidence about fraud in the previous election (RFA 2021) and requested a national emergency meeting. At the time, a letter written by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing was disseminated on Facebook. According to his letter, the military had serious doubts about the Union Election Committee of 2020 and demanded the creation of a new election committee to review the election results. The military also recommended that the activities of the new Hluttaw be halted during that time. An early warning of the military takeover was included in the letter, which stated that if the NLD ignored these requests, the military would take action as permitted under the 2008 constitution (Myanmar Now 2021).

Myanmar's 2008 constitution included partial governance by the military to guarantee its participation in every aspect of the government's administrative sector without much need for approval from the public. In 2011, General Than Shwe, the chairman of the ruling military junta's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), took control of all state power and suppressed all opposition with an iron fist but voluntarily dissolved his own SPDC and resigned from the army, as well as every other government position (Htut 2019). The NLD's overwhelming victory in the 2015 election came as a shock to the military and its counterpart, the Union Solidarity Development Party (USDP), which had al-

ways believed it had strong support around the country. In truth, many opposition groups formed against the NLD government between 2015 and 2020, especially student unions, nationalists, Marxists, and ethnic political parties, as well as Buddhist extremists. There was even a “No Vote” movement before the 2020 election, which claimed that the NLD was just a lesser evil compared with the military. Surprisingly, amid this anti-NLD campaign and criticism, the NLD still won in a landslide in the 2020 election. This time, the military accused the NLD of cheating in the election.

### **The role of social media in Myanmar**

The transition from military regime to elected democracy, which started in 2010, began to open up the formerly closed society in Myanmar. The most significant change was Internet access. While only 1 in 100 households had had access to a mobile connection under the military because of the cost of mobile cards, the price of SIM cards fell from 1,500,000 Myanmar kyats (about 1,000 dollars) to 1,500 Myanmar kyats (USD 1) under the USDP government. This allowed people to have unlimited access to the Internet, including social media. The most influential social media platform in Myanmar is Facebook, which has millions of users all around the country, from children to senior citizens. During this time, government officials also actively used Facebook and posted their daily activities on social media, where the public could interact with them directly without restrictions. Social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as individual blogs and groups, open pathways for the promotion of awareness and encourage advocacy (Surendran 2013). The most noticeable evidence that social media made a big impact on Myanmar society came in 2013, when *Time Magazine* profiled a Buddhist monk called Ashin Wirathu as the Buddhist 969 movement leader for advocating the social exclusion of the Muslim-minority population in the country (Hukil 2013). This increasing use of social media by the public brought a new platform for the politics of Myanmar, which is the use of social media as a political tool.

Starting on 1 February, several pages were created on Facebook with the popular trending theme of revolution against the military, a boycott of military products, and punishment for non-cooperators in the Civil Disobedience Movement by entertainment celebrities and social influencers. These people and pages fervently posted updates, links, images, videos, and comments about the situation in Myanmar every hour without checking the sources' credibility. Moreover, they relentlessly spread news, information, and instructions via social media, which reached the public within hours on social media. The primacy of these tweets and Facebook pages initially aimed to promote the situation in Myanmar through regular postings of activities and events to achieve greater awareness from the international community.

### **The Civil Disobedience Movement**

The most successful anti-military movement in Myanmar in 2021 was the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which was a nonviolent campaign to protest the military coup. The movement was alleged to be a spontaneous event that arose from the rage of the people over the tyranny of the military and free from external control, but in fact it was a planned process to put pressure on the mil-

itary. On 1 February, a picture of a letter allegedly written by Aung San Suu Kyi spread across social media. The letter posted on the NLD's Facebook page was entitled "A request to the people of Myanmar." Among others, the letter stated that the people of Myanmar must not accept the coup and must show their will against the military (Aung San Suu Kyi 2021). In an interview with *Voice Journal*, Win Htein, an influential voice within the NLD, swore the letter was authentic. Furthermore, he claimed the letter had been written by Aung San Suu Kyi herself on 29 January (Aung San Suu Kyi) and explained that Aung San Suu Kyi wanted people to show their resistance by participating in the CDM. Thus, the movement was launched by Win Htein, even though People still had their doubts about his words and the letter.

Doctors working at the 550-bed hospital in Mandalay were the first to take part and began the CDM on 2 February to show they were unwilling to accept the military coup (Irrawaddy 2021). The movement itself was inspired by the idea of Henry David Thoreau and his book *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, in which he argued that people need to let go of a government if its mechanisms turn with the oil of injustice. By letting it go, he meant the unjust government machinery will wear out and stop. The whole idea of civil disobedience is that if you have to be the agent of injustice to another, then it is better to break the law and be a counter-friction to stop the machine (Thoreau 1963).

The person who became the leading figure of Myanmar's 2021 CDM was Min Ko Naing, a former student leader during the protests of 1988. On 5 February, he posted a letter on his Facebook account titled "Who is leading now?" In the letter, he made an analogy between the anti-military democratization movement in Myanmar and a train: Although the train is now without its engine, all the wagons have their own engine to move forward by themselves (Min Ko Naing 2021c). He posted his announcement under the name of the 88<sup>th</sup> Generation (Peace and Open Society), stating that the CDM of public servants can cripple and destroy the government bureaucracy, and the boycott of military products would decrease the military budget (Min Ko Naing 2021d). On 7 February, he posted a video of his speech to the public in which he encouraged public officers to take part in the CDM (Min Ko Naing 2021f). His idea was inspired by the nonviolent campaigns used by government officials worldwide such as stalling and obstruction, general administrative noncooperation, judicial noncooperation, deliberate inefficiency, and selective noncooperation (Albert Einstein Institution 2020).

Within a day of U Min Ko Naing's post, almost all government offices emptied out, with most of the country taking part in the CDM. Another successful attempt to cripple the military was the boycott movement of military-related products. This also came from the theoretical explanation of Thoreau. Although Thoreau's idea focused on government taxation, the boycott campaign targeted the products of military-related companies and later the small neighborhood shops that sold military products (Thoreau 1963). The purpose of the campaign was to shape the target's action by heavily inflicting damage on its revenues (Albert Einstein Institution 2020). The idea that buying products from the military was the same as paying the military to kill and oppress the public spread across social media, and consumers refused to buy the boycotted goods.

## **Impact of the Civil Disobedient Movement**

Despite the movement's success, there were some major flaws in the concept of CDM in Myanmar. The first flaw was that there was no clear definition of which public servants should carry out the CDM. When Min Ko Naing posted a letter to the public entitled "Anti-military coup nonviolent campaign" on 7 February, the second part of his letter mentioned an "All public servants boycott," which would show their denial of the military's rule by not going to work and resigning from their positions (Min Ko Naing 2021b). From his letter, it can be assumed that his definition of the CDM included all government officials, ranging from the managerial level to office clerks and even private bank employees.

The civil servants who were the most active participants in the CDM were teachers, doctors, and bank workers, whose duties were essential to the public in their day-to-day lives in an underdeveloped country like Myanmar. Although other sectors of government also joined the CDM, the education, healthcare, and banking sectors had more civil servants who took part by staying home. The CDM of these civil servants resulted in further damage being inflicted on the public rather than the military, as is clear from the case of physicians and medical workers' participation in the CDM. For most of the impoverished citizens of Myanmar, the only healthcare system was the government hospitals, which have always been overpopulated with patients. With the instruction to leave work, the doctors decided to stop performing their duties and left the hospitals, claiming that they refused to work under the military regime. Normally, strikes by special groups (e.g., prisoners' strikes, craft strikes, and professional strikes like public school teachers' strike) are recognized as nonviolent and successful attempts to pressure the targets without harming the public (M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence 2020). But with doctors and physicians leaving hospitals in the middle of the third wave of COVID-19, the consequences were tragic.

Another error of the CDM is that there was no specific timeframe was set for the public servants to carry out their actions. Although in the announcement of 88<sup>th</sup> Generation's (Peace and Open Society), which Min Ko Naing posted on his Facebook account on 8<sup>th</sup> February, stated that the public servants' CDM would start on 8 February and to continue to 21 days (Min Ko Naing 2021h), the instigations and encouragements to perform CDM still continued till this day. Ignoring the fact that the peaceful movement was already destroyed by the assassinations of non-CDM public servants, the key players in the anti-military movement continued to force public servants to join the CDM even now. Following the example of Min Ko Naing, the newly established Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hlittaw (CRPH) made announcement 1/2021 on 8 February by supporting the CDM with the slogan "Not quitting, just skipping." With the idea of wielding the CDM as the primary tool against the military, people were convinced the CDM was the key to success for their anti-military campaign. Unintentionally or not, Min Ko Naing placed the whole burden of resisting the military on the shoulders of the public servants.

From then on, the whole democratic revolution was focused on the CDM. On 14 February, Min Ko Naing again said the revolution would be successful if the civil servants' CDM held out for another two months (Min Ko Naing 2021e). While pushing for the CDM, all of the responsibilities of the revolution were pushed onto low-ranking public servants who received very low wages. They were having diffi-

culty deciding whether to participate in the CDM while putting their families at risk. When some of these public servants decided not to join the movement, they were targeted as traitors and later persecuted by the local People's Defense Forces.

### **End of the nonviolent Civil Disobedient Movement**

The main issue that corrupted the anti-military movement was the uncontrollable spread of social punishment culture on social media. It all started when Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, a young female activist in Mandalay, was shot and killed during the protests (Tun 2021). The increasing rage of the public was satisfied by social media influencers' exhortations to punish the suspects, as well as their families and relatives (McMichael 2021). At first, the punishment included minor actions like reporting their Facebook accounts. But social media users also inflicted harsher punishment through unethical means, such as spreading false pornography of the female members of the family. While the ostracism of persons (e.g., excommunication and social boycott) was a valid way to carry out the nonviolent campaign, these actions of the keyboard fighters (those who actively use social media such as Facebook, Twitter etc. for the purpose of spreading awareness and information) far exceeded the nonviolent ones (M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence 2020).

The CRPH also began to face a lot of criticism from university students for continuing the nonviolent movement despite the military's brutality. When the General Strike Committee (GSC) increasingly gained popular support, the CRPH announced it was also taking up armed struggle against the military. The 'Suu, Yway, Hlutt' faction, which had come to dominate the National Unity Government (NUG), continued to hold onto the CDM of public servants as their source of influence. Their reasoning is that since those who joined the CDM were the supporters of NLD victory in the 2020 election, those who did not participate were supporters of military. Then they planned to force the civil servants to join the movement by using threats and social punishments. This intention can be seen in the announcement of CRPH on 7<sup>th</sup> March, 2021. In the announcement, the CRPH clearly stated their will that the civil servants who did not participate in the CDM were breaking the laws of the only legitimate government of Myanmar, National Unity Government (NUG) (CRPH 2021c). This announcement indirectly implied that the civil servants who did not join in the CDM were criminals and supporters of military.

With the CRPH officially announced on 21 March 2021 and signed into being by Lwin Ko Latt, the resentment and hostility toward the non-CDM increased further (CRPH 2021b). In the announcement, the CRPH declared the final chance for the public servants to join the CDM would be on 31 March, and those who had participated in CDM would be rewarded while those who did not would be severely punished. Although the intention of the announcement may have been planned to draw more public servants to participate in CDM, it had a brutal impact on non-CDM public servants. Social media influencers and celebrities from the entertainment industry spread beliefs, for example that non-CDM were supporters of the military and "traitors." A similar type of issue was found in the clearing of spies during the 1988 revolution (Lintner 1989). Nevertheless, these justifications led to the local PDF, which were under the

influence of social media, targeting non-CDM public servants and their family members for assassination. The whole country became an open war zone when President Du Wah La Shee of the NUG declared an emergency on 7 September (CRPH 2021c). The announcement contained 14 points, which called on public servants appointed by the military to resign and continue CDM and also sought to encourage the military and police to join the CDM.

The leading person in the effort to inflict social punishment on non-CDM civil servants was Zaw Wai Soe, an orthopedic surgeon and the rector of the University of Medicine (1) in Yangon. On 20 February, he posted on Facebook that he would abandon all his oaths, honor, and dignity as a doctor to fight the military (Zaw Wai Soe 2021a). His dedication was praised by many people, and he became the leading figure in the CDM. He theorizes the CDM as a three-step movement and claims the current step of CDM must move to the final stage of CDM: "Total CDM." He pointed out that the continued survival of the military was because of the non-CDM civil servants. On 23 February, he posted a letter on Facebook and declared the non-CDM public servants are also killers, and they would be severely punished (Zaw Wai Soe 2021b). Thus, the peaceful CDM began to take a vengeful path toward those who did not follow the CDM.

While Henry David Thoreau, the father of the Civil Disobedience Movement, said "this is no reason why I should do as they do or permit others to suffer much greater pain of a different kind," (Thoreau 1963) the keyboard fighters took the social punishment so far that it downgraded the whole nonviolent movement to a dehumanizing movement that later justified the killings of non-CDM public servants by the People's Defense Forces (PDF). The armed groups that were formed in the cities were directed by the social media influencers to perform the missions called the "Clearing of Dalan," in which the PDF assassinated non-CDM civil servants under the instructions of social media influencers.

### **Political divide between democratic groups in Myanmar politics**

Without a constitutional amendment, the military will always have the power to control the politics of the country, and the pro-democratic forces faced a dilemma of whether to accept the undesirable constitutional arrangement of 2008. There were two factions within the NLD on the issue. The hardcore faction, inspired by Marxism and communism, favored rejecting the 2008 constitution and taking up arms to defend democracy. By contrast, the soft faction planned to achieve full-fledged democracy through constitutional reforms after accepting the 2008 constitution (Bhattacharjee 2014: 3–4). Ultimately, the NLD decided to take the path of constitutional reform and entered the election. But the political elites have always had in mind that the military can take back what they give anytime, and to remove the military's iron grip on the country's future, the most important task for the pro-democratic groups is to amend the constitution, which reserved 25 percent of seats in the Hluttaw for the military (Gupta 2014). The public mocked and ignored the early warnings from the military, as well as political elites, and many even dared the military by spreading slogans on social media like "If you want to take it, take the garbage," etc. when there were rumors about possible military coup. By contrast, there were several meetings happening between the

military and the NLD in Nay Pyi Taw, as well as in Yangon, from 28 to 31 January, where the military asked the NLD leadership to postpone the forming of the Hluttaw and to check ballots from the previous election under a new Union Election Committee (Reuters 2021). Thus, the NLD leadership already took notice of the possible military takeover while the public was not aware of it.

The military takeover on 1 February shocked the public, and after the coup, people were waiting for news from Aung San Suu Kyi to decide whether to protest. Even after the widespread increase in anti-military coup campaigns, there was no systematically unified anti-military group with a leadership position. Major conflict erupted between the Marxist and the democratic factions among the political elites. The age-old Marxist faction had once been the most influential in Myanmar politics and was still trying to recapture its prestigious position from the democratic faction (which they called opportunists) that had joined hands with the military. The democratic faction, however, viewed the Marxist faction as an aggressive and dangerous group that could destroy the harmony they had built by reaching out to the military. These two groups constantly clashed with each other whenever a decision had to be made. The entire anti-military movement, which began in February, was led by a competition between these two factions.

When the CDM movement was discussed, many claimed it would be an invisible movement looking like the product of someone's intentional design but not produced by anyone in particular. However, the facts laid out above clearly show the whole movement was designed to strangle the military by using the public as a mean. In other word, NLD decided to abandon their political duties of negotiations and instead shoved everything on the shoulder of the public. And the general public had to pay the price of lives, families and occupations. Therefore, instead of an invisible hand, the CDM is a process of invisible hands: it looks disconnected on the surface but is the product of an individual's or a group's intentional design (Nozick 1974).

As mentioned previously, Min Ko Naing presented a strategy to the public which is designed to remove Military control and the release of Aung Sann Suu Kyi on 5<sup>th</sup> of February. His strategy is comprised of two parts. The first was to place the general public as the driving force of the whole movement (Min Ko Naing 2021c) and the second is placing the CDM of civil servants as the most important above other actions (Min Ko Naing 2021d). In sum, his plan was to use the CDM of civil servants to cripple and destroy the bureaucratic system as a whole to pressure the military. Therefore, the CDM of the civil servants became the center of the whole movement later on. The events after February 5<sup>th</sup> were aftermaths of Min Ko Naing's strategy. Since then, he began to instigate the young generations to increase the movement's momentum by utilizing social media as political tool (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). This led to the forming of an online society dubbed the "Keyboard fighters" who stood electronically against the military without participating in street protests. They included youths from abroad, as well as domestic youths from universities and colleges in Yangon. They became most powerful force since then as they created Facebook pages and interrogated the people close to them if they were supporters of the military. Although their judgment were based on whether the suspects posted or shared any anti-military posts and photos on social media, they were

feared by general public for their brutal social punishments on social media. For instance, people had to show them their photos of participating in protests as evidence of not being related to military personnel. And if someone is decided as guilty of not supporting CDM, they and their whole family is socially punished by the general public who followed these keyboard fighters.

### **The “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction and the general strike committee**

“Suu, Yway, Hlutt” is a synonym for “Release Aung San Suu Kyi, Accept the results of 2020 election and call for Hluttaw to be made up of the NLD.” Prominent figures from this faction included Min Ko Naing, Myoe Yan Naung Thein, Zaw Wai Soe, Pencello, and other social media influencers. The “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction encouraged civil servants to engage in the CDM to force the military into accepting their three demands. The CDM was the most important tool for the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction to build up its influence in the anti-military movement. The faction was also supported by members of the NLD. For instance, the people’s representatives who were staying in government housing in Nay Pyi Taw made announcement 1/2021, in which they claimed themselves as the only legitimate representatives following the 2008 constitution, and they demanded the immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint on 3 February 2021 (Chair NLD 2021). The very first formal statement of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on 8 February gave full support to the CDM and asked that all people encourage public servants to take part in the movement (CRPH 2021e).

The most influential actor in the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction was Min Ko Naing. His famous letter to the people of Myanmar was entitled the “anti-military coup nonviolent campaign.” In the letter, released to the public on 7 February, he stated that CRPH was the only organization that has the “mandate” and “legitimacy” to be the government of Myanmar and that the CRPH was in motion to face against the military, which had seized power illegitimately (Min Ko Naing 2021b). He asked the public to encourage public servants to take part in the CDM because it was the most lethal tool against the military. On 14 February, he again posted a video of his speech on Facebook social media, in which he stated that it was the most important week of the CDM and that this movements would be the military’s Achilles’ heel (Min Ko Naing 2021g). From his speeches, it is clear that the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction planned to pressure the military by utilizing the public servants and their participation in the CDM.

On 24 February, Min Ko Naing again posted a letter on his Facebook profile, this time entitled “CDM of the people or another strategic play.” He introduced the CRPH to the public by declaring it was working to form a legitimate government that would be another strategic part of the CDM (Min Ko Naing 2021a). The “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction planned to use the CDM as a foundation for the CRPH by creating the Union government, which could be claimed to have legitimacy because it was part of the CDM. They continued to spread the idea that civil servants had the duty to continue with the CDM so that the Union government could show that the public does not want to be under military rule. While the idea of public officials performing the CDM came from Thoreau’s

suggestion that such officials should resign their office if they really want to do something against the injustice of the government, the original instruction only suggested that the revolution will finish when people refused allegiance and the public officers resigned their offices (Thoreau 1963). The instructions about what to do next if the targeted government was not hampered by the movement were not mentioned in his book. Nevertheless, Zaw Wai Soe, who took the leading role in the CDM after Min Ko Naing, used it as a tool to shift the blame to non-CDM public servants.

Meanwhile, a challenge to the influence of “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction was raised by the General Strike Committee (GSC), which formed on 20 February when 25 different organizations from different fields, including political groups, joined together to promote the idea that people should not be happy with just “Suu, Yway, Hlutt,” which would only mean returning to life with military involvement. They proposed that everyone fight for full democracy without the military by any means necessary. They explained that the nonviolent path could not take the revolution forward and pointed out that the NLD’s acts of reconciliation were never successful. Therefore, they adopted a strict rule of never negotiating with the military and spread their idea to the public. Their visions were threefold: (1) to work for the end of military dictatorship, (2) to abolish the 2008 constitution, and (3) to establish a federal democratic union (Min Ko Naing 2021c). The GSC became a challenge to the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction because the GSC indirectly implied that if the 2008 constitution was rejected as undemocratic, the “legitimacy” and “mandate” of CRPH, which was derived from the results of the 2020 election under the constitution, would be lost.

Although the GSC in its founding statement declared its position that it accepted the election results of 2020, it took the anti-military revolution further than “Suu, Yway, Hlutt.” However, it was bitterly opposed by the public, which saw the faction as competing with the leading position of CRPH. Many negative comments can be seen on the GSC’s Facebook page on 20 February 2021 (Min Ko Naing 2021b). One reason the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction did not associate with the GSC was because it saw the latter as a group of communists influenced by the Marxist faction. Their worries were justified because the members of the GSC were mostly from student unions around the country and Marxist political groups. They were unpopular in Myanmar politics because they constantly criticized the NLD for conceding too much to the military in the past and instigated anti-government campaigns under the NLD government.

When the GSC stated that the public was united in its hatred for the military and the time was ripe to remove it from Myanmar politics, people started to reconsider their support for the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction. The GSC gained a momentous upper hand when members of the prestigious Yangon University Student Union marched onto the campus of the University of Yangon on 25 February and delivered a speech at the old Student Union building. This demonstration without violence pressured the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction to give up its demands and showed the military the strength of the university students (Albert Einstein Institution 2021). The movement that day brought the GSC into the spotlight when student unions from all around the country an-

nounced they would fight (1) to bring an end to the military dictatorship, (2) to abolish the 2008 constitution, and (3) to establish a federal democratic union (Min Ko Naing 2021b). The GSC had planned and strategized psychological interventions for nonviolent harassment better than the ruthless social media influencers were able to accomplish. For example, pictures of Myanmar military soldiers were displayed with the words “I suffered when you are enjoying luxury” in public places. This was a satirical comment that the soldiers of low ranks have to do the dirty work under the command of generals who are living in opulence (M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence 2020). The GSC also successfully encouraged the students to withdraw from government educational institutions. Through literature and speeches, they peacefully advocated resistance to the military (Albert Einstein Institution 2021).

Given the public’s criticism directed at them, the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction changed their goals on 5 March, stating they too now aimed (1) to bring an end to the military dictatorship, (2) to ensure the unconditional release of all unlawful detainees, including President U Win Myint and State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, (3) to achieve full-fledged democracy, and (4) to rescind the 2008 constitution and write a new constitution based on the federal system (CRPH 2021a). The GSC also announced that it agreed with the CRPH announcement to join forces to work together for their goals on 6 March 2021 (Min Ko Naing 2021a). Although the “Suu, Yway, Hlutt” faction agreed with the GSC, rumors spread that the CRPH still wanted to follow the path of reconciliation with the military. The GSC’s influence grew to such an extent that the CRPH eventually had to announce the abolition of the 2008 constitution on 31 March 2021 to satisfy the public (CRPH 2021a). Since then, the anti-military movement of Myanmar has taken the path of armed struggle to the extent that the National Unity Government (NUG), which was established on 16 April 2021, created the People’s Defense Force (PDF) on 5 May 2021 (CRPH 2021d). This led to the creation of multiple local PDFs that did not fall under the command of the NUG and waged their battles in their own way. According to the MIPS report, there were 380 PDFs in Myanmar. The peaceful nonviolent movement ended, and the brutal path of armed struggle had begun.

## **Conclusion**

The CDM in Myanmar has failed as a nonviolent movement but has had a successful strategy of utilizing coercion and threats to push the whole burden of the revolution onto the shoulders of public servants. Like the anti-Muslim 969 movement was formed with the support of the military, which was the real power behind it, the CDM movement became a movement driven by a group of politicians who changed public opinion through social media (Facebook, in particular) (Routray 2014). The movement was not formed spontaneously. Although the anti-military revolution in 2021 was rooted in public hatred over military rule, the CDM, social punishments, and Dalanizations were the products of profit-seeking politicians and people who sought to make public servants the ones to shoulder all the burden. To quote Kant, it is immoral to use people as a means to achieve one’s goal. Whoever took part in the process that simply treats people’s lives as a means to an end has no right to claim justice on their side.

When US President Bill Clinton apologized for the United States and the world community not doing enough to try to limit the violence and genocide in Rwanda, it was too late because lives had already been lost (Power 2001). Currently, there are many groups of the People's Defense Force (PDF) in cities whose leaders are anonymous, and their priority is to remove the "dalans" (Spies or Informers). By contrast, the military with its most brutal means is trying to suppress the public. All of this is happening in full view of the world community, which is not raising their voices to stop the fighting. It is becoming more and more dangerous for those who openly say that the situation in Myanmar is deteriorating. Anyone who talks about peace and negotiation is treated as a traitor by the anti-military groups and ignored by the military.

In the future, the only possible scenario for Myanmar to achieve peace and democracy is for the military to continue to play a role until an election is held and political power is given to their favorite political party. Therefore it is impossible that the detained public leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be released in the coming years. One unexpected factor is the increase in the political power of anti-military armed groups, which are not allied with the NUG. There is also the possibility of having new leadership led by communists and socialists, since a lot of youths are heavily influenced by Marxism. Lastly, the path of peaceful reconciliation left by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will be completely abandoned if there is no liberal political thought in Myanmar, which is a difficult issue because most people have no understanding of liberal thought, and the public views liberalism as a weak political ideology. However, if there is an alternate solution for the future of Myanmar, spreading liberalism to the public through education and media is the only method for democracy because democracy cannot survive in a completely illiberal society.

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# Unrest in Myanmar after the coup of 2021

Min Thang

*Since the earliest days of the independence movement, the Tatmadaw (Myanmar Armed Forces) has played an important role in Burma politics. Before independence, the military's primary role had been to liberate the country from foreign domination, particularly by the British and the Japanese. Having previously been under British rule, the country gained independence in 1948. Military rule started in 1958, and direct military rule happened when Ne Win seized power in 1962, Than Shwe in 1988, and Min Aung Hlaing in 2021. Military control of the government is nothing new for the people of Myanmar. The reason for the military coup on 1 February 2021 was to combat purported fraud in the 2020 general election. In the following days, people protested in various ways all across the country. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in non-violent demonstrations, and the military and police increasingly used force to violently crack down on the protesters. In turn, youths have also taken to using handmade guns (*tu mae* in Burmese) to resist the military. This paper analyzes military rule in Myanmar after the coups of 1962, 1988, and 2021 and highlights the impact of and the challenges posed by the most recent coup. The paper also studies the challenges faced by young people in the country and their resistance to the military amid the COVID-19 pandemic in Myanmar. The final section will examine the domestic and international responses to the ongoing dictatorship in Myanmar.*

**KEYWORDS:** REFORMS BEFORE 2021; MILITARY COUP; CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT; COVID-19 IN MYANMAR; ASEAN.

*This paper is dedicated to my beloved father, Ri Tang (Late)*

## Introduction

Myanmar is characterized by great ethnic and religious diversity, and the government officially recognizes 135 'races' or *taingyintha*. The country came under direct control of the military in 1962, after which the Ne Win regime held power until 1988. A bloody coup on 18 September 1988 brought a new military regime to power: the State Law and Order Restoration Council (Seekins 1992: 246). In the early morning hours of 1 February 2021, the *Tatmadaw* staged a coup and arrested President U Win Myint and other civilian officials. A yearlong state of emergency was ordered under section 417 of the 2008 constitution, with a promise that new elections would take place one year after what they labeled as 'fraudulent elections' in November 2020. This coup transferred all legislative, executive, and judicial power of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services by Vice President U Myint Swe, who had been appointed by the military. In response, nationwide protests broke out, and the military junta has used systemic and arbitrary violence against anti-coup protesters. One year after the coup, the Myanmar junta continues to use violence against, pressure, detain, beat, arrest, and kill the demonstrators. It has killed more than 2,000 demonstrators across the country. The people of Myanmar have strongly rejected and continue to resist the coup. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings, anti-coup protest groups have formed on the streets. With the military's extreme escalation of violence on demonstrators, civilians have formed local militias and taken up arms to resist the coup.

## **Background and context of Myanmar**

The British occupied Burma in 1825, 1852, and 1885, and the country (named Burma was changed into Myanmar in 1989 by the military regime) gained independence from British rule in 1948 (Ghosh 2000). In this paper, I will use the term Burma and Myanmar interchangeably. I will also use the term Burmese means to all nationalities in Union and in language Burmese means Bamar language. U Nu became the first prime minister of Burma, and the country had a parliamentary government from 1948 to 1958. The country faced various problems, including issues of federalism and civil wars along ethnic and ideological lines. After the military seized control in 1958, and U Nu appointed Ne Win to several cabinet posts, both the military and police presence increased substantially. The new Burmese (Bamar) political system became unitary, and non-Bamar ethnic groups felt uneasy in a Bamar-dominated political system (Topich, William and Leitich 2013). Myanmar has adopted three different constitutions: in 1947, 1974, and 2008. According to the 1974 constitution, Burma is divided into seven states and seven divisions for administrative purposes. The states were mostly hill ethnic groups, and the ethnic Bamar groups were predominant in the divisions. The 2008 constitution renamed these divisions as ‘regions.’ Mutual distrust between the successive majority-Bamar-led central governments and the country’s ethnic minorities has been a continuous source of problems. All major ethnic minorities have engaged in some form of violent or non-violent protest against the central government to achieve equal rights and autonomy under a federal government (Kipgen 2015: 20–21).

Following independence in 1948, Burma’s government was based on a parliamentary democracy characterized by weak internal and external sovereignty. U Nu was opposed by the armed communist groups, which viewed his civilian administration as a continuation of Western colonialism and capitalism. The government also faced armed rebellions by various ethnic groups seeking greater autonomy or even independent statehood. In 1962, Ne Win staged a military coup to reinforce the central government’s hold on power in response to these countervailing forces. Under successive military regimes, the country’s human and physical resources were exhausted through political repression, isolationism, mismanagement, and corruption. Ne Win nationalized private businesses, established state ownership of most enterprises and industries, expelled foreign companies, and restricted foreign trade. He also banned all political parties (except for the Burma Socialist Program Party), imposed strict controls on political and economic activity, controlled government officials, farmers, and workers through their respective organizations, and restricted people’s movement and contact with foreigners (Maung Thawngmung 2019). The principle of the military playing a continuous role was incorporated into the draft constitution that emerged from the National Convention (James 2005).

All the country’s state leaders – from U Nu, Ne Win, and Than Shwe to Thein Sein, Htein Kyaw, and Win Myint – have made attempts to favor, protect, and promote Buddhism in defense of the national religion, and the constitution of 2008 favors the nation’s Buddhist monks over other religions in the country, especially Christians and Muslims. In the 1950s and 1960s, U Nu used his executive power to create the Ministry of Religious Affairs, employed the state

treasury to promote Buddhism, and made Buddhism the state religion, against the expressed will of ethnic groups like the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, who represent the overwhelming majority of Christians in the country (Pum Za Mang 2016). U Nu brought religion into national politics and changed the 1947 constitution that had already been approved by Aung San and other ethnic leaders. Eventually, these actions led to the collapse of the democratic federal system of secular governance in the country. For many decades, the central government developed Burmanization toward other ethnic nationalities in the country. With the support of the central government and Bamar ethnic nationalities, U Nu made Buddhism the state religion (Pum Za Mang 2016). After the military government took power, equality and justice no longer prevailed in Myanmar. The Burmese language, spoken by the Bamar, was made compulsory in all educational institutions and government offices. Students were required to learn Burmese in schools and colleges, and it was made the only official language for raising formal agenda items in Parliament. For several reasons, ethnic groups other than the Bamar majority were apprehensive about the gradual changes in the government's policies. The changes went against the principle of the *Pan-glong* Agreement on local autonomy based on equality and unity in diversity. Bamar culture and religion were imposed on non-Bamar groups. The non-Bamar population construed the changes as a mischievous Burmanization policy to promote Bamar chauvinism (Kipgen 2016). The Ne Win regime actively suppressed diverse social groups, particularly non-Bamar cultural and political identities, by banning minority languages from state schools (South 2008).

From 1948 to 1958, Myanmar was a parliamentary democracy, but political events between 1962 and 2011 isolated the country from the world. Under the military dictatorship, there was a restriction on contact with the outside world. Only a few journalists were accepted but faced restrictions when traveling (Lintner 1989). After almost 50 years of military dictatorship, the *Tatmadaw* created a new constitution in 2008, held multiparty elections in 2010, and transferred power to a nominally civilian government led by Thein Sein and the pro-military party USDP in 2011. These actions transformed Myanmar into a formally democratic state, but the substance of democracy was constrained by constitutional provisions that gave the military control over national security, as well as strong positions of power within Parliament, government, and public administration (Stokke 2019). In February 2021, the *Tatmadaw* again seized power and arrested the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as other political leaders. Since then, as of July 4, 2022 more than 2,057 people have been killed and 11,393 people detained, according to AAPP (2021), which has been met with massive civilian protests. Ethnic minorities in Myanmar have long been targets of the military. Thousands of ethnic minorities have been displaced from their homes due to the ongoing conflict between the *Tatmadaw*, local militias, and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), which can be traced back to the 1950s (Smietana 2021).

### **Reform in Myanmar (2010–2020)**

Myanmar experienced civil wars after 1948 and has been under military control since 1962. Under these conditions, the military has been maintained by the central and Bamar governments. From the very beginning, the military was

deeply embedded in politics and government, which continued under Aung San, Ne Win (Cook and Minogue 1993), Than Shwe, Thein Sein, and Min Aung Hlaing. In 2011, political power was transferred to a civilian government after almost 70 years of brutal dictatorship; however, there was still a military-backed government under the leadership of President Thein Sein, and the military continued to have major political and economic sway over the country. The new government (National League for Democracy, or NLD) carried out a series of political and economic reforms, as detailed below.

### **Political reforms**

Perhaps the most significant changes were made in the political sphere in 2011. In his inaugural address in March 2011, President Thein Sein reached out to critics of the military junta, which in one form or another had ruled the nation for 60 years, and emphasized the need for people to put their differences aside and collaborate for the good of the country. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest. In January 2012, the NLD became a legally registered political party and in April of that year contested elections. It won 43 out of 45 seats – a result the military accepted (Chalk 2013). Myanmar became the darling of the world after its reforms in 2010. Not only the world's top leaders like US President Barack Obama but also film stars like Jackie Chan, Angelina Jolie, and others visited the country. The new democratic government in Parliament enacted a series of socio-political, economic, and administrative reforms.

### **Economic reforms**

In the early 2010s, Myanmar was in the midst of an astonishing transformation from dark dictatorship to peaceful and prosperous democracy. Trade embargos were rolled back, and billions of dollars in aid were promised to make up for lost time. Several top businessmen were investing in Myanmar (Thant Myint-U 2019). In 2014, the country's economy was the fastest growing in the world (Thant Myint-U 2019: 14). In the 2010 census figures, 25.6% (i.e., 16 million people) had been living below the poverty line, and of the total employed, 31% (i.e., 9 million) were earning less than USD 1.25 a day based on 2008 census figures. The rural areas had twice the level of poverty of urban areas, particularly in the Chin and Rakhine states (Bhasin 2014).

Myanmar had witnessed major economic growth over the previous several decades – in particular, since moving towards a more market-oriented economy in 2010. As new industries were emerging and greater foreign direct investment entered the country, urbanization and rising incomes led to greater opportunities for rural populations to seek out income diversification (Müller, Schmidt and Kirkleeng 2020). Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD came to power in 2016, bringing high hopes for positive change in the country. However, the new government also faced major challenges. The military influence continued in public institutions and over the economy. The business environment in Myanmar was becoming better but still faced some big challenges. For ease of doing business, Myanmar improved from 182<sup>nd</sup> out of 189 countries in 2014 to 170<sup>th</sup> out of 190 countries in 2017. Between 2011 and 2016, an average of 46 reforms were implemented annually to make it easier to set up a business (DFAT 2016). The Union-level government played a strong role in economic development in Myanmar, including responsibility for managing licenses in the lucrative natural

resources sectors (Chandra 2021). After decades of isolation from the Western nations and limited interaction with its neighbors to the east, Myanmar embarked on a series of socio-economic reforms across all sectors in 2012 (Kandiko Howson and Lall 2019). International economic sanctions were also eased, and this transition caused various changes. After the democratic transition started, the manufacturing industry expanded its share from 20.4% of GDP in 2007 to 32.1% in 2012 (JICA 2013). The military government announced a referendum in May 2008 to approve a new constitution for the country and a general election in 2010. They already controlled the new parliament with an allocation of 25 percent of seats and veto power over parliamentary decisions. The proposed constitution guaranteed people's right to form political organizations, including unions (Paul 2010).

### **The military coup 2021**

In the early morning hours before Myanmar's newly elected parliament was to convene on 1 February 2021, the military detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint, cabinet ministers, NLD central executive committee members, the chief ministers of Myanmar's states and regions, and members of other political parties and representatives of civil society. As the military carried out these targeted raids, it also cut off Internet and mobile telephone networks in the country's political capital, Naypyitaw, and its economic capital, Yangon, and took the state television channel off the air. In a statement read out on a military-owned channel, the army said it had detained NLD leaders and officials and was invoking the state of emergency provisions in the 2008 constitution, thereby transferring all executive, legislative, and judicial powers to Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing for one year (ICG 2021a). The claimed justification for these actions was serious election fraud, which represented an act or attempt "to take over the sovereignty of the Union by insurgency, violence and wrongful forcible means" in contravention of Article 417 of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Articles 418 and 419 provide that, once a state of emergency has been declared under Article 417, the "legislative, executive and judicial powers of the Union (shall be transferred) to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defense Services" (Centre for Law and Democracy 2021).

After the coup, the people of Myanmar faced a triple crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and the military coup itself. The State Administration Council (SAC) arrested the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and other political leaders (Smietana 2021). After a few days, many politicians, civilians, and government workers started protesting by beating pots and pans in Yangon every night from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. During the day, many civilians, politicians, civil servants, healthcare workers, religious leaders, and government workers peacefully protested in every corner of Myanmar. Tens of thousands of people demonstrated in Yangon and across the country. The day was known as the 2222 Revolution this name immediately calls to mind the 8888 Uprising of 1988 in Myanmar. Military groups brutally killed people and arrested and tortured many civilians (mostly youth) protesting in the streets. They lost their lives for resisting the military coup. The military ordered the arrest of civilians

participating in demonstrations without a permit. Civilians lived in fear, anxiety, and insecurity after the coup.

Barbed-wire roadblocks were set up across Yangon and in other cities. Residents gathered at ATMs and food stalls, while some shops and homes removed the symbols of Aung San Suu Kyi and the flag of the NLD party, which typically decorated the streets and walls of the city. International organizations and governments condemned the takeover, saying it is a setback for the limited democratic reforms Myanmar had made (Milko 2021b). Interreligious religious groups like Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and Hindus joined together in peaceful anti-coup protests nationwide. Pastors, monks, priests, nuns, and seminarians from various places showed solidarity with the people of Myanmar by holding up placards calling for democracy at the entrances of churches, and there was interreligious prayer in Yangon. Hundreds of Christians, mostly young people from cities like Yangon and Mandalay, joined other protesters. Generation Z also played a key role in the anti-coup protests.

On 16 April 2021, politicians and activists in Myanmar announced the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) and several key positions in the new government, which (besides the elected officials from the NLD) included several members of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities. In June, the SAC officially canceled the results of the election that had been held on 8 November 2020. The SAC announced the formation of a new caretaker government with Min Aung Hlaing as prime minister and Soe Win as deputy prime minister (Ray and Giannini 2021). In a televised second speech on 1 August, six months after the coup, Min Aung Hlaing promised to hold a "free and fair multiparty general election" by August 2023 at the latest, after the two-year state of emergency expires (Kyodo News 2021). Following seven months of instability, Myanmar's parallel government, the NUG, declared nationwide resistance to the military regime.

### **The rise of the Civil Disobedience Movement**

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) was formed just two days after the 2021 coup. Refusing to work under military rule, doctors left their hospitals, railway staff stayed home, banks closed, and school teachers and many others refused to work. Medical workers across Myanmar began a civil disobedience protest to show their disapproval and express their desire not to work for the new military government. Health workers in government hospitals and facilities issued a statement against the coup. Photos showing workers with red ribbons pinned to their clothes or holding printed photos of red ribbons were shared on social media. Others used a three-finger salute as a symbol for the pro-democracy protests. Some of those on strike began volunteering at charity health clinics, many of which had been shut down as a precaution against a surge in COVID-19 cases. To combat the outbreak of COVID-19, donated medical equipment had arrived in Myanmar and the government increased bed capacity with new quarantine centers, clinics, and hospitals, but the lack of staff was a continuous problem. The coup came just a few days after Myanmar had launched its vaccination campaign with some 1.5 million doses of a two-shot vaccine from India (Milko 2021a). It is unclear how many people in Myanmar have received this vaccine. Many civilians are fearful of this particular COVID-

19 vaccine because they distrust the military regime. Some say the COVID-19 vaccine donated by India was the only vaccine the military families, and the rest are already expired without vaccinating its own people.

Civilians from all walks of life have joined civil servants in a wider CDM by boycotting products and services from military-owned businesses. They have also boycotted the state lottery and stopped putting advertisements and death notices in state-run newspapers. In addition, they are withdrawing their savings from government- and military-owned banks. However, civil servants refusing to work under the military regime are facing repression as the regime has threatened striking government employees with suspension, dismissal, and eviction from staff quarters; and yet, the civil servants are continuing their strike (Irrawaddy 2021b). Since the coup, the people of Myanmar have not only faced a political crisis but also battled the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict, and a refugee crisis.

### **COVID-19 becomes a political crisis**

The WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, and Myanmar identified its first confirmed case on 23 March in Chin State (World Bank 2021). The country's testing capacity is still very limited. It has only four COVID-19 laboratories – three in Yangon and one in Mandalay – with a combined ability to test 1,000 people a day at most (Hmue Angel 2020). Since February 2021, many healthcare workers and other civil servants have stopped working as part of a peaceful, non-violent CDM against the coup. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the country's fragile existing health systems and affected its many health services. The CDM has spread throughout the healthcare workforce, resulting in the closure of public hospitals and leading to a health crisis. While the global community has been fighting COVID-19, Myanmar's citizens have also been fighting for freedom from oppression. This is a necessary response to protect human rights against risks that increase the spread of COVID-19 at a time when coordinated efforts to manage COVID-19 are frustrated by political restrictions. Since the coup, many peaceful protesters have been threatened, injured, or killed, and the planned COVID-19 vaccination program has been thrown into uncertainty because of the coup. The coup threatens the health and human security of Myanmar and beyond, due to the danger of a possible COVID-19 pandemic wave. Without help from the global community, the people of Myanmar risk losing the battle against the disease and their long fight to emerge from military rule and oppression (Su Myat Han, *et al.* 2021).

Most civilians distrust the military regime, which has reversed the country's hard-won progress in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 data has gone unreported since the military seized power, the shortage of staff, military violence against medical staff, and the widespread lack of trust in authorities have weakened Myanmar's already under-resourced healthcare sector, rendering it less capable to manage care and carry out vaccinations (Wittekind 2021: 2). The COVID-19 vaccination campaign is the latest example of the political use of the pandemic in post-coup Myanmar. The country received its first shipment of vaccines from India a little more than a week before

the coup. While healthcare workers lined up to receive the vaccine at the end of January, they refused to receive their second doses after the coup (Wittekind 2021:4).

The people of Myanmar have shifted their attention from the deadly virus to the pro-democracy movement. They have taken to the streets in protests across the country to show their opposition to the military overthrowing an elected government. Although the protesters wear facemasks, there is no social distancing as they chant slogans, sing songs of defiance, and hold up placards. The low rate of testing comes after thousands of health workers, including doctors and nurses, walked out of hospitals, clinics, and laboratories to join the CDM. The strike by health workers has stopped COVID-19 testing and shut down state-run hospitals across the country (UCA News 2021b). Myanmar's banking system has been paralyzed since the coup as hundreds of branches of at least 31 local and 13 foreign banks have closed their doors due to staff strikes. All banking services have been halted in the country, except for mobile banking and ATM services. As a result, almost all trading companies, especially those engaged in sea-bound trade, have been forced to halt operations, as the banks are unable to issue the documents needed to import and export goods. Companies are struggling to pay salaries because the banks are not providing payroll services. Businesses are also suffering from a cash shortage as bank branches are closed, and the regime has ordered limits on cash withdrawals for both individuals and companies (Irrawaddy 2021a).

### **Local armed resistance to the coup**

Since the coup, Myanmar has seen massive displays of resistance across the country. A core element of this opposition has been the CDM, comprising public and private sector workers who refuse to work under the military regime. The military has responded to the peaceful protesters with violent crackdowns, arrests, intimidation, and the killing of civilians. As a result, the resistance has gradually shifted from being exclusively peaceful to becoming partially armed, with a focus on defending civilians and targeting the military's personnel and property (Kyed and Ah 2021). In this shift, civilians have formed defense groups – mostly young men and women with handmade guns (known as *tu mae* in Burmese). The Chinland Defense Force (CDF) was formed on 4 April 2021 from all nine townships of Chin State before the People's Defense Force (PDF), which was formed by the NUG. On 24 April, CDF members in the Mindat township clashed with security forces for the first time after the officers had refused to release seven people – three men and four women – detained for putting up anti-regime strikers in town. The protesters had demanded the detainees be released, and when a police officer fired into the crowd, the defense force retaliated, reportedly killing three of the security forces. The situation rapidly escalated, and the army attempted to bring troops by road to reinforce the overwhelmed local battalion in Mindat. On 26 and 27 April, CDF fighters ambushed military convoys on the roads leading into town, reportedly killing more than 30 troops, destroying army trucks, and looting weapons (ICG 2021b).

In the week after the coup, as the *Tatmadaw* began its campaign to suppress protest and other forms of dissent, many communities and groups of protesters

across Myanmar began forming militias to protect themselves from regime violence and launched an armed resistance. Some 250 groups emerged over the past 10 months and have carried out regular attacks on regime targets. The resistance groups, many of which have the words “defense force” in their names, range from underground urban cells consisting of a few people to large, well-organized militias with hundreds of fighters equipped with modern light arms. All the resistance groups rely mainly on asymmetric warfare tactics, including assassinations, and have been killing several people per day, including regime-appointed local administrators, USDP members, security force personnel, and alleged informants (known as *Dalan* in Burmese). In addition, there have been hundreds of explosions across the country. Targets include government and local administration offices and houses, businesses owned by the military, homes or businesses of alleged informants, police, and military posts. The local resistance forces have received better training, mostly from ethnic armed groups, and managed to supplement their makeshift arsenals with more modern firearms. They have also been conducting more deadly attacks on security forces. In various cities, the militants have done drive-by shootings to kill policemen and soldiers manning security posts and checkpoints. And in rural areas, resistance forces have regularly hit military convoys with roadside bombs, including as part of complex attacks where the fighters follow the explosions with small arms fire, causing death tolls in the double digits (ICG 2021c).

### **Regime’s blockade of humanitarian aid**

Myanmar’s military junta is blocking desperately needed humanitarian aid from reaching millions of displaced people and others at risk. The United Nations, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and concerned governments should press the SAC to urgently allow aid to reach everyone in need. The junta and its security forces have imposed new travel restrictions on humanitarian workers, blocked access roads and aid convoys, destroyed non-military supplies, attacked aid workers, and shut down telecommunication services. Since the coup, it has carried out a nationwide crackdown on anti-coup protesters and the political opposition, which amounts to crimes against humanity and other abuses. Fighting in some ethnic minority areas has expanded, resulting in war crimes. The crisis has displaced over 284,000 people, with an estimated 22,000 refugees fleeing to India and Thailand. The military has imposed new restrictions, creating a nationwide humanitarian catastrophe (HRW 2021). While Myanmar authorities have long impeded access to aid for vulnerable groups, the military junta has established new restrictions, creating a nationwide humanitarian catastrophe. The UN estimates that the number of people needing assistance will grow from 1 million before the coup to 14.4 million by 2022, including more than 5 million children. About 25 million people, or half the population, could be living below the national poverty line (HRW 2021). The *Tatmadaw* is using its long-established “four cuts” counter-insurgency strategy in these areas – a cruel approach that deliberately targets civilians to deprive insurgents of food, funds, recruits, and intelligence on troop movements. Attacks on populated areas are an integral part of this strategy, along with the looting of food stores and denial of relief supplies, in clear violation of international humanitarian law (ICG 2021b). Between 1 February

2021 and 7 May 2022, the military and its affiliated groups burned down approximately 18,886 civilian houses to crush a growing resistance after the coup. Chin state alone is 1,130 numbers of houses burned down, according to Data for Myanmar (Datawrapper 2022).

### **ASEAN's response**

Myanmar became a member of ASEAN in 1997 (Renshaw 2013: 37). Since the coup on 1 February 2021, what role has the association played in Myanmar amid this political crisis, especially given the violent acts committed by the junta against the pro-democracy protesters, which have sparked international criticism? World leaders have strongly condemned Myanmar's security forces for their deadly actions against the peaceful anti-coup protesters. Several Western countries have expressed condemnation because the military junta's actions against the pro-democracy protesters conflict with the principles of universal human rights (Hidriyah 2021: 8).

The current crisis in Myanmar is the most serious challenge ASEAN has ever faced. It also threatens ASEAN's long-standing foreign policy goal of keeping the region free of external intervention and promoting regional peace and stability. Therefore, a failure to resolve the current Myanmar crisis will pose a long-term existential threat to ASEAN by weakening the organization's international unity and decreasing its relevance and centrality in shaping regional affairs and order. ASEAN is the only actor that can play a meaningful role in this respect (Ryu, Minn and Myat Myat Mon 2021). Its member states are far from united, however: Thailand has promised not to interfere, saying the coup is none of its business. Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines have essentially said the same. Brunei has called for a return to Myanmar's previous semi-democratic system, while Malaysia and Indonesia have expressed "disgust at the continuing deadly violence against unarmed civilians," per the former prime minister, and called for the restoration of democracy. On the whole, however, no ASEAN member state has been willing to truly stand up to the *Tatmadaw* or for the NLD government (Dunst 2021: 38). The member states allowed junta chief Min Aung Hlaing to join the ASEAN meeting on 24 April 2021 but excluded him from the summit in Brunei a few months later.

Although the military has little support among the population beyond direct profiteers and Bamar nationalists, the majority of Burmese resistance has not stopped. International reaction has condemned the coup, but China and ASEAN have proceeded with limited accommodation of the junta, often under the label of non-interference. Russia supports the junta directly, while several Western countries have invoked the UN's responsibility to protect (R2P) (Drechsler 2021: 2). The ASEAN Charter's principle of non-intervention has not made any difference to Myanmar's political situation over the past few decades. The position of ASEAN, which calls for collective steps to overcome the political crisis in Myanmar, is that the political crisis in Myanmar is no longer an internal affair (Dugis 1992). The people of Myanmar are hoping that ASEAN and the international community will take action, but these hopes have not been realized. After the political crisis in Afghanistan that followed the end of the US withdrawal in August 2021, the eyes of the world turned to Afghanistan

and away from the Myanmar crisis. The people of Myanmar have little hope left that the international communities and ASEAN would resolve the crisis, but humanitarian aid is desperately needed in Myanmar, especially by those who have been internally displaced.

### **International reaction**

Almost 10 years of democracy in Myanmar ended on 1 February 2021, when the military overthrew the government and arrested President Win Myint, State Counsellor Suu Kyi, and others. The coup drew strong condemnation from the United Nations and world leaders, including Pope Francis, who has called for the release of detained leaders and dialogue. The UN Human Rights Council held a special session on the Myanmar crisis (UCA News 2021a). The United States imposed mostly personalized sanctions, frozen Myanmar assets in the United States, and stopped official developmental assistance to the government (not humanitarian aid to NGOs), but these actions have had a minimal effect. The EU has followed suit (Steinberg 2021).

On 1 February, US President Joe Biden called for the nations around the world to unite in support of defending Burma's democracy. On 10 February, he announced targeted sanctions against Burma's "military leaders who directed the coup, their business interests, as well as close family members." Biden signed Executive Order 14014 on the same day, authorizing new sanctions and export-control restrictions on Burma. He also announced that the United States would maintain its "support for healthcare, civil society groups, and other areas that benefit the people of Burma directly." On 11 February, the United States Agency for International Development announced it was immediately redirecting USD 42.4 million of assistance toward programs that would "support and strengthen civil society" (Congressional Research Service 2021). The UN issued a statement condemning the military's actions as "crimes against humanity" and imploring the International Court of Justice to bring the military to trial (Sarma and Kapur 2021).

Two types of groups claim to represent Myanmar: the SAC and the National Unity Government (NUG). The United States and the European Union regard the SAC as illegitimate. Now the NUG hopes to win international recognition and aid, oust the military, and return some form of democracy to Myanmar (Dunst 2021). In the meantime, while the people of Myanmar wait for the international community to intervene in the crisis, the situation in the country continues to deteriorate (conflict between *Tatmadaw*, civilian resistance, and EAOs).

### **Conclusion**

Sadly, the crisis in Myanmar is nothing new. Despite popular resistance, the military seized power from the civilian government before in 1962 and 1988. Starting in 2011, Myanmar was in a partial transition toward democracy, and a civilian government came to power in 2015. But the military took power again from the civilian government by force in 2021. The protesters are calling for civil disobedience, a stop to work under the junta, and mass demonstrations. The strike has already paralyzed the banking and healthcare systems at a time when the economy, hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, is struggling to stand on its feet. The military is also facing international sanctions and condemnation

(Hindu 2021). Since the coup, the country has been in dire straits, and people are killing each other. Humanitarian assistance and help from the international community are urgently needed for the people of Myanmar. The military (SAC) and the NUG are struggling to control the situation, and civilians are losing their lives through armed resistance. More than 200,000 people within Myanmar, adding to 370,000 existing internally displaced people is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance like shelter, food, and clothes. There are more and more internally displaced people in Myanmar, and some have had to flee to neighboring countries like India and Thailand because of the conflict between armed groups. There are 1.1 million refugees from Myanmar, according to UNHRC (2022), and nearly 100,000 internally displaced ethnic Chin in western Myanmar, according to Radio Free Asia (RFA 2022).

The military junta has burned down civilians' homes and properties and turned religious buildings to ash. These political crises will not end without help from the international community. ASEAN, the UN, and the international community have failed to act and meet their goals of supporting the rule of law and human rights. Instead, they are pushing sanctions, raising toothless concerns, and condemning the coup with words instead of action. The measures thus far have been ineffective at producing any change, and citizens feel abandoned by the international actors. To support the youth of Myanmar, who are leading the charge against gross injustice, the international community has to do more than sanctions and condemnations.

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# Pro-democracy struggle in the age of social media: Evolution of military and resistance strategies in post-coup Myanmar

Megan Ryan & Mai Van Tran

*In this latest nationwide struggle against military rule in Myanmar, both the military and the anti-coup resistance forces have relied on conventional and digital strategies to discredit their opponents and gain widespread support for their actions. To what extent do social media platforms serve to facilitate and popularize pro-democratic calls? And how do the pro- and anti-military forces adapt their strategies over time? Using an original dataset of 5,200 public Facebook posts and 708 military newspaper articles published between March and May 2021, we address these questions by integrating a qualitative content analysis with statistical analysis. In a stark departure from military media, we find most coup-related Facebook posts are either explicitly anti-military or neutral news. However, military media overall features more resistance-related content than on social media, which might reflect the military's active attempt to reframe reality. Nonetheless, the military's violent repression of resistance forces on the ground continues to engender online backlash rather than stifle dissent. Finally, although pro-resistance content enjoys a significantly higher rate of engagement on average than pro-military content, we find pro-resistance posts gradually declining while pro-military rhetoric is gaining ground. This may reflect power differentials between the pro- and anti-coup forces, as well as the resistance actors' adaptation to the increasing threat of digital repression. The findings from our paper serve to deepen our understanding of social media's evolving affordances of and limitations to anti-authoritarian efforts across the country.*

**KEYWORDS:** DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM; ANTI-COUP STRATEGIES; SOCIAL MEDIA; MEDIA ANALYSIS.

## Introduction

The Arab Spring in 2011 marked the first major confrontation between authoritarian politics and social media. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter were credited with facilitating mass mobilization for pro-democracy uprisings in a hostile political environment. Activists have since made use of social media to increase the cost of repression by publicizing crackdowns, lowering the cost of communicating and coordinating across disparate groups (Zeit-zoff 2017; Little 2016; Breuer, Landman and Farquhar 2015), and multiplying the scale and spread of their grievance frames and mobilization calls (Poell and van Dijck 2018; Margetts, *et al.* 2016). Research on Twitter in particular has highlighted how social media networks facilitate different aspects of contentious mobilization: while users in a peripheral social network position are most effective at recruiting participants, those at the core of the network are more successful at diffusing movement frames and coordinating across disparate networks (Steinert-Threlkeld 2017; Gonzalez-Bailon, *et al.* 2011).

Today, not only dissidents but also governments have learned how to harness the power of social media to influence public opinion at a scale that was unthinkable before the digital age. In terms of contentious politics, regime leaders have increasingly taken advantage of social media penetration and users' low digital literacy to monitor, infiltrate, and disrupt social movements (Lynch 2011). For instance, Aday and colleagues provide anecdotes of the dual impact of social media in the case of protests in Iran in 2009. While it facilitated "com-

munication and coordination for those who could not easily meet face to face,” it was also employed by the regime to encourage “government sympathizers to blog and use Twitter and Facebook and other platforms in support of the regime’s position” (Aday, *et al.* 2010). Similarly, King and colleagues find that in China, government employees pose as ordinary users and fabricate about 500 million social media comments per year to “distract and redirect public attention from discussions or events with collective action potential” (King, Pan, and Roberts 2017). More recent studies point to governments’ increasing use of computational propaganda and commercial firms to run bots and inauthentic accounts in order to scale online disinformation campaigns and attack their opposition (Bradshaw, Bailey and Howard 2021).

Despite the many new studies that reveal autocrats’ and dissidents’ emerging digital strategies, there has been less research into how these actors adapt their social media tactics and narratives over time. Particularly, there is a clear gap in the current literature when it comes to assessing regimes’ and challengers’ competing communication strategies and their effects on public dissent in the digital age. Accordingly, recent scholarship has discouraged asking questions about whether social media favors governments or activists and instead focuses on the “strategic interaction and adaptation of new tactics by either side” (Zeit-zoff 2017).

We aim to fill this gap in the literature by generating fresh hypotheses, combining insights from political science, sociology, and communication studies, and testing the evolution of social media tactics as part of the dynamics of contentious politics in a repressive regime. We employ a mixed-method design to analyze an original dataset of social media and military media content that has been created since the 2021 coup in Myanmar. Social media will continue to play an important role in shaping Internet users’ experiences in the long run. Therefore, our findings will serve as a solid foundation to guide future scholarship and social media companies on how to facilitate information sharing and communication on social media, which advances the social good without compromising the safety of dissidents or empowering actors with repressive aims.

### **Our hypotheses**

We examine three sets of hypotheses regarding the affordances and limitations of social media for pro-democracy mobilizations and political actors’ corresponding adaptations. First, regarding affordances, unlike conventional mass broadcasting platforms where autocrats can control and censor content, social media platforms’ participatory nature promotes a variety of voices from regime dissidents. We argue this is especially meaningful in repressive regimes with a low level of press freedom, as social media enable pro-democracy activists to discredit authoritarian propaganda, debunk disinformation, and mobilize public support through a venue that is difficult for the government to control. By contrast, the authorities are more likely to focus on projecting an image of regime stability by suppressing reporting on mass protest on the ground. Hence, in such regimes, we expect that social media platforms will feature more resistance-related content than authoritarian media.

*H1: Social media platforms are more likely to feature resistance-related content than authoritarian media.*

Moreover, analyzing public reactions to social media content allows us to test the deterrent vs. mobilizing effect of anti-protest crackdowns, on which the current literature is yet to reach a widely accepted consensus (Hassan, Mattingly, and Nugent 2022). If images of brutal repression are likely to deter further public dissent, fear of digital surveillance by the regime should discourage online users from expressing negative reactions toward crackdown-related posts on public platforms. By contrast, if such images are likely to provoke more defiance against the political elites, the netizens' outrage should motivate them to dismiss fear of repercussions and publicly condemn repression via negative reactions to crackdown-related content. Following this latter argument, we hypothesize that the emotional content about the repression of protesters is more likely to engender backlash than stifle dissent, making this type of content receive significantly more negative reactions than other types of anti-regime content on social media.

*H2: Social media content that broadcasts anti-protest repression is likely to receive more negative reactions than other forms of dissident content.*

Nonetheless, social media's public nature might also limit high-risk anti-regime protests. As repression against dissidents grows over time, activists' visibility on social media might leave them exposed to surveillance and arrest by an autocratic regime. Hence, we expect anti-regime dissidents will increasingly migrate to private, encrypted messaging platforms to evade crackdowns and discreetly coordinate resistance. By contrast, pro-regime forces are likely to take advantage of this growing vacuum to actively promote their propaganda. Hence, contentious discourses are likely to decrease while pro-regime rhetoric grows on public social media platforms.

*H3a: Over time, political content on social media becomes increasingly less contentious.*

*H3b: Over time, political content on social media becomes increasingly more pro-regime.*

To examine our hypotheses, we introduce our case study of contentious politics in post-coup Myanmar.

### **Post-coup Myanmar**

Under General Min Aung Hlaing, the Myanmar military staged a coup against the NLD-led civilian government in February 2021. In response, various resistance groups (e.g., the CRPH/NUG parallel government, CDM government staff, new PDF armed groups, and existing ethnic armed organizations) in urban, rural, and border areas have waged both non-violent and violent campaigns against the military administration (SAC). Ever since, both the SAC and the anti-coup resistance have relied on conventional and digital strategies to discredit each other and gain domestic and international support for their actions.

### **Military strategies**

Based on existing reports regarding military-sponsored content on mass and social media, the SAC has actively deployed public and covert propaganda to manipulate narratives about protesters and frame them as criminals in order to turn public opinion against the resistance movement and in favor of the military.

### *Public propaganda*

In May 2021, military-controlled Myawady TV aired an interview with a monk who claimed that NLD supporters burned down a village and compared the NLD to the Taliban – thereby associating NLD members with criminal images that would resonate with the majority of Bamar-Buddhist audience, many of whom usually discriminate against people of Muslim heritage (Nachemson 2021). Similarly, in June 2021, a military media report accused the NUG and the PDF of “communicating with international terrorists and ARSA [a Rohingya Muslim insurgent group] to grab the State power by force” (Myanmar News Agency 2021). Moreover, the military-controlled Ministry of Information started publishing books that accused the anti-coup movement of being a “revolution to bring back vote-cheaters” (Irrawaddy 2021). The military also disseminated newsletters labeling protests as “riotous situations” and “anarchic mob-like activities and sabotage activities” (Lintner 2021).

### *Covert disinformation*

The SAC has further spread disinformation online under the guise of ordinary observers to craft an echo chamber reinforcing their official propaganda. Numerous reports find military-coordinated trolls have made false accusations and used manipulated images of violence to spread disinformation about anti-coup protesters (Nachemson 2021; Global Witness 2021). According to a report by Fanny Potkin and Wa Lone, “the information combat drive is being coordinated from the capital Naypyidaw by the army’s Public Relations and Information Production Unit, known under the acronym Ka Ka Com, which has hundreds of soldiers there” (Potkin and Wa Lone 2021).

For example, pro-military social media accounts claimed that security forces did not kill protesters but that a third party (e.g., the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front or other protesters) was responsible. Some protesters were even falsely accused of killing the police or raping women. Other pro-military accounts accuse anti-coup activists who have turned to violent methods of being manipulated by foreign forces and Islamist groups like ISIS and the Taliban and even suggest, without evidence, that Muslims were behind the attacks.

### **Dissident strategies online**

The anti-coup forces have similarly taken to social media to condemn the military, highlight its abuses against peaceful protesters, and mobilize the population to participate in resistance activities. Despite the military’s efforts to deter online activism through Internet cuts and social media bans, dissidents continue to find ways to circumvent these barriers, such as through virtual private networks (VPNs) and by relying on communication technologies that do not depend on Internet access.

### *Resistance through online activism*

Facebook and Twitter quickly became organizing tools for resistance against the coup. Almost immediately after the military takeover on 1 February, people amplified the visibility of civil disobedience activities, such as the nightly banging of pots and pans symbolizing resistance (Phyu Phyu Oo 2021), healthcare professionals’ refusal to work in military-operated hospitals (RFA 2021), and

traditional resistance performances in rural areas (Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Sue Ye Lin 2021) to coordinate and maximize their impact. Protesters also used social media to broadcast violent crackdowns against peaceful protesters by military forces to generate outrage and motivate greater action both domestically and internationally.

### *Overcoming digital repression*

After the military banned Facebook on the fourth day of the coup, protesters began to download VPNs that allowed them to circumvent the ban and continue their online activities (BBC 2021). As the military ramped up its digital repression, it cut all forms of Internet access at night until 28 April 2021 and restricted all mobile data around the clock starting on 15 March 2021 for more than 50 days (Netblocks 2021). Then, the SAC moved to charge and arrest online users who were found to use VPNs or post dissident content. According to a recent advocacy statement by concerned civil society organizations:

“The amended Broadcasting Law effectively criminalizes any speech deemed impermissible by the military on a wide range of media – including radio, television, audio and video social media posts, and websites – with up to three years’ imprisonment. Meanwhile, the draft Cybersecurity Law provides overbroad censorship and regulatory powers to the authorities – including the Ministry of Defence with its notorious record of committing abuses amounting to serious international crimes – to censor online content, ordering the furnishing of individuals’ personal data from Internet service providers and control online platforms and services through onerous registration and licensing requirements. Not satisfied with the increasing trend of arrests for alleged illegal VPN usage, the draft Cybersecurity Law proposes to penalize VPN usage with up to three years’ imprisonment. [...] The junta are conducting stop-searches of individuals’ devices which often result in arrests, detention, and assault, with impunity” (Access Now 2022).

During this period, dissidents had to rely on more covert methods of activism offline or adapted by moving to the “dark web” (Recorded Future 2021). By using a combination of VPNs, foreign SIM cards, and private encrypted messaging apps, such as Signal or Telegram, protesters could continue to both access the web and avoid detection and arrest by the SAC (Chandran 2022). Protesters also downloaded alternative communication technologies (e.g., Bridgefy) that allowed them to communicate via Bluetooth and avoid using the Internet at all. Moreover, local civil society further launched an international advocacy campaign against Telenor’s sale of its Myanmar business to a military-linked Lebanese company, M1 Group (OECD Watch 2021).

In the next section, we present the original Burmese-language media dataset that we collected and will analyze to test our arguments.

## **Data & methods**

### **Population & sample**

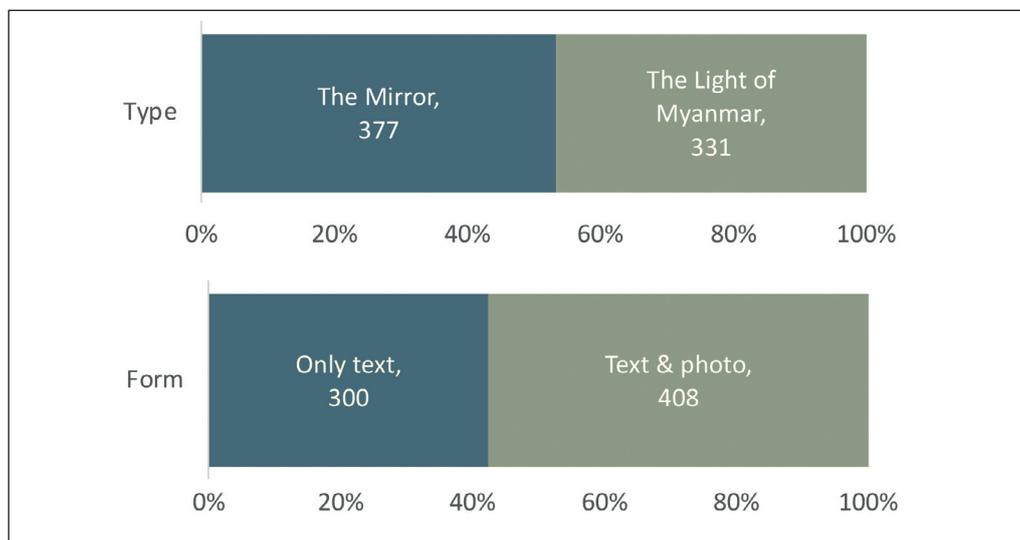
As Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in Myanmar, examining Facebook content allows us to capture the essence of Myanmar social media. By using *CrowdTangle*, a social media monitoring platform owned by Facebook, we have collected public posts from all Burmese-language pages and

groups daily – capped at the 20,000 most viral posts per day – since March 2021. As for military media content, we collected online issues of *The Mirror* (ကြေးမုံ) and *The Light of Myanmar* (မြန်မာ့အလင်း), two SAC-run daily newspapers published during the same period.

Our analysis is based on (1) a random sample of 5,200 Facebook posts over 13 weeks between March and May 2021 and (2) a sample of all 708 daily military newspaper articles whose titles appeared on the first page during the same period.

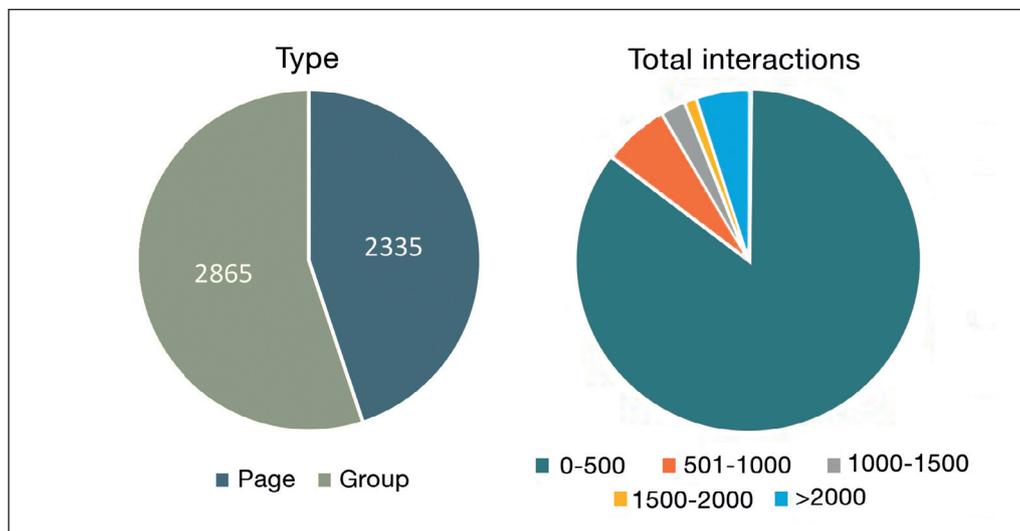
Regarding military media content, the articles are quite evenly distributed between *The Mirror* (53%) and *The Light of Myanmar* (47%), with the majority of articles (58%) containing pictures or photos (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of military newspaper articles' type and form.



As for social media content, the Facebook posts come from a wide range of pages and groups, including politics, business, entertainment, media, education, and the community. They are evenly distributed between page posts (45%) and group posts (55%). Almost all of the posts (95%) had fewer than 2,000 interactions (including reactions, comments, and shares) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Distribution of Facebook posts' type and interactions.



**Mixed method**

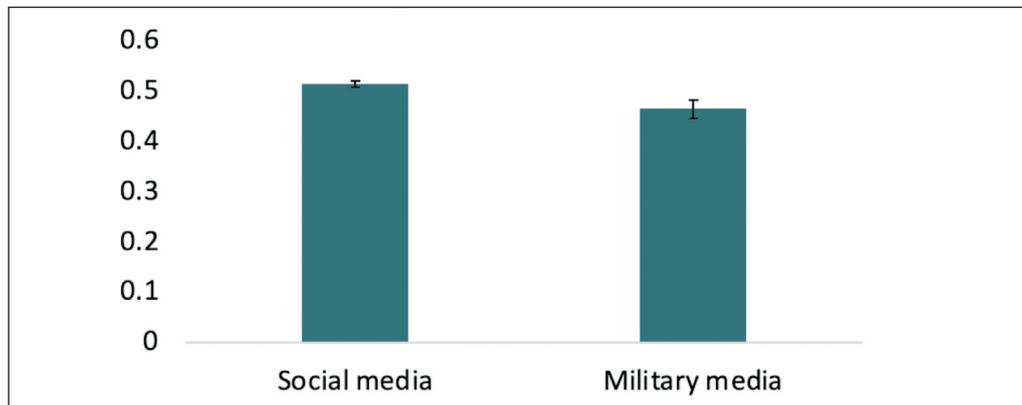
To examine our hypotheses, we worked with Myanmar research assistants to identify key pro-military and pro-dissident narratives in our dataset, as well as the prevalence and evolution of each type of narrative across social and military media. First, we manually coded our sample of posts to get a general understanding of the data. Second, we conducted ANOVA and linear regression analyses to determine whether (1) Facebook is more likely to feature resistance-related content than military media, (2) dissident Facebook posts that broadcast repression are more likely to garner negative reactions than other dissident posts, and (3) Facebook posts with dissident content become less prevalent while pro-military posts increase over time.

**Analysis and discussion**

**Predominant discourse: social vs. military media**

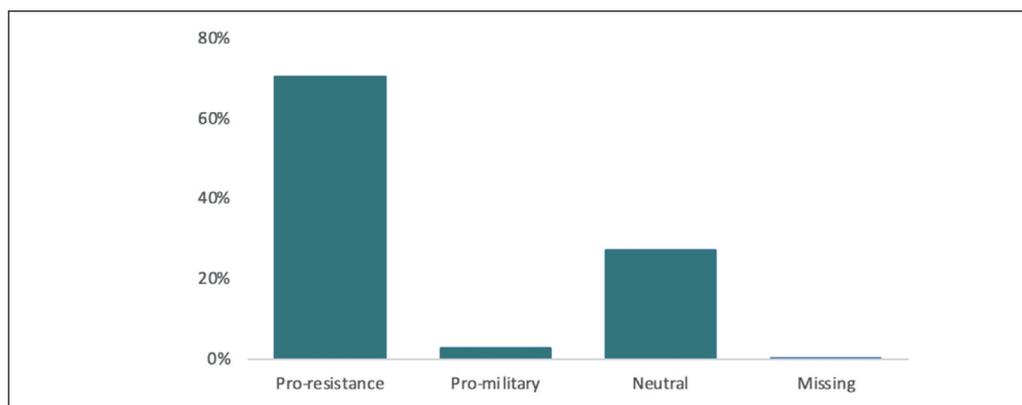
*a. Coup-related rhetoric on social media vs. military media*

*Figure 3. Proportion of content that is coup-related.*



From March to May 2021, military media featured slightly less coup-related content than social media did (Figure 3): 46.5% vs. 51.5%. In particular, the military newspapers underscored two main narratives (Table 1). First, they made accusations and pushed criticisms of the NUG and foreign actors for allegedly manipulating young people and civil servants to carry out violence and abandon their responsibilities to the public. Second, they repeatedly highlighted the military administration’s unsubstantiated commitment to multi-party democracy and free and fair elections while alleging widespread electoral fraud in 2020.

*Figure 4. Distribution of coup-related Facebook posts.*



*Table 1. A random sample of coup-related military newspaper articles.*

No.	Newspaper	Content	Date
1	The Light of Myanmar	Social punishment of non-CDM staff, NLD supporters blamed for not understanding democratic values and not respecting people's individual choices	3/9
2	The Mirror	Dissidents labeled as followers of a cult who cannot see NLD's electoral fraud; police follow democratic principles by breaking up the riots	3/20
3	The Mirror	A seriously ill patient cannot get help, CDM doctors criticized as unethical	4/6
4	The Mirror	Military takeover legitimized; NUG, independent media, and foreign actors accused of getting innocent youth involved in anarchic mobs	4/21
5	The Mirror	Min Aung Hlaing urges CDM civil servants and medical staff to return to work as soon as possible, says they can hold different political beliefs under democracy	4/27
6	The Light of Myanmar	Myanmar Central Bank announces it will let people open new bank accounts to secure their assets amid the violence and chaos	4/28
7	The Light of Myanmar	SAC grants commander in Mindat township, Chin State, the authority to impose martial law in order to maintain law and order	5/14
8	The Light of Myanmar	Teachers should impart the right knowledge to young students; article indirectly criticizes CDM teachers and student protesters	5/22
9	The Light of Myanmar	Corrected voting results from seven townships in Shan State, released; claims of missing votes, as well as extra votes	5/24
10	The Light of Myanmar	People advised to stay vigilant against false information and support the administration for national development	5/25

However, in stark contrast to military media, most coup-related Facebook posts (Figure 4) are either explicitly anti-military (70%) or neutral reporting (27%).

Moreover, among the Top 10 most viral Facebook posts, 20% of page posts and 70% of group posts are explicitly anti-military, with no pro-military posts (Tables 2, 3). They highlight domestic resistance activities (e.g., NUG, protests, etc.), international advocacy and response (e.g., advocacy at the UN, ASEAN response, military sanctions, etc.), and military crackdowns and activist casualties (e.g., attacks against ethnic armed organizations, militias, and civilians; harassment of CDM participants; etc.). In other words, they condemn the SAC and encourage further resistance.

Table 2. Top 10 viral page posts.

No.	Content	Date	Interactions
1	Formation of parallel government	3/31	302,988
2	Opposition protest	3/1	131,068
3	R2P request to UN	3/9	115,029
4	Anti-military content	3/12	107,218
5	Malaysia's three-point proposal to Myanmar	4/24	96,332
6	Opposition protest	5/4	89,193
7	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw's (CRPH) participation in UNSC meeting	4/9	72,231
8	Opposition protest mobilization	4/23	70,687
9	US & EU sanctions on military	3/23	59,289
10	Military attack on ethnic armed organization's area	3/27	57,281

Table 3. Top 10 viral group posts.

No.	Content	Date	Interactions
1	Civilian casualties due to military attack in Mindat	5/15	41,827
2	Taunting of military's spokesman	3/11	15,813
3	Dr. Sasa's health	5/11	9,164
4	Local support for Myanmar protesters in Korea	5/2	7,332
5	Eviction of CDM staff	5/13	7,281
6	Death of a front-line student protester	3/14	6,519
7	An account of good protest planning	3/1	5,828
8	Promotion of a fashion style	5/12	5,499
9	Civilian commended for helping someone who had been shot	3/27	5,316
10	Turkey's statement at the UN against the Myanmar military	3/22	5,067

### *b. Resistance-related content*

In contrast to our affordance hypothesis (H1), we find military media feature more resistance-related content (as a percentage of coup-related content) than social media does (Figure 5). However, the existence of such content on social media is significant as it contrasts with the SAC media's pro-military discourse.

Resistance-related content (Table 4) makes up 64.4% of the coup-related military newspaper articles in our sample. These articles repeatedly blame the NUG and foreign actors for orchestrating violent protests, anti-military disinformation, and the destruction of public property to further their own interests. In addition, such posts either highlight unfounded accusations of armed protesters killing each other or criticize anti-coup activists for disrespecting and intimidating pro-SAC supporters.

Figure 5. Proportion of resistance-related content among coup-related content.

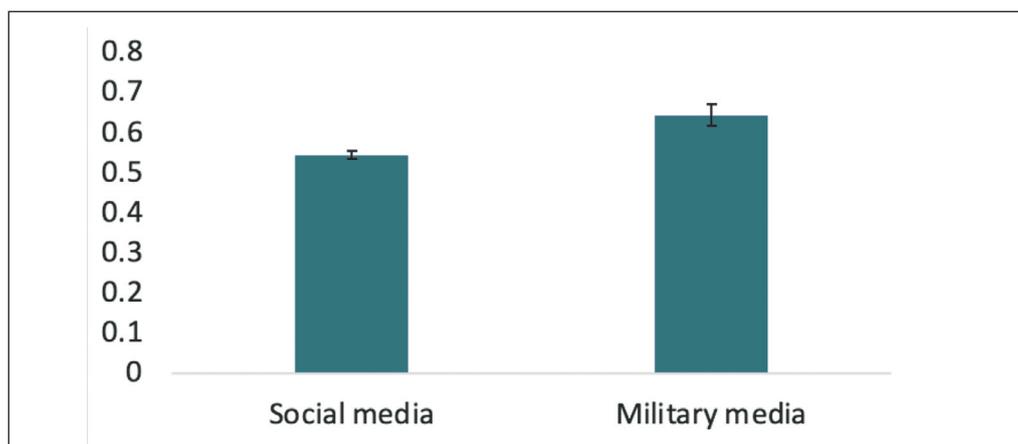


Table 4. A random sample of resistance-related & coup-related military newspaper articles.

No.	Newspaper	Content	Date
1	The Light of Myanmar	Min Aung Hlaing's speech about violent protesters armed with weapons, in which he justifies the arrests and blames NUG supporters for the protesters' casualties	3/9
2	The Light of Myanmar	Min Aung Hlaing accuses NUG and foreign actors of manipulating protesters to organize violent riots and attacks on public property and innocent people	3/21
3	The Mirror	Article accuses the US National Endowment for Democracy of funding dissident cells that force medical workers to join the CDM, agitate violence, and spread disinformation against the Myanmar military	3/29
4	The Light of Myanmar	Article discusses Min Aung Hlaing's wariness of CRPH members and supporters	4/8
5	The Light of Myanmar	SAC shares with a US diplomat how it tries to deal with the NUG's violent actions in the softest ways	4/9
6	The Mirror	Article accuses NUG of giving false hope to persuade civil servants to join the CDM and advises CDM participants to cooperate with the SAC since most have returned to office	4/22
7	The Light of Myanmar	Dissident politicians accused of manipulating people to carry out violence to further their agenda	5/5
8	The Mirror	Film association urged not to support a particular party but to work for the public good	5/9
9	The Light of Myanmar	NUG accused of destroying peace and stability	5/12
10	The Mirror	Anti-military protesters accused of being unethical and disrespecting others' ideas and decisions	5/25

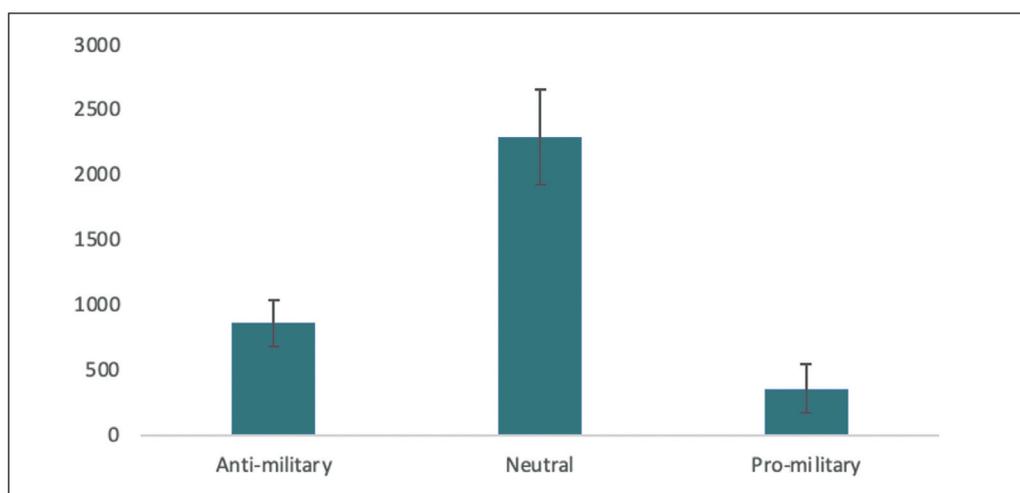
By contrast, resistance-related Facebook posts (54.5% of coup-related Facebook posts) are mostly either anti-military (73.3%) or neutral reporting (24.8%) and highlight NUG activities, protests, clashes, casualties, etc. (Table 5). Overall, this contrast between social media vs. military media content further reinforces the notion of military propaganda's limited ability to dominate public discourse, at least among Myanmar netizens, despite growing repression and censorship.

*Table 5. A sample of resistance-related Facebook posts.*

No.	Type	Content	Date
1	Page	Formation of parallel government	3/31
2	Page	Opposition protest	3/1
3	Page	Opposition protest	5/4
4	Page	CRPH's participation in UNSC meeting	4/9
5	Page	Mobilization for opposition protest	4/23
6	Page	Strike in Mandalay	5/5
7	Page	Clashes in Kayah State	5/26
8	Page	Emergency call for a hiding place in Mindat township, Chin State	5/14
9	Page	Clashes in Kayah State	5/24
10	Page	Clashes between the PDF and the SAC	5/23

### Engagement with dissident discourse

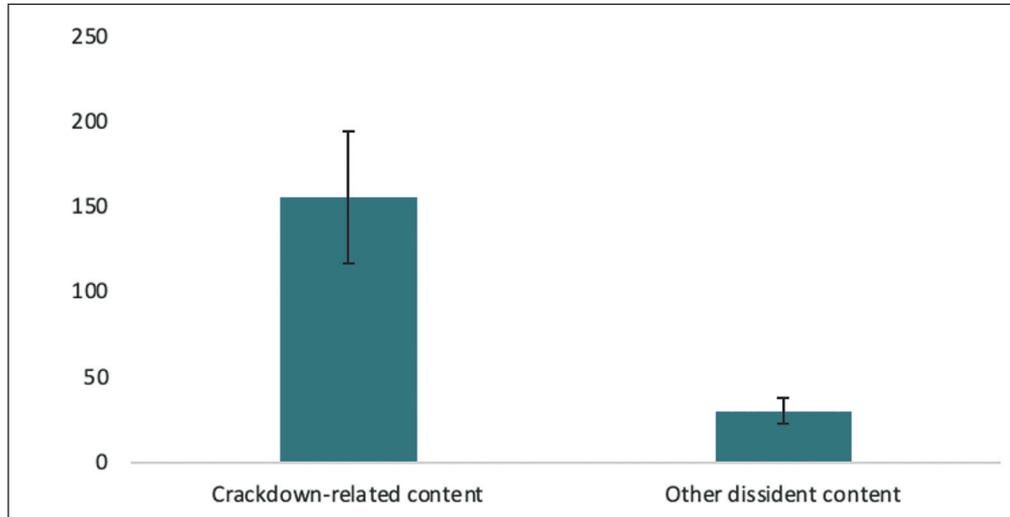
Figure 6 demonstrates the average number of interactions for Facebook posts by different content types. Overall, within our sample, coup-related content received many more interactions on average (1,233) than posts unrelated to the coup (403). Among coup-related posts, neutral (2,289) and anti-military (859) posts received more interaction on average than pro-military posts (357), which is unsurprising given the widespread animosity toward the military among the majority of the Myanmar population.

*Figure 6. Mean number of interactions by content type.*

We further hypothesized (H2) that among dissident Facebook posts, those that broadcast crackdowns and arrests by the military against unarmed protesters and civilians will generate more negative reactions (i.e., sad and angry reactions) than those that do not. As expected, we find a significant difference in the average number of negative interactions received by dissident posts that do vs.

do not mention military crackdowns: 155 vs. 30 (Figure 7). This finding elucidates how the mobilizing effect of anti-protest repression substantially outweighs its deterrent effect.

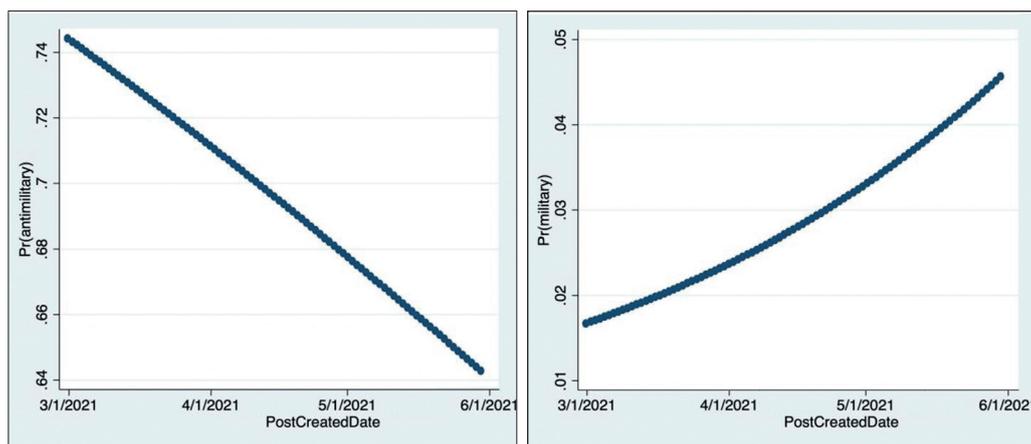
Figure 7. Mean number of negative reactions to dissident posts.



### Change in social media discourse over time

Our final models evaluate temporal changes in the prevalence of pro-military vs. anti-military posts on Facebook (H3a & H3b). As expected, coup-related posts become increasingly less contentious and more pro-military over time (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Gradual change in the probability of coup-related Facebook posts being anti- vs. pro-military.



The results may reflect asymmetric power differentials and strategic adaptations by the pro- and anti-military forces. Anti-military forces may find it more costly and dangerous to engage in dissident activities on social media due to the constraints on Internet access and fears that engaging online facilitates military targeting of resistance forces. The pro-military forces, by contrast, may feel relatively safer mobilizing online because they feel protected or supported by the military and because the resistance forces have a weaker capacity to retaliate.

## Conclusion

Our paper used evidence from post-coup Myanmar in 2021 to examine how autocrats and dissidents adapt political discourse in the digital age. To scrutinize the affordances and limitations of social media for pro-democracy mobilizations, we juxtaposed military newspaper articles with Facebook posts. In contrast to our first hypothesis, we find social media to be less likely to feature resistance-related content than military media. However, we find evidence for a higher rate of negative engagement with crackdown-related content than other dissident content online. Last but not least, although dissident content enjoys a higher rate of engagement on average than pro-military content on Facebook, we find the rate of contentious posts to decrease over time while the number of pro-military posts is growing steadily.

Our findings highlight three main dynamics of contentious politics in post-coup Myanmar. First, our results shed light on the military's inability to steer public discourse away from increasingly widespread dissident activities. The SAC's lack of control and legitimacy on the ground has likely made it necessary for the military media to adopt a relatively active reframing of reality to vilify resistance leaders and justify military repression and administration. While military propaganda underscores the consistency in its projected image as championing "disciplined democracy" toward both domestic and international audiences, dissident narratives reveal how the anti-coup resistance appears to be united not because they have a shared ideological goal but because of a shared animosity toward the SAC. This shared animosity and increasing dissent toward the military is further corroborated by our finding that crackdown-related posts receive more negative reactions on average than other dissident content. Finally, a decline in the prevalence of dissident rhetoric on public Facebook pages and groups over time might reflect activists' increasingly salient risk perception, suggesting the limitations of social media as a dissident tool. Further research involving in-person interviews/surveys or content analysis of encrypted platforms (e.g., Signal and Telegram) is required to triangulate our analysis.

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# Economic and political challenges imposed on the Myanmar labor movement by the military junta

**Cecilia Brighi & Khaing Zar Aung**

*Following a brief description of the political reasons behind the military coup of 1 February 2021 in Myanmar, as well as the international dynamics that had facilitated it, this paper analyses the several economic and political challenges imposed on the country's labor movement in the weeks and months after the start of the crisis. It illustrates the crucial role of women, youth and labor organizations in the construction and activities of the Civil Disobedience Movement, of the civil service workers as well as of the teachers, university professors, of the railway and energy workers. It illustrates the widespread international campaign to convince the more than 100 international and EU brands to responsibly leave the country due to the impossibility to implement the necessary due diligence. Moreover it argues in favor of the introduction of generalized trade restrictive measures, including financial sanctions on the State Administrative Council controlled banks and the inclusion of fuel into the "dual-use goods list" to block the transport of Russian fuel to Myanmar.*

**KEYWORDS:** LABOR AND ECONOMY IN MYANMAR; STRIKE; CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT; MILITARY JUNTA.

## The road to the military coup

To explain the main reasons behind the military coup on 1 February 2021, its impact on Myanmar, and its main actors, it is essential to examine the events leading up to it.

For nearly five years (1 April 2016–1 February 2021), Aung San Suu Kyi's government had delivered mixed results. Despite its victory, her National League for Democracy (NLD) faced several political and institutional constraints imposed on it by the military-dominated political system and the military's lack of interest in making major concessions to the NLD. In addition, the leaders of the NLD struggled to overcome their lack of both governing experience and ministerial competence. The government's Minister of Labor, for example, was a former military officer with no previous labor or industrial relations experience. Nevertheless, despite some interesting and positive socio-economic results, the limits of a difficult and poorly tolerated coexistence between the military and civil power could not be overcome.

During the NLD's rule, one of the most important changes from a political point of view was the shifting of the GAD (General Administration Department) from the military-led Ministry of Home Affairs to the Myanmar leader's cabinet. This was a big change and gave significant power to the civil government, as well as state and regional governments – down to the 330 townships and 17,000 wards and village tracts. Under the NLD, a series of major investments led to changes in the daily lives of millions of people across the country. Electrification in the country improved from 33% to 50% in four years, and the construction of roads and bridges also increased. The school sector saw a dramatic rise in investments: from USD 251 million in 2012 to USD 1.2 billion in 2016. The same was true for the healthcare sector, which went from an investment of USD 20.2 million in 2012 to USD 840 million in 2017/18 (Nan Lwin 2019).

However, insurmountable problems persisted, including the seeming impossibility of reforming the constitution, the complex peace talks, and relations with ethnic minorities, which are firmly connected to the previous two issues.

The military never had any intention of downsizing its political role – least of all its economic role, particularly in the ethnic states: gas and oil, mining, teak, jade, etc. At the same time, the thorny tripartite peace talks between the army, the civilian government, and ethnic representatives continued with fits and starts. The sides did not grow closer, especially given the military's increasingly violent activities in the Kachin and Rakhine states.

The most severe backlash caused by the Rohingya crisis resurfaced on 25 August 2017, the day after Aung San Suu Kyi and Kofi Annan had presented the final report of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State. The report's proposals included rewriting the law on citizenship, granting freedom of movement to the Rohingya, closing internal refugee camps, promoting decent work in productive investments, advancing gender equality, and implementing a series of measures to overcome ethnic and religious discrimination.

Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, has always railed against this commission and its recommendations because normalization would lead to a decrease in military importance (Irrawaddy 2017).

On that day, the military's response to the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army's attacks on 30 border police positions in Rakhine was so violent that its actions were condemned as acts of genocide: 800,000 people had to flee to Bangladesh (Simpson 2017).

This was also the beginning of attacks on Aung San Suu Kyi, which the military used to undermine her status and international credibility.

In this difficult and obligatory coexistence (not often understood by the international media, which have tended to paint the relationship between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military as "idyllic" or one of connivance, to the detriment of ethnic nationalities), the electoral results of 8 November 2020, which showed the NLD had scored an overwhelming victory, were the straw that broke the camel's back.

The state counselor's party gained 83% of available seats, while the USDP, the military's puppet party, got only 7%. This was too little for Min Aung Hlaing to be elected president of the republic, which would have protected him from prosecution for war crimes and genocide by the International Criminal Court.

On 29 January, Min Aung Hlaing's deputy tried without success to appoint him as president. In the three months between the election and the coup, the military made a series of serious threats against the government to persuade Aung San Suu Kyi's government to act according to their wishes.

The coup did not come as a surprise. The landslide victory of the NLD would have jeopardized not only the status of the commander-in-chief but also the enormous economic interests of the army. Min Aung Hlaing and a small group of generals controlled 80% of the economy, and these are the most profitable

sectors (i.e., mining, gas, oil, precious stones, industry, etc.) under the two large holdings, UMEH and MEC, which have 120 companies under them.

During the NLD regime, new laws were passed to align the country with international standards of transparency and anti-corruption, as well as compliance with basic environmental and social standards. Regulations were obstacles to the implementation of major infrastructure projects and works that China should be able to develop in Myanmar to guarantee the former access to the sea and connect Myanmar to China's Yunnan region. Thus, the alliance between the military and China also responded to the need to cut short all the procedures of democratic governance, consultation, transparency, and "accountability" imported from international institutions.

Moreover, by joining the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), the NLD government was starting to erode the military's profits and decided to follow social and environmental guidelines for all the major infrastructure projects planned and agreed on with China. New laws were planned to frustrate the huge drug sector, which was generating big profits that never arrived in the state coffers (but rather in foreign military accounts) and the International Monetary Fund estimated to total around USD 6.7 billion per year (Adam Smith International and MDRI-CESD 2015).

### **The role of labor in the fight against the coup**

From the outset, the entire country reacted strongly against the coup. Residents of major towns and villages went out onto their balconies and into the streets and banged pots in protest. The freedom they had savored after 50 years of dictatorship would not be easy to suppress again. Immediately before the coup, on 30 January 2021, the Confederation of Myanmar Trade Unions (CTUM) had declared its intention to oppose any kind of coup. On 1 February, the CTUM again declared: "Since we have already tried these devastating experiences, we, the CTUM, declare that we will not collaborate with the military junta on any issue related to labor. Therefore, we, the CTUM, announce our resignation from all tripartite mechanisms" This decision was also supported by the MICS-TUsF trade union.

The CTUM immediately mobilized its 110,000 members all over the country, becoming one of the backbones of the brand-new Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). This was made possible thanks to the unions' long experience of clandestine organizing under the previous dictatorship and because they could count on a large network of labor activists that began to organize strikes and demonstrations in most economic sectors throughout the country, bringing all the ministries' functions to a halt. Railway workers, as well as 900 oil and gas enterprise workers, were dismissed and evicted from their government homes (ILO 2022).

In response, on 8 February, the military regime announced a prohibition on freedom of association and penalties for those who broke the rules.

The CTUM called on the international trade unions and their members to isolate the military attaché offices in foreign countries and start shareholder actions against investors working with military-owned enterprises. Inside the country,

there was a call to boycott all goods and services produced by military companies, and a list of their names was published and disseminated. The response was huge and is still continuing more than a year later. Every day, hundreds of thousands of workers across Myanmar participated in large, peaceful rallies against the unlawful military coup, risking harassment, violence, detention, and being shot.

On 17 February, 11 members of the Myanmar Press Council and more than a dozen other *The Myanmar Times* journalists resigned in protest against the junta's new restrictions on press freedom. The military accused the media of instigating the protests, and its new directives required not using the words "regime" or "junta" to refer to the State Administrative Council (SAC). The military was already in a corner and did not know how to get out of it. They did not plan for the resistance to be so robust or long-lasting.

The streets continued to be overrun by demonstrators, workers, and people of all ages and social backgrounds. Young people and women also played a key role during this time.

Private banks closed for days and are still facing huge problems due to employee strikes, while the military began to arrest the ministerial staff. Factory workers continued to strike. Train drivers who refused to work were arrested and forced to drive the trains.

Already on 18 February, the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar (IWFMM) appealed to international brands to respect workers' rights: "As workers sacrifice themselves into restoring democracy in the country, we call upon all suppliers in the Myanmar garment, shoe, and leather industry to respect workers' fundamental freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, and to refrain from imposing disciplinary actions on workers for participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and maintain dialogue with the trade unions to resolve differences and address the current crisis."

A total of 77 investors responded positively by issuing a declaration calling on companies across all sectors to map their activities, address the human rights impact of their activities, and support the staff and employees instead of retaliating against them (BHRRC 2021).

COVID-19 and the coup have had a serious impact on the garment sector, in particular. According to an MGMA survey, around 600 factories are still operating, while between 170 and 200 have been closed since January 2020 (MGMA 2022). The European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar (2022) reports that more than 150 foreign brands sourced from Myanmar in the past. In 2020, the country's garment exports to the EU totaled around USD 2.5 billion (USD 2.63 billion if footwear and accessories such as leather goods, handbags, and travel goods are included).

The military regime prosecuted the Central Committee members of the CTUM, as well as trade union leaders, under section 505 of the penal code, which does not allow bail but recommends a jail sentence for a minimum of two years.

Cabin crew, civilian aircraft tower personnel, and civilian aircraft engineers stopped working, thereby paralyzing the airports; however, maps recording

flight data showed an intensification of flights between Kunming and Myanmar. Despite denials by the Chinese ambassador to Myanmar, concerns mounted about Beijing's active support for the Myanmar military. At the end of February, in the industrial townships, the military continued to harass workers at their homes or other places where they were staying. They threatened the hostel owners with losing their license if they harbored activists, trade union leaders, etc. Meanwhile, hundreds of civil servants at all levels inside the ministries received orders to return to work if no action was taken.

Thousands of people were dismissed from their jobs. Others who were working in the field did not reply to the warning letters, but because they were skilled workers who could not easily be replaced, they were not dismissed. Train drivers, mechanical train signal operators, oil and gas production teams, engineers, and crude oil refinery workers continued to block their activities and, in so doing, blocked production. In those weeks, all sources of energy extraction stopped, including the Nyaungdon gas production plant, which had been generating about 270 million kyat (MMK) per day, and the Ayadaw gas production plant, which produces the gas to run the turbines of military-owned factories in Wazi township (Magwe region). Production at many other factories was impeded, including companies that print bullets and banknotes, which compelled the SAC to buy these products from China. Since the Thanpayakan refinery was also blocked by workers, the military, which had anticipated this action, took away three weeks' supply of processed fuel a few weeks earlier, leaving no reserves.

The military attempted to divide the civil service workers and the unions, but because most of the leaders had a minimum of 20 years of service, it was not possible to dismiss them. The military tried to phone trade union leaders and frighten them, and the Ministry of Labor, Immigration, and Population issued an order to the private sector factory owners to reopen by the end of February, pay salaries the next day, and dismiss those who did not arrive on time at the factory gates. As a result, the World Bank informed the regime that all draw-downs had been suspended.

On 7 March, 18 labor organizations published a statement organizing an "extended nationwide work stoppage against the military coup and for the future of Myanmar democracy" and declared, "We are not and will never be slaves to the military junta." The statement called for an "expansion of the CDM to all Myanmar people starting on 8 March and a full extended shutdown of the Myanmar economy."

The labor movement succeeded in paralyzing the nation. The day after the statement was published, the labor movement shuttered all workplaces across the country, and hundreds of thousands of people went out onto the streets. In response to the country's paralysis, provoked by trade unions and CDM, the military banned 16 labor unions by declaring them to be "illegal organizations." The SAC arrested or filed arrest orders for at least 71 individual union leaders (Conradt 2021).

In 135 confirmed collective cases, workers were fired for participating in street protests, while thousands more had their factory jobs threatened if they participated any further in the CDM. On that day, more than 60 people were killed

and some 2,000 arrested. There were more arrests during the general strike on 14 March, when many Chinese-owned factories were set on fire. Following that terrible day, the Mandalay and six Yangon industrial zones (Hlaing Thar Yar, Shwe Pyi Thar, South Dagon, North Dagon, Dagon Seikkan, and North Okklapa) were placed under martial law, which gave and still gives full administrative judicial authority to the military. Since then, workers can be sentenced to many years of jail and hard labor for no reason.

Since March 2021, between 150,000 and 200,000 workers from the Hlaing Thar Yar (Yangon) industrial zone, which has more than 500 factories in operation, have fled due to random killings, arbitrary arrests, violence, and arson attacks on houses and factories.

The IWFM, which was part of the ACT agreement,<sup>1</sup> discussed and agreed with the ACT members' brands that suppliers should not punish those workers who exercise their rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly and join the demonstrations. The agreement put in place a Fast Track Dispute Resolution Mechanism through which workers or their representatives can contact the IWFM to file complaints about the (lack of) respect for workers' rights, including termination without severance pay. The IWFM has been proactively documenting labor rights violations and negotiating through the dispute resolution mechanism as much as possible, particularly on wage payment. Despite the severe restrictions imposed on trade unions by the military junta, the IWFM has submitted cases with proposed remedies to IndustriAll and ACT for negotiations with the brands. However, while the mechanism facilitated agreement on arrear wage payments with some suppliers, major violations cannot be solved due to the continuous harassment of workers and the human rights restrictions imposed by the dictatorship.

Hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs after 14 March, since the factories asked workers to return to work even though the industrial zones could not be reached because of security issues. The IWFM tried to protect workers from losing their jobs by demanding the brands oblige suppliers to allow unpaid leave since there were too many cases that could not be solved through the mechanism. But there was no positive answer, and in April and May alone, hundreds of thousands of workers in the garment sector lost their jobs. The ITUC denounced the suspension of nearly 150,000 university and basic education teachers and hundreds of thousands of public employees and bank and health service workers due to their participation in the CDM. The junta has continued to pressure businesses to fire workers involved in the demonstrations.

On 9 June, a list of 77 investors with more than USD 3.9 trillion in combined assets under management or advisement declared that they expected companies to uphold their corporate responsibility to respect human rights. To this end, companies should undertake enhanced due diligence to address and prevent human rights violations and, in so doing, mitigate the risks associated with such violations. These investors called on companies across all sectors with business

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<sup>1</sup> The "Action, Collaboration, Transformation" initiative between global brands, retailers, and trade unions seeks to transform the garment, textile, and footwear industries and secure living wages for workers through collective bargaining at the industry level.

activities or business relations in Myanmar to assess and address all actual and potential human rights impacts of their business activities and relationships and take steps to reduce and prevent them (BHRRC 2021). According to the Business and Human Rights Resource Center, businesses operating in Myanmar failed to take sufficient action to listen to workers and communities, which continue to suffer disproportionately under the rule of the military junta, and neglected to respond to allegations of abuse inside their Myanmar operations.

The CTUM's international campaign succeeded in blocking the SAC from gaining access to the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conference in 2021, where a strong resolution against the military coup was passed.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, other calls and resolutions have not been as strong, especially because of China and Russia's veto power at the UN Security Council and the shyness of governments around the world, including the EU. Diplomatic and political action has been weak and partial, and the restrictive measures that have been passed have not sought to strangle the junta's financial and economic resources.

Following the ILO Conference, the 343<sup>rd</sup> Session of the ILO Governing Body in November (2021a) reaffirmed its "profound concern that the military authorities have continued with the large-scale use of lethal violence and with the harassment, ongoing intimidation, arrests and detentions of trade unionists and others."

A huge amount of data collected over months has confirmed a series of human rights violations committed by international brand suppliers.

Nearly two years later, hospitals are still not functioning properly because healthcare workers have continued their boycott of state-run hospitals. Some 70% of these workers have abandoned their jobs and joined the CDM, building a shadow health system supported by the NUG (Head 2022). The junta has issued arrest warrants for hundreds of healthcare workers, forced them into hiding, raided charity and health facilities, and destroyed, damaged, or confiscated medical equipment while abducting, beating, and arbitrarily detaining doctors, nurses, and other colleagues.

According to verified data collected by the CTUM among the workers, 130,000 teachers, and 11,000 university professors have been suspended from their jobs this past year due to their participation in the CDM, while more than 250,000 workers in the garment and footwear sectors lost their jobs due to the coup. Thousands more from 140 factories that are temporarily closed are still jobless.

The military continued to carry out searches at workplaces and went door-to-door at hostels and the workers' homes. To this day, company managers continue to provide telephone numbers, addresses, and photos of union leaders to both the military and the police.

The factories announced a pre-employment warning that workers would be fired if they joined a union or participated in union/labor support activities.

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<sup>2</sup> It deplored "the arbitrary arrests, detention, intimidation, threats, and acts of violence against trade unionists and others peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, as well as the destruction of factories and other workplaces."

After the first months of closure, many companies reopened but clearly stated they would not hire labor activists. All the workers have to work excessive hours and on Sundays or official holidays without receiving overtime pay, in contravention of the labor laws. Workers who joined the CDM do not get any paid leave.

All collective agreements have been canceled, and social dialogue is not possible since trade unions have been banned. Workers have no employment contracts. The Mandalay and the six Yangon industrial zones continue to be subject to martial law with judicial power transferred to the military. In many factories, the payment of wages was delayed, with the excuse of political instability and the impossibility of withdrawing cash from banks. Children are also being recruited to work. Salaries are below the minimum wage fixed by law (MMK 4,800, approximately EUR 2.30, a day) and are not negotiated with trade unions or employer organizations.

Despite the third wave of COVID-19, many factories have no protective measures, and workers have had to do their jobs without PPE masks or safety equipment. In many Chinese companies that work for international brands, the workers are not recognized as permanent workers after three months of probation. Most factories have requested military or police presence in front of their gates to threaten workers who are frightened when entering the workplace. The reality is that most Myanmar employers are using the dictatorship to suspend all workers' rights inscribed in the national laws and do not follow international human rights or labor standards. Nothing can prevent the military from targeting, arresting, torturing, or killing trade unionists or workers cooperating with trade unions and reporting violations of labor rights and laws in the factories.

### **The struggle for companies' responsible withdrawal from Myanmar**

Nineteen out of the 31 manufacturers listed as violators during that period attracted the ACT initiative's attention, as they were linked to specific brands that had signed the ACT agreements. They should have been held liable for such violations by the brands unless they worked to correct them, but in the end, a positive resolution was reached in only 10 cases.

As a result, the IWFM requested brands to leave the country if they were not in a position to respect the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights or the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises, of which one of the fundamental conditions is freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Hundreds of collective cases of deep human rights violations have been collected by the IWFM and published on its Facebook page. These include a decrease in the minimum wage to less than EUR 2 a day, the use of forced labor due to compulsory overtime work until late at night or early in the morning, which goes unpaid, the obligation to sleep on the premises due to the curfew, impossible piecework quotas, refusal to grant sick leave, nonpayment of social security benefits, sexual harassment, verbal and physical assault, and salary reduction, among others.

The military continues to arbitrarily stop workers from handling their phones and compels them to pay fines. They conduct inspections to search for trade union representatives, making the situation impossible for those who try to denounce labor violations. Moreover, terminations and suspensions targeting civil and public servants and workers in state-owned enterprises who are supporting the CDM have continued.

For this reason, given the impossibility of obliging suppliers to respect international labor standards and carry out their due diligence as provided by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the IWFMM has called on brands to withdraw from Myanmar and on the EU to suspend the *Everything But Arms* (EBA) facilitations to prevent the military from profiting off of exports to the EU.

The withdrawal procedure starts with an implementation decision adopted by the commission after consultations with the EU Member States. Following a six-month monitoring and evaluation period, the EU Commission has three months to submit a report of findings and conclusions to the beneficiary country, which then has one month to comment on it. Finally, within 12 months after the start of the procedure, the commission decides whether to go ahead with the temporary withdrawal.

Despite a similar call by the European Parliament resolution of 7 October 2021 and later approved a resolution by the EU Parliament on 7 March 2022, the EU Commission is still strongly opposed to suspending the *Everything But Arms* (EBA) agreement, arguing it would harm workers and not the military.

It should be noted that the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP) is part of the EU's trade policy toolbox, including development objectives, which have been in place since 1971. Under the GSP Regulation, EBA preferences provide the world's least developed countries with duty-free, quota-free access to the EU market for all products except arms and ammunition.

Such preferences are conditioned upon the beneficiary country respecting the principles of the 15 core UN and ILO conventions on human and labor rights. Article 19 of the GSP Regulation spells out that the preferential tariffs may be withdrawn temporarily in respect of all or certain products originating in a beneficiary country. Following the EU procedures, in 2020, after a verification process that had started on 11 February 2019, the EU suspended EBA assistance to Cambodia (EU 2020) for violating the principles laid down in UN/ILO human rights and labor rights conventions.<sup>3</sup>

According to the ILO's rapid impact assessment of the labor market (ILO 2021b), an estimated 14% of working hours were lost in the first half of 2021, which is equivalent to the working time of at least 2.2 million full-time workers. The estimates indicate that total working hours in 2021 had decreased by 18% year on year and 30% in comparison with 2019. In 2021, more than 1.6 million workers had lost their jobs in comparison with 2020.

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<sup>3</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) ('ICCPR'); Convention concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, No 87 (1948) ('ILO Convention 87'); Convention concerning the Application of the Principles of the Right to Organize and to Bargain Collectively, No 98 (1949) ('ILO Convention 98'); and International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966) ('ICESCR').

Agriculture, which covers half of the country's employment, was heavily impacted, as was the construction sector, which shed 350,000 jobs. According to a SMART survey, although 68% have an employment contract, there is increasing use of casual/day labor and piece-rate hiring.

Workers are suffering from rising inflation caused by a devaluation of the national currency of approximately 50% (by February 2022, inflation had reached 60%) and are less able to send remittances to family members.

Owing to the increase in violations of fundamental human rights at work and as a follow-up to the resolutions adopted by the ILO Conferences, the ILO Governing Body at the end of its 344<sup>th</sup> session in March 2022 decided "to establish a Commission of Inquiry in respect of the non-observance of the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize Convention, 1948 (No. 87), and the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)" (ILO 2022).

Since February 2021, nearly 28 big multinationals have left the country or temporarily suspended their activity as a result of the military coup. Among others, they include the Amata Corporation (construction sector), Telenor, Electricité de France, Petronas, Sembcorp, the Woodside V Power group, Moattama Gas Transportation Company Ltd, Myanmar Metal, Toyota, Suzuki, Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd., and Metro.

In October 2021, a coalition of 183 organizations led by the Myanmar Labour Alliance, including workers, farmers, students, teachers, medical professionals, lawyers, youth, and women's organizations, requested that international institutions and governments adopt comprehensive economic sanctions: "The requested comprehensive economic sanctions call for the stopping of international financial services (international bank transfers and bank credits), stopping the insurance and reinsurance services, effectively stopping arms and weapon selling and related support goods trading and dealing, oil, and gas exploring, excavation, exporting and trading of natural resources of Myanmar such as gems, woods, and other forest products" (Comprehensive Economic Sanctions 2021).

Despite the great limitations on and the rampant repression of labor activists and trade unions, the Labour Alliance (starting by the CTUM) is continuing to play a central role in the democratic opposition movement.

It has representation on the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), which consists of 28 democratic organizations, including the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, the interim NUG, ethnic resistance organizations and ethnic political parties, CDM groups, general strike councils, and civil society organizations. The NUCC drafted the Federal Democracy Charter through a consensus-based approach and is finalizing the new Federal Democratic Constitution, which includes a specific paragraph on labor rights and social dialogue. In the first meeting of the People's Assembly, Daw Phyo Sandar Soe, Deputy Secretary-General of the CTUM, was nominated to the People's Assembly Presidium to represent the Labour Alliance. She was also required to read the NUCC and NUG's endorsement of the People's Assembly.

In July 2022, a Business & Human Rights Resource Center report analyzing 100 collective cases of human rights violations involving 60,800 garment workers de-

nounced the “widespread and systemic abuse in the international brands’ supply chain” (H&M and Marks & Spencer 2022). This is not the only recent report to condemn the rampant violations of human rights at work. The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) commissioned an in-depth assessment of human rights risks in the garment sector value chain exporting to the EU and the UK between February 2021 and July 2022. The assessment highlighted a massive use of forced labor, forced and excessive use of overtime, financial penalties for refusing work, a high rate of harassment and abuse of workers paying for recruitment and jobs, lack of access to remedies, etc. The report does not explicitly recommend that brands leave the country, but it suggests that, in this case, brands should plan a responsible exit to mitigate the impact of their withdrawal on workers and suppliers (ETI 2022). Some brands, like Marks & Spencer, declared that their due diligence sectoral assessment showed it was impossible to respect their Global Sourcing Principles; therefore, they decided to execute a responsible exit from the country through joint work with the ETI and other partners.

A similar request has been made by the NUG, which requested a socially responsible disengagement policy (NUG 2022). While garment sector workers are often in the media, other key sectors remain in the shadows despite their growing global importance.

This is the case of the mining sector and jade, copper, and rare earth mines. Myanmar is the third-largest producer of rare earths in the world, and a recent Global Witness study showed a rapid expansion of illicit heavy rare earth mining in Kachin State (Global Witness 2022) fueling human rights abuses, deforestation, environmental contamination, and land expropriation. A similar situation is linked to jade, gem, and copper mining, where human rights abuses at work are constantly called out by trade unions and environmental NGOs.

After 20 months, pervasive military repression and violence have caused the collapse of the Myanmar economy and led to a large-scale social and humanitarian crisis. Poverty levels doubled while the SAC increased defense spending even as it reduced allocations for education, health, and social welfare (UN 2022). In a country with more than 1.347 million internal refugees, 15,901 civilians arrested (400 of whom are trade unionists) and 2,376 killed by the military, with 1,927 trade unionists and labor activists in hiding due to arrest warrants, the world’s attention has been distracted by the brutal and unprovoked Russian invasion of Ukraine and increasing tension in the Indo-Pacific region. Nevertheless, the Burmese trade unions through the CTUM have not underestimated the potential negative impact on Myanmar and are proposing that some of the important economic and political sanctions against Russia also be imposed on the Burmese military junta, including blocking it from using the SWIFT payments system.

Further restrictive measures, including against arms brokers and Myanmar banks, as well as the inclusion of fuel and gasoline in the dual-use goods list, have also been recommended in response to the latest deals concluded between Russia and Myanmar.

In the past few months, the Myanmar junta’s commander-in-chief signed important and dangerous trade agreements with Russia to import arms and Rus-

sian gasoline and fuel oil in order to ease supply concerns and rising fuel costs. In turn, Russia is seeking new customers for its energy in the region to mitigate the effect of Western sanctions. Fuel shipments started arriving in Myanmar in September 2022. The recent fuel and oil import agreement with Russia entails serious negative geopolitical impacts at both the regional and international levels. The alliance with Russia, in particular, could be defeated by expanding the list of dual-use goods to include fuel and gasoline, thereby blocking these kinds of imports. In addition, the Myanmar military regime and Russian state-owned nuclear corporation Rosatom signed a roadmap for further atomic energy cooperation, including the possible implementation of a modular reactor project in Myanmar.

The inclusion of fuel and gasoline in the dual-use goods list should be accompanied by decisions to freeze international financial flows toward the junta through the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank, the Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank, and the Myanmar Economic Bank, which currently enable the junta to pay for the oil and fuel imports.

### **Conclusion**

It is very difficult to predict the best possible way out. But the wait-and-see strategy adopted by international institutions, the EU, and other governments – often hamstrung by the vetoes of China and Russia at the UN Security Council, the divisions within ASEAN, and the weakness of the EU Commission – have failed to deliver results.

The work of the Myanmar Labour Alliance and the CTUM is not confined to requesting economic sanctions, however, and they recently requested the Financial Action Task Force, which is the global money laundering and terrorist financing watchdog, to blacklist the SAC in order to prevent its organized crime, corruption, terrorist, and other illegal activities.

A new strategic approach consisting of a clear diplomatic initiative by like-minded countries should open a formal dialogue between the main international actors and the NUG, which should be recognized as the legitimate representative of the Myanmar people, including at the UN General Assembly. This approach should be accompanied by strong economic and politically restrictive measures. The adoption of generalized sanctions targeting the junta's financial interests, as well as banks and insurance companies insuring the transport sector (airports, flights ships, ports, etc.), together with robust financial support to the NUG and civil society organizations, could contribute to weakening and ultimately defeating the military junta. Only by innovating and acting with courage can international institutions and governments breathe life into the stillborn five-point consensus that ASEAN approved in April 2021.

What is clear is that, after more nearly two years, the military coup does not have any chance to strengthen itself or rule the country for another 50 years, as workers across the spectrum – from the least to the most qualified – will simply not accept it.

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# Weapons and ethnonational geographies in the borderlands: The case of the Ta'ang rebel movements in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>

Francesco Buscemi

*In Myanmar, ethnonationalism is often invoked as an explanation for the country's perpetual violence and armed conflict. However, it is important to unpack the concept of ethnonationalism per se and how it is reproduced. To illuminate the dynamics since the 2021 coup, this chapter takes a step back from recent events to consider the case of the Ta'ang rebel movements in Myanmar's borderlands. Specifically, it analyzes how the acquisition of weapons and the formation of a Ta'ang armed collective during the second half of the 2000s have been shaped by political rationalities and techniques that govern both weapons and soldiers and have spread throughout society and rebel polities. Drawing on extensive and in-depth qualitative fieldwork research, the chapter posits that the rebel movements harness processes of weapon acquisition and the formation of an armed ensemble to reproduce a collective (ethnonational) identity and related ethnonational political geographies via discourses and practices. This argument is illustrated by focusing on the Ta'ang National Liberation Army's military uniform. The uniform is understood as a technical object that governs the relations between weapons and people and contributes to reproducing an ethnonational rebel polity with its associated political geographies.*

**KEYWORDS:** DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM; ANTI-COUP STRATEGIES; SOCIAL MEDIA; MEDIA ANALYSIS.

## Introduction

How is ethnonationalism, with its attendant political geographies, reproduced and re-perpetuated via the creation of armed forces in Myanmar? I will open with a short story that touches on this question. It is the story of a Kayan political leader we will call Thun.

Thun is both a member of the Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces (KNDF) and an actively engaged political officer with the National Unity Government (NUG). It is a hot *Songkhrām* holiday evening in 2022, and Thun is sitting at a table on the veranda of a friend's house somewhere in the hills of Mae Hong Son province, just across the border from Karenni State. His family has joined him here to spend some time together and enjoy his two-day break from the heavy fighting in Karenni. Soon, Thun will leave for a diplomatic trip he has been sent on as part of his NUG duties. At the same time, however, he is also on a mission on behalf of the KNDF: he aims to look for contacts to procure much-needed weaponry.

It is not long into dinner before he starts testing the waters with an American guest who has longstanding personal connections with both Thai and US authorities and has been invited over by Thun's friend, the house owner. After a couple of exchanges on the war in Ukraine and US involvement via military support, Thun shifts the conversation to the paucity of weaponry over "here" in Myanmar and Karenni. He notes: "We love everything about the US We love

<sup>1</sup> This paper draws in part on a research article previously published by the author on *Small Wars & Insurgencies* journal, see Buscemi, F. (2022), "Blunt' Biopolitical Rebel Rule: On Weapons and Political Geography at the Edge of the State." Available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2022.2121389?journalCode=fswi20>.

Rambo, and we love the American way. We love freedom and would like a free Karenni State for the free Karenni nationalities. But we need weapons to free them.” The nexus between weapons, the KNDF, and the Karenni polity is quite straightforward in his words, but things become more complicated when one asks something that over that dinner will go silent: Are weapons and the related armed forces really a way to secure liberation? Or do they – and if they do, how do they – re-perpetuate forms of oppression?

In the aftermath of the 1 February 2021 military coup, political resistance to the Myanmar armed forces – which are commonly referred to as *sit-tat* by the opposition, a Burmese word that translates as ‘armed band/group’ and is deployed to deprive the military of the institutional/royal status it attributes to itself using the suffix “-daw” in the name *Tat-ma-daw*<sup>2</sup> – has decidedly shifted toward armed struggle. Confronted with extreme military-state violence, many of the newly emerging armed formations across the country have experienced serious difficulties in acquiring weaponry and mostly have to rely on craft-manufactured firearms, seizures from or sales by *sit-tat* frontline units, and/or small to medium-scale weapons trafficking. Yet, some have found it easier to access available weapon sources. For example, at the same dinner, Thun and his American interlocutor discuss a Jane’s Intelligence piece published a few days before. Hotly debated among the resistance, the piece reported how the Karenni National People’s Liberation Front (KNPLF) – a formerly communist breakaway faction that split from the Karenni Army in the late 1970s and later accepted the terms of the Border Guard Forces (BGF) program in 2009, which it abandoned after the 2021 coup – would act as a possible interface for weapon flows from the United Wa State Army (UWSA) into Karenni State. It is something that Thun rejects and is very eager to dismiss as “fake news.” Unsurprisingly so, perhaps, given, on the one hand, UWSA’s reputation as a Chinese proxy in Myanmar that, Thun thinks, would discredit possible Western support for the Karenni cause, and, on the other hand, UWSA’s political vision concerning the creation of autonomous states within the union, which rests on the idea of proportionality between ethnic minority populations and their territory. Again, one might ask, do the acquisition of weapons and the creation of entanglement between humans and weapons in the form of an armed force really play a liberatory role? Is acquiring weapons and forming armed forces a purely organizational, logistical, and financial matter, or does it play a distinct role in the reproduction of ethnonationalism and ethnonational political geographies?

The literature on civil wars and armed violence has approached the topic of armed actors’ acquisition of weapons mostly as a function of their organizational or institutional configurations, their governance capabilities, and the “external” state support they can mobilize (see Buscemi 2019). Within predominant approaches to armed rebellion, weapons acquisition is most often de-politicized, devoid of political and historical valence, and neglected as a political field/arena of and for governing (Arjona, Kasfir and Zacharia 2015). Without discarding the relevance of these aspects, this chapter makes two interrelated arguments. First, it argues that the formation of an armed collective via the acquisition of

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the text, I follow this practice and refer to the *Tat-ma-daw* as *sit-tat*.

weapons (and related practices to manage the entanglements between humans and weapons) is also shaped by and linked to political rationalities and techniques of governing both weapons and people. These political rationalities are diffused throughout society and rebel polities as a whole. Second, it posits that the acquisition of weapons and the formation of an armed ensemble are harnessed by rebel movements to reproduce collective (ethnonational) identity and related political geographies via discourses and practices.

In Myanmar, ethnonationalism is often invoked as an explanatory factor for the perpetuation of violence and armed conflict. Yet, similarly to what has been argued concerning racism and mass violence (Ong and Prasse-Freeman 2021), ethnonationalism per se and how it is reproduced should be explained. To illustrate these two arguments, I will focus specifically on the military uniform understood as a technology – comprised of an assemblage of a technical object (the actual dress), discourses, and practices to wear it – that regulates the interface between humans and weapons. I will show how, through the military uniform as a technical object, the rationalities that informed the acquisition of weapons and the formation of an armed force by rebel movements are materialized and reproduced; and how, in turn, an ethnonational rebel polity with its attendant political geography is simultaneously reproduced by governing the relations between weapons and people. To illuminate post-coup dynamics, the chapter takes a step back from recent events and considers how ethnonationalism and connected political geographies have been contested and reproduced in the case of the Ta'ang rebel movements in the borderlands of Myanmar. It does so by drawing on extensive and in-depth qualitative fieldwork research carried out by the author for his doctoral and other research projects.

This chapter starts by briefly explaining how political rationalities to acquire weapons and form an armed collective have emerged and consolidated throughout the processes of ceasefire and disarmament experienced by the Palaung State Liberation Organization/Army (PSLO/A) throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Subsequently, it analyzes how the two main interconnected political rationalities of narcotics eradication and ethnonationality have been harnessed to shape the acquisition of weaponry and the formation of a new armed force – that is, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) – in 2009. Lastly, it will concisely sketch how these rationalities have been materialized through the TNLA's military uniform along with ethnonational collective identity and related political geographies of territory.

### **Ta'ang rebel movements' ceasefire, disarmament, and re-armament trajectories**

The Ta'ang areas of Shan State can be understood as a fluid, self-identified political geography that has remained highly contested since decolonization. We could think of a so-called Ta'ang Land as a frontier space that sweeps across parts of both northern and southern Shan State and that both state and rebel political projects (first and foremost, those of the military-state and the Kachin and Shan ethnic armed organizations (EAOs)<sup>3</sup> have included into disparate geographies of rule. Over the past three decades, the original Ta'ang ethnonational rebel movement has had a 14-year ceasefire agreement and a disarmament process in 2005

that eventually led to its dismantlement and transformation into the People's Militia Force (PMF), which is based in Manton.

The trajectories of the ceasefire, disarmament, and then re-armament of the Ta'ang rebel movements have to be contextualized against a broader political and socio-economic backdrop that, for reasons of space, I will summarize here along three main lines. First, similarly to others in Myanmar, the peace and conflict processes characterizing Ta'ang areas should be read in the context of a specific system of rule, which anthropologist Elliot Prasse-Freeman, drawing on Michael Foucault's work on power and rule, defines as blunt governmentality. In very simple terms,<sup>4</sup> blunt governmentality describes a system of regulating populations that 1) relies on blunt categories to know, organize, and foster life at a distance, 2) is characterized by a lack of interest in the promotion of life at aggregate scales, and 3) functions through the deployment of violence as a key governing technique to massify and divide the populations that it takes as its object. Against the backdrop of Prasse-Freeman's Foucauldian analysis, I would argue that rebel movements' rule in the borderlands of Myanmar can also qualify as blunt governmentality. In particular, in this context, rebel rule operates its own massifications and divisions of both populations and space primarily by creating, reproducing, and managing its own armed forces as a way to cleave the Myanmar polity apart.

Second, in this landscape, in parallel with different forms of state violence (Ong and Prasse-Freeman 2021), rebel movements and other armed actors have harnessed two major rationalities to massify and to divide populations by acquiring weapons and by conducting the conduct of guns and humans with guns. One is the rationality of ethnonationality, which is expressed by the concepts of *Taingyintha* and *lumyo* ("national races" and "type of person," respectively), and divides Myanmar's populations into several national races (usually 135, although this number is not codified and often varies) (Cheesman 2017). They are understood to be (1) united in a single political community, (2) indigenous to Myanmar before colonization, and (3) hierarchically organized into a scale of civilizational and socio-political development that (naturally) sees the Bamar at the top. The other is the rationality of narcotics eradication, which has been tied to processes of state-building in the borderlands (Meehan 2011), various foreign drug-control policies with cross-border reverberations (Kramer and Woods 2012), and public condemnation of drug smuggling and the figures of "drug-lords."

Third, the ceasefire, disarmament, and re-armament trajectory should be read against larger convergencies, processes, and forces of neoliberal foreign capital investment and extraction and accumulation by dispossession characterizing

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, in the current post-2021 coup political scenario, many in the resistance to the military-state have rejected the EAO terminology since it is felt closely connected with the Thein Sein government-initiated peace process and the so-called National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). There is also a perception that such terminology downplays the revolutionary character of the struggles it tries to define to the extent that many have started to speak of ethnic revolutionary organizations (EROs) instead.

<sup>4</sup> I cannot provide here a full conceptualization or review of these concepts and literatures, and direct instead the reader to Prasse-Freeman's works (2022 and 2021).

Shan State as a whole – and Ta’ang areas and communities specifically– since at least the late 1980s.

### **Ceasefire and disarmament in Ta’ang areas**

The PSLO/A’s decision to agree to a ceasefire with the *sit-tat* on 21 April 1991 came at the intersection of precise political geographies of violence. In what is perhaps one of the most underreported and least-known textbook cases of the infamous *sit-tat*’s four-cuts counterinsurgency strategy, Ta’ang communities in Manton, Namhsan, Namtu, Kyaukme, Hsipaw, and Namkham were heavily targeted with forced relocation and scorched earth tactics. Moreover, in the previous two years, several EAOs all around PSLO/A influence areas had entered ceasefire agreements and had been granted “special regions” within Shan State. These military and political developments had also profoundly changed the geographies of access to the flow of weapons for the Ta’ang rebel movement. PSLO/A had relied most prominently on its connections with other armed actors at the Thailand–Burma border and the 4th brigade of the Kachin Independence Organization/Army (KIO/A), which had reached terms with the military shortly before the PSLO/A.

A few months later, part of the leadership, as well as the rank and file, rejected the ceasefire and constituted a new political front named the Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF). Purely political in its approach to the necessity to continue fighting with the military-state toward the creation of a democratic federal union that would comprise a state of autonomy for Ta’ang communities, the PSLF was created at the National Democratic Front (NDF) headquarters in Manerplaw, far from the PSLO/A’s operational areas.

The formation of the PSLF at this stage was informed by a clear-cut rationality of ethnonationality. The new political front was founded on 12 January 1992, that is, on what is celebrated every year as the Ta’ang revolutionary day due to the anniversary of the formation of the Palaung National Force (PNF), the very first rebel movement from which the PSLO/A had transformed in the 1970s. The choice of such a date has to be understood as part of an attempt to construct continuity and unity among the Ta’ang resistance movement representing a Ta’ang polity. Similarly, the name chosen for the new organization maintained the exonym *Palaung* rather than using the endonym *Ta’ang*. While the political significance of the latter may be discussed (the use of the endonym Ta’ang might be specific to certain political elites and has certainly been connected to more recent political projects), Palaung has been the term used by the Taingyintha regime of “truth” to classify the Ta’ang as a sub-group of the Shan national races placed in a specific territory within Shan State. Reaffirming the term Palaung in the name of the PSLF was connected to a re-affirmation of the political and geographical place of the Ta’ang polity, and the new political front vis-a-vis the Myanmar polity, as well as other ethnonational rebel movements in the borderlands. Furthermore, the PSLF emerged as a synthesis among different threads of what can be thought of as a larger Ta’ang resistance movement. There were PSLO/A leaders and rank and file in Ta’ang areas of northern Shan that had gone underground after rejecting the terms of the ceasefire agreement. There was a contingent of PSLO/A troops and leadership detachment that had

been dispatched to Manerplaw as a mission to the NDF headquarters at the Thailand–Burma border. And some new political figures and activists had emerged in the context of the 8888 uprisings. The concept of unity within an ethnonational Ta'ang polity – a concept that permeates other ambits of political thought in Myanmar as well (see Walton 2015) – informed the agreement among these components at different political and geographical scales that there should be only one armed force. A geographic distinction was agreed according to which the PSLO/A would have continued to pursue the ethnonational cause within Myanmar, while the PSLF would have worked for political resistance outside the constraints imposed by the ceasefire agreement (which had relegated the PSLO/A to the townships of Manton and Namhsan).

The years following the ceasefire agreement marked a moment of deep transformation for Ta'ang communities and Ta'ang areas. The PSLO/A saw its military and political influence shrink progressively to the advantage of regime-affiliated militias located on the edges of the PSLO/A's pre-ceasefire territorial areas. On top of the “ceasefire capitalism” schemes noted above, which unfolded all around Ta'ang areas of northern Shan, the expansion of poppy cultivation and smuggling by militias were particularly relevant. The Pansay militia expansion in the Namhkam and Pansay areas was rapidly turning previous PSLO/A areas into frontier spaces for the Ta'ang rebel movement.

Drug addiction turned into an extremely thorny and multi-layered social issue throughout Ta'ang communities. Many farmers evicted due to land grabbing in relation to infrastructural projects, *sit-tat* encroachment, or militia expansions of poppy production were pushed into slave labor with opium as a wage, while women had to take over as the sole breadwinners in the household as a significant proportion of the male population fell into addiction. When placed into perspective with the encroachment of the Myanmar military and militia actors, among Ta'ang communities the spread of narcotics came to be understood as a genocidal strategy against Ta'ang populations. With the crumbling of the PSLO/A in northern Shan, the eradication of narcotics became strictly entangled with the issue of the lack and need for the constitution of an armed force that would preserve Ta'ang populations and spaces. The drugs-related research and political activism activities carried out by civil society organizations (CSOs) established in connection to the PSLF at the Thailand–Myanmar border in the late 1990s/early 2000s – such as, in particular, the Palaung Youth Network Group (PYNG) and the Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) – were key in delineating a logic of narcotics eradication. Moreover, through their social work, these Ta'ang CSOs actively contributed to molding a Ta'ang polity transcending the strict territorial boundaries imposed by the ceasefire agreement.

The issue of acquiring weapons and recreating an armed force as a way to cope with the preservation of a Ta'ang polity, as well as with the problem of the spread of narcotics, started to become more and more relevant by the mid-2000s. At this point, the military regime was trying to enforce a series of political reforms to further incorporate the borderlands. Rebel movements all around Ta'ang areas were placed under mounting political and military pressure to disarm in light of the imminent adoption of a “semi-democratic” constitution, while the PSLO/A was forced into disarmament on 21 April 2005. Following the 2005

disarmament, Ta'ang areas of northern Shan experienced an intensification of the dynamics characterizing the previous 14 years. The region's militarization increased through both the expansion of Kachin and Shan ethnonational rebel movements and a rise in relatively small village community militias created by the *sit-tat*, which recycled weaponry handed over by the PSLO/A upon disarmament and former PSLO/A rank-and-file combatants. At the same time, there was also a rise in narcotics production, smuggling, and consumption, which further affected Ta'ang households (PWO 2006).

In public discourse, the crumbling and lack of a Ta'ang armed collective, as well as the organizational networks related to it, was linked to the incorporation of (collective and/or individual) Ta'ang bodies and spaces through their reterritorialization into *sit-tat* or other EAOs' polities via the Burmanization and Shan-nization of Ta'ang communities.

### **How the creation of the TNLA was inflected by rationalities of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication**

The actual re-armament of the PSLF in 2009 was heavily informed by the political rationalities of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication. Because of a lack of space, I offer here only a concise sketch of how the processes and practices of weapons acquisition and the formation of an armed collective named the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) were impacted by this logic.

Let us, first of all, consider the very name of the armed force, which in October 2009 the PSLF termed the "Ta'ang National Liberation Army" rather than the "Palaung National Liberation Army." The use of the endonym "Ta'ang" was part of a broader (ongoing) re-shaping of the ethnonational collective identity that had become more urgent since the ceasefire accord and especially since the 2005 PSLA disarmament. One year earlier, the 2008 military-drafted constitution of the Union of Myanmar had enshrined the political and geographical framings imposed by the *sit-tat*'s Taingyintha regime of truth. A "Palaung Self-Administered Zone" for the Palaung people inside the Shan State had been established in the townships of Manton and Namhsan, thus curtailing broader conceptions of and aspirations for a Ta'ang polity. The choice of the endonym Ta'ang for the armed force of a political front, which nonetheless continued to be named "Palaung," should be read as a dual move of contestation and a reproduction of the Taingyintha system. The choice of the name Ta'ang expressed the idea that the Ta'ang polity and Ta'ang communities that the TNLA should free from all forms of oppression (i.e., state and ethnonational rebels oppression) were different from and broader than social and geographical limitations established by external identifications and impositions.

While the territory that is understood as part of Ta'ang land remains fluid and changing (and while up-to-date, the PSLF/TNLA, like many other EAOs, is particularly reluctant to make and sensitive about making political maps publicly available), there was one specific concern in this attempt at re-articulating the Ta'ang polity and ethnonational identity: the inclusion of those communities living far away from PSLO/A's historical areas of influence and the Manton and Namhsan townships. Ta'ang communities living in southern Shan State, in particular, which throughout the 1990s had experienced intense waves of violence

in relation to *sit-tat* military campaigns against Shan rebel groups that often forcibly recruited them, were taken as the epitome of oppression, dispossession, and denial of a Ta'ang identity.

After the formal establishment of the TNLA at the Thailand–Myanmar border provinces of Mae Sot, Mae Hong Son, and Chiang Mai (where the PSLF was still based), the ideas and practices underpinning the recruitment of soldiers to boost the ranks of the armed force after 2009 were inflected by the logics of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication in four concurrent ways (which in part have continued to be relevant throughout the past decade).

First, the PSLF aimed to dismantle village community militias created by the *sit-tat* over the past two decades in part to then reinsert Ta'ang village community militiamen into the ranks of the TNLA. Located mostly in areas of Ta'ang Land – such as Pansay, the western portions of Kutkai, Hsenwi and Namtu townships, or southern Namhkam – that had progressively become the frontiers of the Ta'ang polity and the PSLO/A during the ceasefire and post-disarmament years, larger militia formations cooperating with the military-state were also the target of a similar strategy to insert the TNLA in these spaces. The poppy fields connected to these larger *sit-tat* integrated militias, in particular, were heavily targeted and with them the Ta'ang farming communities working the fields that the TNLA tried to bring under its influence also via recruitment.

Second, the PSLF/TNLA started to perform recruitment drives in northern Shan that relied heavily on press-ganging drug addicts into military service. In a sort of a counter-narcotics version of the four-cuts strategy, the TNLA rounded up villages and cut off any kind of communication and sustenance network to drug addicts residing in the area. Forcing addicts into withdrawal, they could then be identified and forced into the PSLF/TNLA's blunt rehabilitation programs. While newly recruited Ta'ang addicts' labor was immediately useful in ambits like military camp construction and maintenance or similar support tasks, the main idea behind this practice was to identify deviant subjects affecting the Ta'ang ethnonational body population and reinsert them into society, possibly also in/via the ranks of the TNLA.

Third, the recruitment endeavor was based on a “one Ta'ang household, one Ta'ang body” policy to turn Ta'ang families throughout Ta'ang areas into the recruitment base of the armed forces. There were exceptions for those households with only one daughter or son with the idea not to impede the household's ability to sustain itself. Interestingly, recruitment was (and has been up to now) restricted to Ta'ang individuals, something that the PSLF/TNLA's leadership continues to pride itself on. While the ethnicity of those being recruited remained a fluid, constructed category that the act of recruitment per se would not reify, it is worth noting how such recruitment practices embody the PSLF's conception of the Ta'ang polity.

The PSLF has maintained a conception of Ta'ang Land that differs slightly from the conception that, for example, Shan ethnonational rebel movements have maintained of Shanland (see Ferguson 2021: 103). From the PSLF's perspective, Ta'ang Land comprises other ethnonational communities too, but the organization – at least, in principle – remains sensitive about the issue of both uniting

and subjugating them under the Ta'ang polity via recruitment of non-Ta'ang populations into the TNLA. More radical Shan ethnonational postures and chauvinistic stances instead understand the Shan polity and Shanland as constituted by a diverse tapestry of communities that in a sense belong to the Shan and are to achieve unity, autonomy, and harmony “within” the Shan struggle (Ferguson 2021: 103). In this regard, one could note, for example, how the PSLF/TNLA has not refrained from including non-Ta'ang individuals in its anti-narcotics programs, which entail some kind of labor in/for the TNLA, but normally does not insert non-Ta'ang individuals into the armed forces at the end of the “rehabilitation.” While Ta'ang Land has to be freed from drugs regardless of issues of ethnicity, recruitment and military (especially combat) service into the TNLA is harnessed to build a Ta'ang polity.

Along similar lines, a further major idea and practice underpinning recruitment on a one-household/one-body ratio was that of re-articulating the Ta'ang body population collectively by placing people who had maintained a very localized understanding of being “Palaung” next to each other. Organizing and calculating recruitment on a household basis was not only a way of producing a territory that would exceed the P-SAZ, it also simultaneously represented a way to build a different spatial understanding of being Ta'ang for people who had been geographically apart in Kyaukme, Kutkai, Muse, Mogoke, Mongyawng, or Mong Hsu, for example. This involved not only recruits themselves but also their families and communities.

Fourth, women played a particularly relevant role in the recruitment endeavor of these initial years. Facing the realities of Ta'ang communities deeply affected by a variety of narcotics-related social issues (PWO 2011 and 2010), the PSLF's networks focused on engaging with women as the actual pillars of the household in a situation in which, on the one hand, narcotics consumption was especially impactful on the male population and, on the other hand, women could be leveraged to authorize in-household recruitment and legitimize the formation of an armed force. The voices of women were mobilized to rally support for the ethnonational armed force and its renewed war, particularly in light of the intertwined logics of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication, while women's unpaid labor was mobilized in support and services-delivery roles.<sup>5</sup> This kind of recruitment was discursively and materially constructed as a practice to liberate Ta'ang Land from drugs by freeing Ta'ang households and communities from drugs. Here again, recruitment embodied a specific political geography by placing different localities in relation to one another and a Ta'ang polity's territory.

Such rationalities and practices of recruitment contributed and were connected to specific modalities of access to weapons and dynamics of weapons circulation as well. At the time of the TNLA's official proclamation, the PSLF had been struggling to acquire weaponry, confronted as it was with an overall unfavorable conjuncture that had seen weapon flows and availability gradually shifting away from the Thailand–Myanmar borderlands toward the UWSA and KIO/A's areas since the early 2000s. The front had managed to acquire firearms via con-

<sup>5</sup> Similarly to what Hedström and Olivius (2021) have found in relation to the wars in Kachin.

tacts with the Karen rebel movements and the Wa National Organisation/Army (WNO/A).<sup>6</sup> Yet, it remained extremely difficult (but important) to maintain access to weapons in Ta'ang areas of northern Shan. The ethnonationality and narcotics eradication rationalities that inflected the recruitment drives analyzed above were important ways to build consensus among disgruntled members of the PSLO/A who, since the (more or less tacit) rejection of the ceasefire (and later, the disarmament) had stashed weapons away. The spatial elements intrinsically connected to the formation of a Ta'ang armed force that I aimed to foreground above were also important in embodying former PSLO/A officers' political aspirations, which had been deeply frustrated by the imposition of the ceasefire accord and the 2008 constitutional arrangements.

In the meantime, Ta'ang militiamen serving in village community militias or *sit-tat* integrated militias were also deciding to join the cause and bringing along their weaponry with them. After the first years, however, the support received also in the form of weapon supplies by other EAOs in northern Shan State (namely the KIO/A and SSPP/SSA-N) was particularly crucial. The political stances of these two EAOs, which rejected military-state demands to integrate into Myanmar's defense structure via the BGF and/or PMF programs and were, thus, facing mounting military offensives, were key in agreeing to support the development of the TNLA (2011–2014/5).

The most crucial dynamic in terms of access to weapons and consolidating the Ta'ang armed force has been the relationship between the PSLF and the UWSP/A. While a thorough reconstruction of this relationship is beyond the scope of this chapter, the acquisition of weaponry, training, and military support from the Wa EAO has been heavily inflected by the two rationalities of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication. The two rebel movements are argued to share a common Mon–Khmer ethnic background and longstanding linkages that go back to at least the joint *sit-tat* and UWSA military offensive against Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army (MTA) in the mid-1990s, when the PSLO/A had responded to a call for support by the Wa armed group. Most importantly perhaps, they share a common understanding of the ethnonational cause as a struggle unfolding at different scales: a struggle not only vis à vis the central “Bamar” military-state authorities and state institutions but also against inclusion into a Shan polity and the assimilation of ethnonational communities via a “Shannization” process.

Moreover, a common political agenda concerning the need for a war on narcotics in Shan State has been linked up with a shared understanding of the relationship between territory and ethnicity. Both rebel movements have upheld the idea that territory should be divided according to a proportionality criterion on the basis of the presence of ethnic minority populations. As Tar Bong Kyaw, the PSLF/TNLA's first secretary-general recently put it while commenting on the territory of a future Ta'ang state: “We are not greedy – we are not demanding control of the cities, that will just lead to endless clashes. We are just demanding the regions where the majority of the people are Ta'ang” (Frontier Myanmar 2021).

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<sup>6</sup> At the headquarters of which it had maintained a small contingent of troops even before TNLA's creation: see Busce-mi 2019.

### **Ta'ang military hats and badges: How rationalities are inflected into a uniform (and how a uniform reproduces the polity)**

I end with a very brief analysis of how the political rationalities of narcotics eradication and ethnonationality that have informed the processes of weapons acquisition and armed forces formation have been made tangible and material in technical objects and techniques. To this end, I delve into a specific military-technical object, that is, the military uniform of the TNLA (particularly, the badges and hat of the uniform).<sup>7</sup> Military uniforms – and related techniques to wear the garment – should be understood as a technology to regulate and govern the relationship between people (individuals and collectives) and weapons, regardless of whether it is the very same body of the person becoming a soldier or a firearm, for example. In turn, I also sketch here some of the ways in which, by governing the relationship between people and weapons, the military uniform and related techniques to wear it contribute to symbolically and materially reproducing a Ta'ang polity.

The service combat uniform that the PSLF adopted for the TNLA in 2009 included a specific hat and two shoulder badges. The hat of the uniform presented striking similarities with the one that was in use among the KIO/A, thus suggesting how – not only concerning weapons but also for militaria more broadly – there are common supply chains among rebel movements in the borderlands. Yet, the cap differed clearly from the Kachin one due to a band cutting the upper panel horizontally. The TNLA's hat drew instead from the one that was in use by the PSLO/A, either via old stocks or new supplies designed on the same model. Military training manuals and training techniques reported in detail on the components of the hat and their meaning, something that every recruit would have to learn about. The peculiar horizontal band that connects the left and right sides of the hat through the upper panel symbolizes the Ta'ang people and the armed force joining hands in symbiosis to constitute both the TNLA and the population it preserves. A further band running along the circumference of the head reinforces this role of the TNLA which, like a band surrounding soldiers' heads, delimits and surrounds Ta'ang spaces and populations. Moreover, besides these bands, the hat is made of a cloth panel folded six times into the specific shape it presents. The set of six folds giving shape to a unitary cloth is taught of as a reference to the PNF, the very first Ta'ang armed resistance group.

The two brigades forming PNF in 1963 merged into the Shan State Army (SSA) at its constitution in 1964 as the latter's brigades 5 and 6. When brigades 5 and 6 broke away from the SSA a few years later, the PNF was first recreated by both brigades jointly and then eventually restructured under the leader of brigade 6, Captain Kham Thaung. Captain Kham Thaung and his brigade 6 factions comprised the strands of the PNF more inclined toward a political struggle for a Palaung state inside a democratic federal union, as opposed instead to brigade 5's leadership, which expressed more conservative political stances and focused more on recreating the administrative system of the *Sao Hpa* in Shan State. Thus, the six folds of the hat are presented as a reference to

<sup>7</sup> I take here into consideration the first hats and badges of the TNLA's uniform that were adopted in 2009. While still used by some of the troops, they were official replaced with renewed ones in late 2021.

brigade 6 and the process of the PNF's restructuring as a key moment in the ethnogenesis of the Ta'ang and the formation of a Ta'ang polity. In summary, the TNLA's military hat and the training manuals and techniques (as an integral part of the uniform) are a technology that – through the act of wearing the uniform – connects the armed force with Ta'ang populations and resistance movements across space and time.

But what/who are Ta'ang spaces and people? The uniform's shoulder badges offer some clues. The left-sleeve badge depicts a green, three-peaked mountain range against a light blue background nested between tea leaves branches with a tea flower right at the center. Towered over by a stylized red sun, the range, tea leaves, and flower make symbolic reference to the social and politico-economic legacies of the Ta'ang communities and Ta'ang polity in northern Shan State specifically, where the production of tea in these hilly regions has long played a central role.

However, the three different peaks and the sun towering over the composition enlarge the scale of Ta'ang Land: They express the rejection of state-framed scales of Ta'ang Land and the Palaung SAZ limited to specific areas of northern Shan State. The three peaks of the mountain range refer to the three main borderland regions where Ta'ang people are to be found – that is, northern Shan, Southern Shan, and the Myanmar–China and Myanmar–Thailand borderlands. While the red sun recalls a cosmology shared by Ta'ang communities throughout the three regions, according to which the Ta'ang people were born out of the encounter between father sun and mother dragon, who gave birth to the egg containing the first human beings.

The right-sleeve badge instead displayed two Ta'ang “traditional” swords, named “Boh,” on a red background with the letters TNLA underneath. The military training manuals detail how the swords are a reference to the Unknown Soldier of the Ta'ang polity, who fought until the very end – figuratively recalled by the traditional swords – to defend the polity. Above all, the idea of refusing to lay down the Ta'ang polity's weapons and disarm at any cost, even if this would entail fighting with two traditional “Boh,” is also embodied by the badge. As key components of the uniform, the two badges contribute to molding the bodies of recruits from different parts of Ta'ang Land into a single ethnonational body and territory-space that, via the uniform, is depicted and performed as both distinct from and broader than state-framed identifications of the Palaung and their zone of “autonomy” within Shan State.

If the act of wearing the uniform, with all the associated doctrines and techniques that (together with the technical object) aim to regulate the body at its interface with weapons, activates specific affections, the opposite is also true – that is, not wearing the uniform similarly contributes to reproducing the ethnonational polity and its territory. Drug addicts who have been press-ganged into military service and “rehabilitation” in the TNLA, for example, do not wear the same PSLF/TNLA military uniform (at least, not immediately). Addicts are shaved and provided with second-hand olive-green uniforms that often do not really “uniform” those who wear them: A top may be different from another, some may be given tracksuits, others either pants or tops only. “Rehabil-

itation” into the TNLA’s so-called “Drug Fighting Centers” essentially entails forced withdrawal via two main types of activities, both of which are highly informed by military discipline techniques.

First, the “rehabilitation” is performed via military-like drills, physical and disciplinary training carried out without weapons. (Only at later stages will weapons be introduced in the form of wooden props for those who will become TNLA soldiers after “rehabilitation”.) Second, “rehabilitation” is performed via social services – most often entailing military camps cleaning and maintenance labor more than real local community services. Only a portion of the addicts press-ganged into the PSLF/TNLA’s centers will then be integrated into the armed force, and only they will eventually wear the service military uniform. As the diffusion of narcotics has long been conceived as a genocidal strategy practiced by the *sit-tat* and the military-state institutions to target the ethnonational Ta’ang population, the main logic behind practices of “rehabilitation” is the idea of cleaning up Ta’ang society and Ta’ang Land. This entails the reshaping of addicted bodies, households, and communities into drug-free bodies, households, and communities to be reinserted into a drug-free Ta’ang polity and territory. Thus, not wearing the uniform during the “rehabilitation” process functions, by contrast, as a material practice that singles out the “addict” from the polity and its territory to gradually reinsert it into them and to gradually re-compose the polity and the territory (in part via the re-insertion of part of the “rehabilitated” bodies as soldiers into the TNLA).

### **Conclusion**

Offering a concise reconstruction of the trajectories of the ceasefire, disarmament, and re-armament of Ta’ang rebel movements in the borderlands of Myanmar, this chapter analyzed the political rationalities that have shaped the processes and practices of (re)acquiring weapons and (re)forming the TNLA by the political front of the PSLF. In so doing, it highlighted the highly political role of the processes and practices of acquiring weaponry beyond any organizational or logistic issue. It also remarked on the diffused societal character of the two main rationalities of ethnonationality and narcotics eradication: They are not merely ideological elements mobilized by a political movement but political logics rooted in and diffused through micro- and less micro-societal practices to govern weapons, people, and the relations between them.

It has been observed how it is in the very rationalities and practices of acquiring and holding guns and constituting an armed force that ethnonationality and its attendant political geographies are reproduced. By combining military doctrines, manuals, recruitment practices, and technical objects (e.g., the service uniform) throughout the process of disciplining and governing the relations between weapons and the bodies of those entering the TNLA, the PSLF has managed to re-articulate a Ta’ang ethnonational collective identity and territory. Both this identity and territory simultaneously contest and reproduce an ethnonational system of rule informed by the military state’s Taingyintha logic.

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# Drugs flow where the rivers meet: Myanmar's drug economy before and after the coup

**Maria Elena Sassaroli**

*On the border between Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar, the confluence of two rivers – the Mekong and the Ruak – makes the land extremely fertile. This territory, dubbed the Golden Triangle, is one of the biggest opium-producing regions in the world and second only to the Central-Asian Golden Crescent. Myanmar, and in particular its eastern Shan State, is the main hub of the Golden Triangle. Drug production and trade in and from the area has represented a major driver of the country's economy since the 1950s. Drug trafficking is a deeply rooted phenomenon in Myanmar, and despite a slight decrease in the country's drug flow during the first two decades of the 2000s, the overall figures remain high, especially since opium production is quickly being replaced by the market of methamphetamines. When the military coup occurred in early 2021 and further destabilized the already fragile situation caused by the pandemic, researchers warned about an upsurge in drug trafficking. This paper will provide an overarching summary of the evolution of the drug economy in Myanmar before shifting the focus to examine how this phenomenon's scope and characteristics have changed after the coup: Have the recent socio-political shifts exacerbated or weakened the already existing trends, and how? To answer this question, I will analyze the discourse of the issue in newspaper articles by reviewing international newspapers. My primary source will be the press of neighboring China and Thailand. Myanmar's media will not be analyzed because of the difficulty of obtaining information from online sources since the coup.*

**KEYWORDS:** DRUG ECONOMY; GOLDEN TRIANGLE; MYANMAR'S DRUG ECONOMY; OPIUM TRADE IN MYANMAR.

*My hoe goes into the ground five times:  
The first time is to feed the army,  
The second time, to feed the militias,  
The third one, to feed the rebels,  
The fourth one, to make the village wealthy,  
And only the fifth one is for my family.<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

According to a well-known myth in Myanmar, one of the 37 deities and spirits (*nat*) of a widely worshipped pre-Buddhist cult died from an opium overdose in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Temple 1906). This story indicates how deeply rooted the use of opium has been in the country and that it can be traced back centuries. Today, more than 500 years later, “Myanmar is the world's second-largest producer of illicit opium/heroin and one of the major global producers of methamphetamines” (Thomson and Meehan 2021). “[A]dd the two together and Myanmar's the largest narcotic state in the world” (Thornton 2012).

Here, opium was initially consumed only by local lower classes, and its production was strictly confined to a limited area. Poppy cultivation increased over time and, influenced by traditional, geographical, and political factors, took on various shapes over the years. As will be outlined, the international community has also played an important role in the development of the region's drug econ-

<sup>1</sup> Popular saying in Myanmar, from “The Business of Drugs”, interview with Kunai Jaiyen, founder of the *Shan State Herald* by Amaryllis Hope Fox, former CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) officer.

omy. For this reason, what was initially only a limited activity slowly evolved until it became one of the main components of the country's socio-economic fabric. Since there was already an opium market, Myanmar was in a good position to start experimenting with the production and trade of newer and more appealing drugs: In the past decade, the country has seen an increase in the production of methamphetamines. One of the most popular is the so-called *yaba* ("crazy drug" in its Thai name), "a tablet form of methamphetamine, and a very powerful stimulant" (UNODC 2008) because of the presence of caffeine in the formula.

The military coup of February 2021 had a strong impact on the country's social, economic, and political features, and its effect on the ever-flourishing drug trade has piqued the interest of various scholars and researchers. Many have attempted to understand how the coup has impacted and will impact the phenomenon and how this underground economy's scope and characteristics have changed in light of the country's new political landscape.

This paper contributes to the literature on the topic by describing Myanmar's drug economy before and after the coup. The first and second sections identify the *when* and the *why* of drug production by underlining the main factors that have contributed to the country becoming one of the global hotspots of drug production and trade. The third part focuses on *how* this phenomenon's scope and characteristics appear to have changed since the recent coup. Before delving into the details, it is important to lay out two main starting points:

- Data on the matter is hard to retrieve, and it is difficult to reach an objective and fair conclusion. This is true in particular for the production of methamphetamines, which, unlike opium, are produced "with readily available chemicals often in small laboratories [...]. This makes an assessment of volume, location, extent, and evolution of production" (Kramer 2015) an even bigger challenge.
- The situation is continuously evolving, and, for this reason, the scarce available data is not reliable enough to make consistent predictions for the future.

### **Drugs in Myanmar: When?**

Arab traders brought opium to the shores of Myanmar at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. However, historical texts and records do not (or only partially) refer to opium cultivation and usage in Myanmar before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (TNI 2021). Until the 1800s, opium consumption had been a phenomenon mostly affecting the lower classes and "kept under control by the societal fabric and Buddhist morality" (UNODCCP 2001). Under British colonial rule, opium cultivation was a limited activity, restricted only to certain local leaders: Those living in the Shan State and other northeastern regions were "exempted [from restrictions]," and "opium cultivation remained largely legal" (TNI 2021). The Shan State currently accounts for almost 90% of opium production (Meehan 2021), with approximately 190,000 households farming between Shan and Kachin (TNI 2020). In addition, the majority of synthetic drug labs are believed to be located in Shan's mountainous areas.

The production and use of opium started to increase at the same pace as the "development of the international opium trade" (TNI 2020). In fact, the first

steady introduction of poppy in Myanmar's agriculture goes back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when "hill tribes in southern China introduced the poppy plant to the Golden Triangle, a very remote area which included the Shan State in the northeastern part of Burma" (Othman 2004). However, it is only after World War II that the large-scale flow of drugs started within and from the region. In 1949, Mao banned opium production in China; thus, poppy cultivation shifted from the Chinese Yunnan Province to Myanmar's Shan State (TNI 2021): "the remnants of the KMT who found their way to the Shan Hills of Burma became active in the illicit drug trade as a way to finance their costly struggle against the communists back in mainland China" (Othman 2004).

In 1962, the Tatmadaw took power in Myanmar through a coup d'état, introducing a new ideology, the "Burmese way to Socialism (မြန်မာ့နည်းမြန်မာ့လမ်းဆီဂျယ်လစ်စနစ်)", in Burmese), which would steer the country in subsequent years. In this context, "opium – and increasingly heroin – became the medium of exchange" for people, since "more than 80 percent of all consumer goods available in Myanmar were smuggled in from neighboring countries" (Lintner 2021). In 1974, "in the attempt to curb the growing numbers of opium production, the Tatmadaw enacted the "New Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Law" (TNI 2021). The activity of the Central Committee for Drug Abuse Control (CCDAC), which oversaw the drafting and application of the new law, facilitated involvement by the United Nations: In the mid-1970s, the CCDAC established "an agreement with the UN and the adoption of a five-year work plan from 1976 to 1981, [which] cost USD 6.5 million" and "was largely paid for by the government of Norway" (Thomson and Meehan 2021). However, it slowly became "clear that controlling drug production and use in Burma was challenging" (Thomson and Meehan). The international community's intervention in Myanmar's drug issue was difficult back then and continues to pose a challenge: As pointed out by Thomson and Meehan, "the most influential actors shaping the drug economy [in Myanmar] are the hardest for international actors to interact with and influence" (Thomson and Meehan).

The New Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Law, as well as the joint effort with the UN, were short-lived, and opium production, boosted by the high rate of consumption by the US soldiers fighting in nearby Vietnam, kept rising into the late 1970s (Hill and Weier 2017). By the mid-1980s, Myanmar was the world's largest producer of opium and retained this primacy until the mid-1990s, when it reached a peak of production between 1993 and 1996 (TNI 2021).

In the late 1990s, various factors (mainly the shifts in the global heroin trade) contributed to a gradual decline in drug production in the country. The period between 2006 and 2013 saw a mild resurgence marked by the appearance of a drug-related phenomenon: the spread of HIV and AIDS in Myanmar, which still represents a huge problem for the country (Kramer 2015). In 2014, production started to fall again. In 2020, "the area under opium poppy cultivation in Myanmar was estimated at 29,500 [hectares]," and since 2019, it "has decreased by about 11% or 3,600 hectares, which is a continuation of the downward trend that had started in 2014" (UNODC Regional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific 2021a).

Nevertheless, a fall in opium production does not mean a collapse of the drug economy. On the contrary, the slow decline of opium cultivation and the loss of profit in heroin coincided with a sharp rise in methamphetamines and the production of other synthetic drugs, substances that can be produced and smuggled way easier than opium. Throughout the 2010s, “seizures of meth in East and South-East Asia increased 640%, with much of the activity concentrated in the Lower Mekong” (Stone 2021). According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Myanmar is now the main source of meth in nations across the region” and “could be the world’s top supplier” (Stone). The office’s most recent report, dated February 2021, “confirms that production and demand for opium has further declined as the region’s synthetic drug market continues to expand and diversify” (UNODC Regional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific 2021a).

### **Drugs in Myanmar: Why?**

Following this short description of how drug production in Myanmar has evolved over the years, it is important to understand the drivers behind this massive drug trade in the area. Drawing on Othman’s research and a policy paper published by the Transnational Institute in 2021, I identify six different factors contributing to Myanmar becoming a hotspot of drug production.

First, tradition and culture. In Myanmar, there are “very strong cultural identities held by the minority groups [...], based partly on geographical location of their respective home areas” (Othman 2004), which have led to a lack of “unity necessary to tackle the country’s serious social problems,” like drug addiction, and “leav[e] the way open to military dictatorships as seeming to be perhaps the only viable form of government” (Othman). Moreover, precisely because opium has been cultivated and consumed in Myanmar for centuries, its use is socially accepted as a way of life, and part of the consumption is historically linked to medicinal use.

Second, geography and climate. As part of the Golden Triangle, the northeastern part of Myanmar possesses favorable natural conditions for the cultivation of opium: the confluence of the Mekong and Ruak rivers makes the land fertile and optimal for growing poppies. The geographical factor applies to the production of both meth and synthetic drugs. The mountainous and wild hinterland, where most of the meth labs are believed to be located, is not accessible by car and provides the ideal environment for unhindered drug production. Moreover, the areas where opium and meth are mainly produced – Shan State, above all – are border regions, extremely close to the frontiers of both Thailand and China, where the demand for opium before and meth now is very high. Finally, “a lot of regions in the North lack effective governance” (Reed 2021), which creates a context that encourages illicit trade and is only bound to worsen after the February 2021 coup.

This last element leads to the third factor: the form of government. Since the end of colonial rule, Myanmar has largely been a military state, “providing conditions in which information is easily kept from the people” (Othman 2004). As highlighted in an article from the *Financial Times*, “the narcotics business flourishes in places where the state is weak, corruption is common,

and officials can be bribed,” and Myanmar, now more than ever before, is “one such place” (Reed 2021).

The fourth factor is the economy. As noted before, Myanmar’s ruling powers have implemented a set of economic policies over the years that, for various reasons, have led to an “underground economy.” This economy, which we can call a black or grey market, often represents the “only way for most citizens to obtain goods from outside their region or from outside the country” (Othman 2004).

Fifth is the influence of the international community. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, “France’s intelligence agency – Direction de Documentation Exterieur et de Contre-Espionage (SPDEC) and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) [were] also believed to have helped foster the growth of the Golden Triangle’s illicit drug production, by supporting the area’s independent warlords as a buffer against the extension of communism in the region” (Othman). Many countries have supported production as buyers. The demand for drugs – opium before and meth now – is strong throughout Myanmar’s surrounding region, from Thailand to New Zealand, and from the Philippines to South Korea. In addition, for a long time before the emergence of drug markets in South America and the Middle East, Myanmar had been a very important supplier of drugs for the US and Europe as well.

Sixth, and particularly in the case of opium, access to land and credit. To put it simply, opium production and selling have represented a major source of income for many families: Poppies grow easily, and their cultivation requires less effort than with other products. Many Myanmar families still depend on poppy farming for survival and, although declining, opium farming is still one of the most profitable markets in Myanmar. In an article from the Thai newspaper *Manager Daily 360 Degree* (ผู้จัดการรายวัน 360 องศา in Thai), an opium farmer argues he is aware of the illegality of what he is doing but also stresses he has no other choice because it is very difficult to “feed his family’s stomachs” with other plants (Manager Online 2019).

In the next and final section, I will describe the evolution of the drug economy after the February 2021 coup d’état and expected future developments in the drug market.

### **Drug economy after the coup**

Poverty in Myanmar is large “but shallow, with the median income only 25% above the poverty line.” Therefore, “small improvements can [...] bring a large number of people out of poverty, but already small shocks can also bring an even larger number of people into poverty” (Schmitt-Degenhardt 2013). The United Nations Development Program expects an economic downturn resulting from the pandemic and the coup d’état, which could “leave nearly half of the population of Myanmar, some 25 million people, in poverty” (Zsombor 2021) very soon. In such circumstances, people turn to the drug economy, which may be illegal but offers certain revenue: in other words, a shift from a *licit* to an illicit means of income in response to the economic slowdown. In this context, the region’s criminal syndicates have naturally been adapting and capitalizing (UNODC Regional Office for South-East Asia and the Pacific 2021b). As shown in the first section, opium production – albeit still ongoing

– has been declining since 2014, while the methamphetamine market is growing. The production of synthetic drugs reached a record level in 2020 since the health crisis resulting from the pandemic led to a supply glut (Strangio 2021) coinciding with higher levels of production. However, this scenario might change in the future: in May 2021, the UNODC warned that opium production “may rise again if the economic crunch brought on by COVID-19 and [the] February 1 coup persists, with fallout for much of the region” (Zsombor 2021).

Unfortunately, data cannot be easily retrieved, which means it is “hard to assess the current scale of the drug industry” (Stone 2021). Myanmar’s “police stopped reporting seizures on its Facebook page in early February [2021], and the UN is not engaging with the junta” (Stone 2021). Moreover, the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it even harder to retrieve clean and precise data.

To provide as clear an outline of the available data as possible, I gathered information from online newspapers from both the West and Myanmar’s neighboring countries (e.g., China, Thailand, and Laos). I selected the most relevant articles, reports, and analyses, including valuable interviews with police officials, front-line workers, and narcotraffic analysts, to get a general picture of the levels of the drug trade after the coup. The starting point is that in the past year there has been a “surge [...] in drug trafficking through and out Myanmar,” (Reed 2021) and it has most likely been fueled by the coup. Richard Horsey, a senior Myanmar adviser to the International Crisis Group, states that “the military coup has been a win-win for the drug cartels” (Duangdee 2021). This is because “crime syndicates in Myanmar are likely using the military takeover to their advantage to strengthen their positions and increase synthetic drug production” (Thaiger 2021).

Using the terms “缅甸” miandian, “Myanmar,” and “毒品” dupin, “drug”, a search on 百度咨询 Baidu zixun (the section of China’s most popular research engine (Baidu) dedicated to the latest news) brings us to a series of articles on Myanmar’s drugs trade rise and smuggling in the borders. The article “缅甸毒贩活动愈发频, 缉毒警接连查获上亿毒品,” roughly translated to “Drug smugglers in Myanmar are becoming more and more common, and anti-drug police have seized hundreds of millions of drugs one after another,” provides numbers and figures on recent seizures of cargo coming from Myanmar, demonstrating that they are on the rise, and the number of drug shipments is very alarming (NetEase 2022b). The article “缅甸军事政变后缅北毒品越发泛滥,” translated to “After the military coup in Myanmar, drugs are rampant in northern Myanmar,” claims that Myanmar police are concerned about general safety in the region but do not have the resources to keep track of illicit drug trafficking (NetEase 2022a). Moreover, the article asserts that more and more women and children have been involved in drug production and consumption in the area since early 2021.

Thailand has also detected “a spike in methamphetamine trafficking across the Mekong River following the military coup” (Thaiger 2021). In the *Bangkok Post*,<sup>2</sup> one of the largest Thai newspapers available in English, many articles

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<sup>2</sup> All the articles quoted in this paragraph have been retrieved from the *Bangkok Post* using the key words “Myanmar” and “meth” in the search box, and then costuming the search, by specifying the time window: March 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, and March 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021. The search resulted in a total of 48 articles.

published in 2021 highlighted the surge in drug production in the region. There is evidence that the illicit operations of local producers across the borders have not been hindered by COVID-19 or the post-coup unrest in Myanmar (Post Reporters 2021) – in fact, quite the contrary. The emphasis is generally on the fact that crime groups have expanded their activity in the Upper Mekong and the Shan State of Myanmar. The content of these articles becomes even more relevant if compared with the narrative used to describe seizures in the same months the year before (i.e., before the coup). The articles from 2020 focus mainly on seizures in Thailand, with Myanmar being quoted as the main producer in the region but with no emphasis on any increase in production. The articles also quote different anti-traffic operations by the main countries involved in drug trafficking in the region, like “Operation Golden Triangle 1511” and the “Safe Mekong Operation”: in most cases, Myanmar’s active involvement in the operations is highlighted. There is no mention of such operations in the articles published in 2021. One of the articles even refers to the suppression of drug production in Myanmar in 2020, which resulted in massive production in Thailand: “since early this year [2020], ice [crystal meth] trafficking has largely been frozen due to heavy suppression by the Myanmar government and restrictions imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19” (Laohong 2020).

Another important indicator of increasing drug trafficking is the rise in the number of seizures reported in the newspapers of nearby Laos, probably also a result of a route change: Thai authorities estimate “that around three-quarters of illegal drugs entering their territory are now routed through Laos” (Martin 2021). A massive seizure was reported in Laos in late October 2021, which local police considered the “largest single drug bust ever” (Reuters 2021). Jeremy Douglas, the regional representative for South-East Asia and the Pacific at the UNODC, comments on the episode underlining that “the spike in volume of drugs seized in Laos was due to a shifting of smuggling routes inside Myanmar, as a result of unrest in border areas since a coup in February” (Reuters). Myanmar is “flooding neighboring countries with narcotics and carving out new channels to reach old markets” (Duangdee 2021). Furthermore, “the price of methamphetamine has dropped to a low of 50 baht (around USD 1.60)” (Thaiger 2021). The fact that prices are “stable or down in the region, and production is up, [...] suggests that the seizures are not reducing supply” (Reed 2021).

Logistic factors have certainly contributed to a smoother process of drug trading: Before the coup, the “government had scanning machines for trucks,” but now, “the machines are still running but you can bypass the checks: you can pay bribes” (Reed 2021). According to law enforcement and front-line workers active in the border area, Myanmar’s “post-coup civil conflict and cash crunch has weakened drug enforcement capacity inside Myanmar and given traffickers free rein” (Reed). In fact, “what the coup has done is completely distract the police from their anti-drug activities” and “created a perfect storm for these criminal organizations, who thrive in the gaps where justice authorities can’t easily get” (Lintner 2021). Similarly, U Tin Maung Teng, the chairman of the Myanmar Anti-Narcotic Association in Kyaukme, claims that since the coup, the drug issue has become more pervasive. He states that, before the turmoil in the country, the police had been in charge of ensuring general safety,

while now it cannot have a comprehensive view of drug illicit traffic and consumption (NetEase 2022a). This line of thought is supported by Dan Seng Lawn, executive director of the Kachinland Research Center, who argues that “police forces distracted by an increasingly armed resistance to the ruling junta are likely to spend less time on stopping the flow of drugs” (Zsombor 2021).

Thus, the coup seems to have had an impact on the flow of drugs. Several elements triggered by the military coup have contributed to exacerbating an already high level of drug production in Myanmar: the instability within the country has fueled the drug economy with more freedom for drug syndicates and cartels, scarcer law application, and laxer police enforcement. All of this adds to the already volatile situation created by the pandemic.

However, the data and interpretations need to be taken with a grain of salt. Some analysts have a different view of how the available information should be interpreted. A sharp commentary written by Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner and published in *The Irrawaddy* claims that the conclusions drawn by some international agencies – namely that the production of illicit narcotic drugs in the region is booming – are speculative: “there can be many reasons for the increase in drug busts, and that [...] does not necessarily mean that production is skyrocketing” (Lintner 2022). He cites the pandemic outburst: COVID-19 “has prompted border security forces in, for instance, Thailand and Laos, to step up surveillance of all movements across their respective borders.” He also mentions logistics factors: “new couriers have been recruited, and they are taking risks that more experienced smugglers would not.” On top of that, the number of seizures and the quantity of seized drugs “always fluctuate regardless of the level of production” (Lintner).

## **Conclusion**

This research represents an attempt to handle the data and information available today and provide a rough picture of the drug economy in Myanmar and how it has changed over the past year – specifically, since the February 2021 coup.

The analysis of articles from eight Asian and four Western newspapers and journals shows that Myanmar’s neighboring countries have recently experienced a rise in the number of drugs seized, and the overall opinion of people directly involved in monitoring the drug trade is that the flow of drugs has increased since the coup. Owing to governance changes and more controls at Thailand’s borders in the months following the coup, there has been a change of route through Laos that makes the trade easier and faster. Moreover, police enforcement in the area has been loosened: most officials are now involved in monitoring and supervising the riots. Finally, the law is seldom applied in the border areas since February 2021: for instance, scanning machines are not functioning, and functionaries can easily be bribed.

Even before the coup, the bans and policies to contain drug production had failed to limit the demand, which, conversely, has always remained high: the direct consequence was a rise in prices for opium/heroin before, and meth more recently, and the cultivation of poppy and production of meth in locations with laxer controls. The current situation has exacerbated existing trends: “the

continuing conflict in the country, and the policy of the Tatmadaw to prioritize security over drugs – causing it to support and create militias that are heavily involved in the drug trade – also contributed to the new increase” (Kramer 2015). This does not come as a surprise since, throughout Myanmar’s contemporary history, “the explicit involvement of Tatmadaw units and commanders in the drug trade has also been documented. [...] the fact that local Tatmadaw units have to be largely self-reliant (i.e., find their own food and other supplies and enjoy less logistical support from the army headquarters) fuels corruption and their participation in the drug trade” (Kramer).

It is important to stress that the high profit of illicit drug retail makes the drug economy very hard to eradicate, regardless of the country of interest. In the case of Myanmar, various factors influence the proliferation of drug production and have made it very robust over time. For instance, the consumption of opium blends with tradition (i.e., it is rooted in society, its use is socially accepted as a way of life, and a part of the consumption is historically linked to medicinal use). In addition, the *Tatmadaw*, along with the country’s most powerful people, is deeply involved in the market, and, as it is really difficult to monitor drug trade, it is also hard to prevent its production, both from within and from the outside. Moreover, as stressed by an article in *The Myanmar Times*, there is an important link between the evolution of the drug market and Myanmar’s recent economic development (intended in a broader sense): “economic development may have brought roads and bridges, but little has changed in terms of governance in these areas. Coupled with access to markets, this is a perfect environment for transnational organized crime” (Hofmann 2020).

David Mathieson, an independent analyst, sums up the current fight against Myanmar’s drug economy as follows: “the military pretends to get serious about drug eradication and the West pretends to believe them” (Al Arabiya News 2022). Mathieson highlights how lightly the fight is pursued both within and outside the country. While Myanmar authorities torched tons of narcotics in June “as part of eradication efforts for World Drug Day,” the United Nations warned “that production of methamphetamine in the region is hitting record levels.” Some scholars believe that these bonfires “are part of a long-running game of smoke and mirrors played by a junta government not serious about tackling the problem” (Al Arabiya News).

In conclusion, it is important to stress that in a scenario like the current one, where the status of things is in constant flux, the available data is definitely not consistent enough to make predictions or even assess the real extent of the situation. As stressed by some other analysts like Lintner, the recent drug busts could be influenced by many factors, and the correlation between the growth in the number of drug seizures and the post-coup scenario might be mere speculation. Nevertheless, according to Jeremy Douglas from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “if past actions are an indicator of what’s coming, then we’re likely to see another increase in synthetic drug production” (Thai PBS World 2021). In fact, “in the late 1980s as well as in Myanmar today, the military (or *Tatmadaw*) and the police could hardly be described as anti-drug crusaders” (Lintner 2021). The recent developments discussed in this paper “suggest that illegal narcotics will remain a crucial part of the country’s political

economy, and play an outsized role in whatever constellation of power emerges from the current crisis” (Strangio 2021).

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# Myanmar universities in the post-coup era: The clash between old and new visions of higher education<sup>1</sup>

Licia Proserpio & Antonio Fiori

*In the wake of the 1 February 2021 military coup, Myanmar universities became the sites of multiple and overlapping conflicts. At the macro-level, the military has faced massive nationwide protests with teachers and students in the vanguard. This broad opposition has been met with highly repressive and violent systems of social control, including mass firings of university staff, the imprisonment of student activists, and a halt to the higher education reforms that had been underway for more than a decade. The State Administration Council (SAC) is now rapidly moving forward with a national vision of higher education that replicates old and repressive Tatmadaw policies and strategies. On the other side of the divide, participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and other social movements are re-imagining a new higher education system rooted in the idea of education and oriented toward a federal and just society. At the meso-level, within the different university institutions, educators are divided along conflictual and unbridgeable frontlines: those who kept their positions and now work in the new military educational framework for “the sake of their fields of study and their students” and those who left or were forced to leave their occupations at great personal cost. At the micro-level, this latest military coup imposed an as yet underestimated cost on the higher education staff and students who had played such a central role in Myanmar’s metamorphosis in the decade before the coup. Our article gives an insight into the coup’s impact on Myanmar by focusing on the higher education sector. At this time of crisis, it draws on a set of qualitative data gathered through online interviews with students and university staff to produce an analysis of this extremely challenging chapter in the history of the country and its education system.*

**KEYWORDS:** MYANMAR/BURMA; HIGHER EDUCATION; UNIVERSITIES; SOCIAL MOVEMENTS; PROTESTS.

## Introduction

On 1 February 2021, Myanmar experienced the third coup d’état in its history. This coup surprised even the most seasoned Burma watchers, who, as a result, have tried to formulate coherent explanations, give assessments of the current situation, or provide possible scenarios for the future. At the time of this writing, it is still difficult to grasp how this return to authoritarianism will put an end to the country’s post-2011 opening to the external world and the associated decade of (mostly incomplete) economic and social reforms. To contribute to this scholarly debate regarding what was happening within this complex stage of the political life of the country, especially in terms of collective participation in the process of political and social change, our work focuses on a specific policy sector: higher education. In so doing, we answer the following questions: What is the new mission of higher education within the State Administration Council’s (SAC) state project? What is the impact of the SAC’s actions at the institutional level (i.e., in everyday life) in university spaces? Who are those who contest the vision of higher education that the state authority is imposing? And what is the idea of higher education that these opposition groups are proposing?

From a methodological perspective, this study is based on qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews with governmental officials and uni-

<sup>1</sup> This paper was jointly conceived by the two authors. However, for the purposes of acknowledging authorship, sections 1, 3, 5, 7, and 8 should be attributed to Licia Proserpio while sections 2, 4, and 6 to Antonio Fiori.

versity teaching staff. Our interactions were exclusively virtual. Despite the limitations of conducting ‘online fieldwork’ through Zoom calls, we were able to collect relevant information and get an idea of the perceptions, emotions, choices, and, ultimately, strategic decisions of the actors involved in the higher education sectors. Our “positionality” as foreign researchers with solid connections to Myanmar universities and civil society organizations and individuals helped us access higher education actors quite smoothly and establish the necessary interviewer–interviewee trust. Simultaneously, this positionality required us to be very aware of potential personal biases when interpreting data. To bolster the interpretations offered by our interviews, we triangulated their accounts with additional sources, including movement documents – mostly social media material – and journalistic or international agency reports.

After highlighting a few conceptual frameworks on the politics of higher education, the article reviews how the military juntas have shaped higher education from a historical perspective (1962–2011), the reform of higher education during the transitional period (2011–2021), and the coup’s impact on the sector. The article gives specific examples of how the SAC is moving forward with a national vision on higher education by replicating old *Tatmadaw* policies and strategies and agrees with Khaing Phyu Htut, Marie Lall, and Camille Kandiko Howson that the *Tatmadaw* seems to believe the old procedures can be successfully reapplied (Htut, Lall and Howson 2022). These policies are not only halting the ongoing crucial higher education reform but also creating new institutional conflicts. At the same time, on the other side of the divide, actors in the social movements are re-imagining a new higher education system. They are framing new visions for universities deeply rooted in the idea of an education suited to a federal and just society. These frames are even more transformative than the ones at the core of the recent higher education reforms. The conclusion highlights a few analytical points on the dynamics of the new state authority’s un-making of higher education and the re-invention of educational spaces created by resistance movements in post-coup Myanmar.

### **Higher education:**

#### **State authority and the social movement nexus**

A higher education system is built to teach, conduct research, and carry out service activities for the wider society. These functions are often interrelated, but not all of them have equal priority in every institution or society; in some cases, one or more may be missing completely (Altbach 2009; Bourner 2008). In carrying out these functions, higher education institutions play important social, political, economic, and cultural roles in societies (Brennan, King, and Lebeau 2004; World Bank 2000). These roles have been portrayed in different ways in the prevailing educational discourse. Higher education can support economic and social development by fostering the production of human capital and the growth of a knowledge society; it can perpetuate, legitimize, and reinforce the position of dominant elites in society; or it can be a force for progressive social change and for creating a more “just society” (Moore 2004). Ultimately, each higher education system impacts (or not) the society in which it is embedded in different ways according to the mission and vision it pursues.

This “ambiguity” makes higher education both an interesting and a complex field of analysis. Higher education is an interesting field because the unpacking of the political tensions that play out in its spaces can shed light on various features of the political system and society in which it is embedded (as our work ultimately aims to do). At the same time, the fact that each system is different makes this unpacking quite complex. Geographical, historical, and cultural contexts play an important role.

In seeking to understand the contemporary role of higher education, a central premise is that, in many nations, universities are created, chartered, financed, and governed by the state: This means the state is intertwined with and – in some political systems – inseparable from higher education. Acknowledging the role of government, as well as other institutions (i.e., the legal and executive branches of the state, regulatory entities, and institutions of national security), state-theoretical models have offered a holistic approach to studying the politics of higher education. Brian Pusser (2018) notes that the first question to be asked of the state and higher education in any given national context is: “What is the mission of higher education within the state project, and what role do various elements of the state play in meeting that mission?” In other words, in most national contexts, the purposes of a public political institution such as a university can be ascertained by paying attention to the state and the role of a particular institution in the state project. State missions influence educational policies. At the same time, universities are independent agencies with core missions and characteristics: They are not always easily directed and not always responsive to the will of political authorities. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s terminology, higher education can be considered a “field,” a space in which various actors interact: “constant, permanent relationship of inequality operate inside this space, which at the same time becomes a space in which various actors struggle for the transformation or preservation of the field. All the individuals in this universe bring to the competition all the relevant power at their disposal. It is this power that defines their position in the field and, as a result, their strategies” (Bourdieu 1998).

Universities find themselves at the nexus of powerful tensions created by different actors involved in this field. Among these actors, there are the disenfranchised, excluded individuals and groups that arise as social movements to influence the power structure, institutions, or both. It has been conceptualized that social movements and universities go hand in hand (Pusser 2018). As sites of critical inquiry and symbols of national purposes, universities have often been central to the mobilization of various social movements (student movements taking center stage) aimed at drawing attention to demands for change, influencing the state, or pressuring civil society to take action (Pusser). Referencing the long history of conflicts in universities’ spaces between authorities and elements of the civil society, Ordorika and Lloyd frame each education reform as “a historical product of power struggles between dominant and subaltern groups in education and the broader state; explaining the dynamics of educational reform as a consequence of competing demands for the reproduction and production of ideology and skills on the one hand and struggles for social transformation and equality on the other; and establishing the linkages between political contest at

the internal and external levels as central to understanding new sites of educational contest and reform” (Ordorika and Lloyd 2015).

Along these lines, in the following section, we highlight the interplay between state authority and the actions of social movements in shaping higher education in the modern history of Myanmar – specifically, between 1962 and 2011. This historical perspective shows the complexity and ambiguity of how Myanmar’s universities are both fields of contestation over state authority and legitimacy and instruments in broader contests for control over the state.

### **The history of higher education in Myanmar under military juntas**

The Myanmar higher education system was built by the British colonial powers to educate a very small segment of the urban population and generate the skilled workforce required by the colonial administration. Throughout colonial times, university students represented a small (less than 1,000 individuals) elite in a country where only two cities had universities (Yangon and Mandalay), and the subjects that were taught mostly related to law, arts and sciences, medicine, and engineering (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2020). At the same time, university students became one of the most significant collective actors of that time. In the 1920s and 1930s, the campus of the University of Yangon was a laboratory for the formulation of radical nationalism that, extending outward past the spaces of elitist higher education, shaped the country’s political trajectory. During World War II, the same student leaders began to leave their university studies to organize the armed struggle for independence and establish their place in the “political mythology” of the country, which still allows student organizations to play their long-lasting role as contentious political actors (Altbach 1989).

Since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar has routinely been ruled by military juntas. During the Ne Win era (1962–1988, including the periods of the Revolutionary Council and the Burma Socialist Program Party), higher education transformed amid waves of reform. These educational reforms were carried out within a broader political and economic context and were inextricably linked to the project of building a modern socialist nation in keeping with the Burmese Way to Socialism policy framework. Higher education was subservient to the technological needs of a socialist country and was maintained under strict state control, which led to the nationalization and centralization of all activities. Higher education institutions were to emphasize the type of knowledge and expertise required by the socialist economy and industry. For instance, medicine, statistics, and education were considered “*non*-economically linked or *non*-industry and *non*-economy linked studies,” whereas technological subjects, agricultural sciences, and veterinary sciences were labeled “economy- or industry-based studies” (Zarni 1998). Through eloquent rhetoric of inclusiveness and social justice, higher education was made into a field largely closed to the intervention of both student politics and international actors who might potentially lead to contestation and resistance. Meanwhile, military education was portrayed and valorized as the best possible education, one that – unlike the other higher education institutions – could provide secure social and economic status. General Ne Win’s policies led to a total crackdown on higher education

during the regimes of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and later the State Peace and Development Council, a period in which higher education was spatially and administratively fragmented and cognitively separated from wider society.

After 1988, all universities were closed for three years (until May 1991), and gatherings of more than six people became illegal in the country (Sheader 2018). During this three-year closure, the SLORC initiated a systematic purge of civil servants, including teachers and university lecturers. When they were reopened by the regime, universities and colleges by default became the only places other than monasteries where large groups of people could gather, the regime having shut down all other potential forces of opposition (Koon-Hong 2014). At any sign of protest (the main protests of the 1990s took place in 1992 and 1996), the regime stepped in to interrupt academic activities: In Yangon, between 1988 and 2000, the universities were closed for 10 out of the 12 years (Lall 2008). After 1996, both Rangoon and Mandalay universities were prohibited from enrolling undergraduate students, a situation that was not reversed until 2015. During the extended period of closure, university and college teaching staff were often asked to attend “retraining camps.” Rives describes a four-week “re-education” course at the Phaunggyi Central Institute of Civil Service (about 50 miles north of Rangoon) that Rangoon University staff were obliged to attend in early January 1992, about a month after the student demonstration celebrating Aung San Suu Kyi’s Nobel Peace Prize award that led to the shutting of the campus (Rives 2014). The camp was run by the military, and it included instructions and lectures on national unity and patriotism and how to enforce student regulations in practical terms. The ultimate goal was to indoctrinate, re-educate, and control the university staff. Practical advice about monitoring students included surveillance in halls and bathrooms; on some campuses, a military system of control was implemented in which corridors and staircases were divided into security units under the command of department heads.

The military junta progressively split and relocated existing higher education institutions and established new ones (mostly lacking student dormitories) in remote locations far from urban centers. Students and staff from the existing higher education institutions (around 32 at the end of the Ne Win era) were transferred to 156 newly built institutions or campuses outside the main urban centers (Shah and Lopes Cardozo 2018). These institutions had a smaller number of students, which prevented the formation of student groups capable of organizing contentious actions. The different universities were divided among 13 line ministries, placing the medical universities under the Ministry of Health, for instance, and leaving only the non-technical arts and sciences universities under the Ministry of Education. Not only were the new institutions built in unsuitable locations, but they were also built in a hurry with poor materials; teaching spaces were not carefully planned, laboratories remained under-resourced, and libraries stocked materials that were obsolete and outdated. The teaching, learning, and research in universities were all profoundly affected. Curricula were reduced to narrow texts, critical thinking was removed from the learning process, and rote learning became the main pedagogical approach, a situation that continues to this day (Po Po Thaug Win 2015). Access to the country’s

universities was highly restricted, with admission often given out as a reward for political loyalty and compliance, and large numbers of students were channeled into the vast new distance education system (Lorch 2007). Distance education was not only more economically accessible (lower fees), but it also continued to operate during periods when regular universities and colleges were closed without any clear schedule for reopening (from the authors' interview with a Ministry of Education official in 2020). The official narrative focused on using information technology and multimedia facilities to offer better education to the masses; most scholars note that, in reality, the *Tatmadaw* was determined to prevent any further disruptions caused by uncontrolled gatherings of students.

The result was a higher education system in disarray, which was still the case when the 2011 political transition began. In a speech at a Myanmar–UK higher education policy dialogue event convened by the British Council in 2013, Aung San Suu Kyi (leader of the opposition at the time) noted that “the standard of our university education has fallen so low that graduates have nothing except a photograph of their graduation ceremony to show for the years they spent at university” (Mackenzie 2013). This condition is widely acknowledged in Myanmar. The country's higher education system is poor by global standards (CESR Team 2014; 2013). In the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index for 2015–16, Myanmar's higher education and training was ranked 138 out of 140 countries (Schwab 2015). These shortcomings span multiple areas: the physical and digital infrastructures are inadequate; the system's human resource capacity is poor by any standard; teachers are given few opportunities and little incentive for professional development; the teaching activities and curricula of most university courses are outdated and not well aligned to the needs of the country (Thein Lwin 2007); and, finally, research activities are limited (CHINLONE 2018). Moreover, the higher education system reflects the considerable inequalities running across Myanmar society. Youth from poor households are highly underrepresented, and the cost of tuition fees, study guides, boarding costs, and other auxiliary expenses constitute a significant barrier to higher education. Although only limited data is available, multiple scholars point out that several ethnic groups are underrepresented in the country's universities.

Against this backdrop, a higher education system in which (military) government involvement in the daily affairs of universities was the norm for decades led to a system in complete disarray. Student organizations proved remarkably resilient during these periods, but the firm grip of the state prevented their actions from having a positive impact on the education system. In the next section, we turn to how higher education was reformed during Myanmar's period of transition.

### **The 2011–2021 Myanmar higher education reform**

From the onset of his presidency, President Thein Sein highlighted education as a space for reform that required the intervention of a large number of stakeholders (both local and international). Reversing the vision of Myanmar state authority for the first time since the 1960s, he asserted the success of the higher education system as a key element in the long-term drive to move the country forward, regain the respect of the international community, and establish a credible place in the ASEAN region. This new collective participation in educational

matters took form in the “Comprehensive Education Sector Review” (CESR) process, an arena in which local and international actors could work together toward this goal. CESR quickly became dominated by the various aid agencies that were sending in experts and policy suggestions for influencing the reform process. In the same year, the CESR announced that an umbrella organization called the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) would be created. Initially, the NNER included the student organizations of the country, among others. It was intended as a political participation process aimed at making recommendations to Parliament to potentially inform the CESR. Thus, at the beginning, the NNER was firm in its intent to cooperate with government initiatives. Within a few months, however, it withdrew from this collaboration because the government-led reform process did not value or incorporate the public input (Metro 2016). Student organizations’ level of disenchantment and dissatisfaction grew with each step of the reform process, which led to a nationwide mobilization from September 2014 until March 2015.

Finding that the CESR process was taking too long and wanting to secure a set of education laws well ahead of the 2015 elections, the President’s Office initiated a parallel process called the Education Promotion Implementation Committee (EPIC) to draft policies for the implementation of educational reform. As a result of the work EPIC undertook, Parliament approved a new National Education Law (NEL) in 2014, which was amended in 2015. In late 2015, a brand-new five-year National Education Strategic Plan – 2016/2021 (NESP) was launched. Considering the premises of the NLD’s 2015 and 2020 election campaigns, Aung San Suu Kyi and her NLD party might well have been expected to play a decisive role in reforming higher education (Lall 2021). The reality was very different, however: not only did the NLD function less as a genuine opposition party and more as a bystander during the drafting of the NEL, but the trajectory of the education reform did not take any significant turn during the entire term of the NLD. Ultimately, the NESP drafted under Thein Sein’s presidency was only slightly revised, and the main aim in terms of higher education reform was to pursue better governance through autonomy.

The NEL and the subsequent amendment aimed to provide a national framework for the implementation of a range of complementary reforms across the national education system, such as a recognition of the right of all citizens to free, mandatory education at the primary level; the establishment of a standards-based education quality assurance system (thanks to the establishment of *ad hoc* commissions for quality assurance); an extension of the basic education system up to the age of 13; support for instruction in minority groups’ languages and cultures; and a greater decentralization of the education system. With regard to the higher education system, the NESP had three specific strategies: 1) to strengthen higher education governance and management capacity; 2) to encourage local teaching staff to undertake quality research and offer effective teaching, to provide students with an effective learning experience; and 3) to improve access to high-quality education without discrimination and regardless of students’ social and economic backgrounds. The NEL and the NESP put the issues of governance and management at the heart of the reform in the hope that changing the governance system would lead to better-quality

education. In other words, higher education reform took the form of a quest to make a few carefully chosen and trusted universities autonomous from day-to-day governmental interference.

It must be acknowledged that the route to increased autonomy is a long-term process, and its effects are not always immediately perceptible at a macro-level, especially at the time of writing, shortly after the 2021 coup had interrupted the process before it could be completed. In an effort to map the specific stages and impacts of the overall reform process, a few studies have collected perceptions at the institutional meso-level (see, for example, Fiori and Proserpio 2021). These studies have found that higher education actors considered the ongoing reform beneficial in terms of enhancing the efficiency of higher education institutions (by linking decisions more closely to actions), improving the quality and relevance of academic programs (by allowing several universities to modernize and differentiate their degrees and courses), strengthening the relevance of teaching activities (by allowing higher education institutions staff to choose their academic paths more freely), and facilitating international relations with international partners. At the same time, issues of equity and access were not dealt with as top priorities, and there was very little progress on making universities more accessible to students from different social and ethnic backgrounds.

Lastly, it is important to mention how, throughout the entire “period of transition,” student organizations embraced a progressive idea of higher education and pushed for more “just” higher education with the potential to improve society (Proserpio 2022). Student organizations kept engaging in micro-level episodes of contention. These contentious activities mostly focused on endogenous educational issues and improving the well-being of students on campus without linking their claims to broader national political demands. The student unions repeatedly pointed out that higher education reform was at a standstill under the NLD government, and that the administration was unwilling to move forward with implementing decisions that had formally been taken on key matters. The key demands often raised concerned university autonomy and the drafting of institutional charters to legislate such autonomy; new regulations on the hiring and dismissal of university staff; an increase of the education governmental budget; the formal legalization of student unions that were active without proper legislation; and general freedom of expression and protest for students.

### **The SAC’s unmaking of higher education reform**

When the coup happened, Myanmar’s universities were already de facto closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The SAC kept higher education institutions closed throughout 2021 and 2022, only allowing students in their final classes to take examinations, thus ensuring that students do not remain in the system for too long and could potentially create problems. In an online interview in December 2021 with the authors, the Ministry of Education’s officials asserted there are a few restricted pathways still open to enrolling students: some universities focused on medicine and computer science had been authorized to carry out autonomous selection processes, and a few universities closely tied to neighboring countries helped students find alternative routes for enrollment (e.g., the Mandalay Institute of Information Technology has an agreement

with the Indian government and is encouraging students to apply to go study in India). Meanwhile, higher education institutions are by and large closed to most of the student population given that the SAC is changing the higher education field by shrinking the spaces of autonomy that were created during the period of transition.

As already mentioned, in the period of transition universities were gaining autonomy from both the organizational and decisional (meaning the university's ability to decide on various academic issues) perspectives; staffing and financial autonomy, which are the other self-sufficiency sectors in global academia, were not really tackled. The SAC's first actions were targeted at undermining these recent policies by bringing back the old policies and education structure that had been changed during the transitional period. As is made clear in the next section, these actions are coupled with (re)creating a climate of political violence, fear, and vulnerability that is (re)becoming a way of life in Myanmar academia, where teaching staff and students report being targeted with oppression and scrutiny (Moon 2022).

With regard to organizational autonomy, higher education institutions have been re-separated into different line ministries. In June 2021, the new Ministry of Science and Technology was put in charge of technical (33) and computer science universities (27) (a total of 60 institutions are under the umbrella of this new ministry), while the Ministry of Education is still in charge of the 49 arts and sciences universities, plus an additional 25 institutions (a total of 74 institutions are under the Ministry of Education). This "new" higher education organization is the "old" structure that had been in place before the recent reforms. The National Education Policy Commission (NEPC) has been abolished, and the NCC (National Curricula Committee) has been established as the sole coordination body, its main duty being to supervise university curricula. The NEPC was created as a new policy body by the NESP. The NEPC was a committee independent of the Ministry of Education mandated with formulating and implementing education policy reform, while the Ministry of Education retained only administrative duties. The NEPC was designed to play an executive role in advising and coordinating higher education policy and legislation in the form of Myanmar's 30-year Long-term Education Development Plan, as well as coordinating with development partners, a role that had previously been assigned to the Ministry of Education. The abolishment of the NEPC could be seen as a step backward from the progress made in the past decade in terms of universities' autonomy from state authority.

Concerning academic autonomy, the SAC is determined to take a firm grip of the curricula content once more, as is made clear by the NCC (National Curricula Committee) being the only coordination body. For decades under the previous military juntas, the university curricula had not only been inadequate compared with global standards but also disseminated Buddhist-Burman supremacy in a multi-ethnic society. One of the most evident achievements of the recent reform was the relative academic freedom that was granted by letting university staff set the teaching agendas (Fiori and Proserpio 2021). The same professors who had been so enthusiastic about the change are now concerned

about their future teaching activities. The interviewed professors who have decided to maintain their position in academia even under the military junta have declared to the authors that they perceive increased scrutiny in their activities. This leads them to be very cautious not only in their classroom activities but also in the conversations they have with students and colleagues. According to our formal and informal discussions, the space for critical thinking and freedom of expression inside the university spaces is shrinking dramatically.

Lastly, government officials assert that: “the Roadmap of the new NESP 2021–2030 is still there. Nothing has changed for 2021–2030. The education policies are not so much changed at the moment” (from an interview with the authors, December 2021). At the same time, however, no real action is underway to implement any NESP policies; rather, all the efforts of state authority seem to be concentrated once again on fragmenting the higher education system.

### **New conflicts in higher education spaces**

Higher education staff have taken a strong stand against the actions of the *Tatmadaw* and the SAC. Multiple sources point out that between 35% and 50% of the country’s teachers have abandoned their duties and given up their jobs to take part in the CDM.<sup>2</sup> In our virtual fieldwork, we collected the narratives of academics who have decided to join the CDM and the ones that kept their positions.

Among the CDM academics, we found three similar perceptions. First, “the *Tatmadaw* cannot be trusted when comes to education; this is a proven fact in the history of our country.” An SAC-run education system is not credible in the eyes of most university staff. Second, the higher education reform was opening up welcome spaces for debate and autonomy that academics are not willing to lose: “the progress was slow, but it was there, [and] now it is all lost... the *Tatmadaw* will recreate the old ways, an outdated system.” Losing one’s job as a university professor comes at great personal cost, especially since 80% of the staff is female. Even if an academic position is not well-paid, it comes with financial security that is hard for women in Myanmar to acquire in other ways. A former department head in one of the most prestigious universities in Yangon stated in an online interview:

*My university was providing me a house in Yangon, but now I don’t have a salary, and I don’t have a house. I’m not married. It will be very hard for me in the future to make a living, but I couldn’t bear teaching under the military. Not after the past 10 years of progress and the activities that we have had, including international projects.*

This last consideration brings us to the third common point that surfaced in the narratives we collected: the shared fear that the SAC will once again isolate the country from the outside world, starting with cutting all academic ties with international partners. Ultimately, the university staff that joined the CDM believed that losing their jobs was the only way to fight for a functioning higher education system since the SAC will have no interest in keeping the university running or providing quality education based on critical thinking, autonomy, and interna-

<sup>2</sup> Our governmental sources stated they have started to hire student as tutors to replace the missing professors.

tional engagement. According to our interviews, the punishment for a civil servant to join the CDM could vary according to not only the actions carried out by the single person but also their rank: higher-ranking civil servants (like heads of departments or pro-rectors) face more severe charges under Section 505(a).

In December 2021, we interviewed at length a professor based in Mandalay who decided to keep her position. She framed her reasoning in the following way:

*I'm a teacher. If I don't go back to the university, what can we do? If we make the revolution, we might win or lose. I'm a teacher; if the students come to the university, I have to teach. I teach only my subjects, not politics.*

*I have to do research for the new generation. That's why I decided to return to the university and handle my department. At the time, two professors had left, and everything was locked. Then I took control of the department because otherwise other people would come and try. I work for my students and my subject, not for them. The students will come back one day.*

*I'm not a politician, but I understand what is fair and what is unfair, only that. I have to work for the university, the students, and the subject. I have to work for this community only, for the country, not for the government.*

A conflict has arisen between CMD staff and those who have decided to stay in their positions. It is a conflict based on different perceptions of what constitutes the most honorable and suitable thing to do for Myanmar's future and the current students. Regardless of the outcomes of the struggles in the coming months, it is evident that the bond and relationship of trust between and among students, teachers, and families has been broken.

### **Re-thinking higher education: The push toward federal education**

At the time of this writing, the mass mobilization against the SAC, against all odds, has already continued for more than a year and is bringing new regional alliances and repertoires of contention into the national debate thanks, in part, to the support of other regional social movements, the so-called "Milk Tea Alliance."<sup>3</sup> Student unions were part of the resistance movement since the early days, and their involvement remains active and constant. The SAC has promptly reacted by enacting old strategies: by abolishing student unions at universities and colleges throughout the country and supporting alternative groups known as student associations. Student union members believe the associations are supported by the SAC, the junta's governing body, as part of an intentional strategy to undermine resistance to military rule (Frontier Myanmar 2022). Without fully analyzing the actors, grievances, and actions of this mobilization (which probably represents the country's first transnational cultural revolution) here, we offer a few examples of what this mobilization is planning in relation to higher education, to support the argument that these "protests have accomplished what has been elusive to prior generations of anti-regime movements

<sup>3</sup> The Milk Tea Alliance is an online democratic solidarity movement connected to Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan, and Myanmar. It pushes back against Chinese domination in the region and aligns itself with other global anti-authoritarian/pro-democracy movements such as various country-based Spring Revolutions. Protesters in Thailand and Myanmar have adopted the three-finger protest salute from the fictional *Hunger Games* movie series as a sign of resistance by people facing injustice everywhere.

and uprisings. They have severed the Bamar Buddhist nationalist narrative that has gripped state society relations and the military’s ideological control over the political landscape, substituting for it an inclusive democratic ideology” (Jordt, Than and Lin 2021).

Knowing that “we have nothing to lose but our chains,” one of the Marxist expressions popularized by groups such as the University of Yangon Student Union, student organizations are boycotting and fighting the current SAC control of education.

Figure 1. Students against “the military education.” Picture shared on social media.



At the same time, however, they are also imagining a new education system. As Rosalie Metro argues, there are several emerging alternatives to “military slave education” (another historically rooted motto), all based on principles of federalism and self-determination (Metro 2021). So, what does an independent and federal university mean to students? What are their demands for the government and politicians? Most importantly, what is their alternative education model? One proposed model is embodied by the Virtual Federal University (VFU), led in part by members of the University of Yangon Student Union. Three principles underpin the VFU: 1) experiment with a learning and teaching model that will facilitate the federal education system, 2) provide free education, and 3) make students’ voices

and demands central to the operation of the university. The VFU seems to interpret federalism in terms of everyday civic actions, including students' interactions with each other, educators' views of their students, and the role of classes in promoting self-esteem, dignity, and a sense of belonging to a community. Experiments such as the VFU aim to foster federal conversations and practices and to build a federal democratic country from the bottom up. This process would entail bridging the differences among organizations and individuals from different backgrounds<sup>4</sup> and bringing wider political issues that were sidelined by student unions under the NLD government back into the conversation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we are witnessing a fight between students and academics on the one hand and the SAC and the *Tatmadaw* on the other hand over the future of Myanmar's universities. The core of this confrontation is represented both by the future of younger generations, who are already facing a two-year hiatus on their educational path, and by the possibility to establish a higher education system that either can have a transformative power (possibly represented by the visions for a federal education) or is destined to reinforce the military state's authority. In the introduction, our first question was about the new mission of higher education within the SAC state project; the "new" visions are, in fact, the "old" *Tatmadaw* recipes. The SAC seems determined to being the country back to the days when higher education was spatially and administratively fragmented and cognitively separated from society at large. The SAC is actively working against the recent higher education reform that, among several difficulties and limitations, was seeking to improve the higher education system of the country founding Myanmar's future on university autonomy, national academia with a place in the global scientific arena, and down the line a more just society. Interestingly, the SAC seems to believe that the old ways would still work, even if students and academics, in particular, are proving that after a decade of transition, they have acquired different visions for transformative higher education and a far better understanding of what a more just Myanmar could look like.

To a certain extent, the SAC's actions have already (re)created divergences in everyday life in university spaces. For example, a conflict has arisen between CMD staff and those who have decided to maintain their positions. Academics in the two camps are expressing different perceptions of what constitutes the most honorable and suitable thing to do for Myanmar's future and current students. The bond and relationship of trust between and among students, teachers, and families has once again been broken, like during the previous military period. SAC actions are (re)shaping a climate of political violence, fear, and vulnerability that is causing teaching staff and students in Myanmar universities to perceive themselves as targets of oppression and scrutiny. The light in the darkness is represented by the conversations on federalism and practices in education that students and academics are investigating, aimed at building up a federal

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<sup>4</sup> One fact is particularly interesting in relation to this issue: in March 2021, various universities in Mandalay issued statements apologizing to Rohingyas and other minorities for having failed in the past to speak up on their behalf over human rights violations. The Rohingya crisis had not been one of the grievances central to student politics during the transitional period, but it is now part of the debate, and this overall debate is gaining new language linked to human rights and federalism.

democratic country from the bottom. These conversations and experiments can lay the foundations for the restructuring of a new national higher education system if and when a new policy window for change eventually re-opens.

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# Mother tongue-based multilingual education: A vehicle for building Myanmar into an equal and fair federal democratic union

**Yaw Bawm Mangshang**

*This paper reviews the education-related reforms that Myanmar's nominally civilian government initiated in 2011. It specifically analyses whether the reforms paved the way for the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for all ethnic nationalities. The paper argues that the reforms fell short of allowing MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities, although it did permit the teaching of ethnic minority languages at public primary schools. The paper concludes by arguing that it is vital to provide and maintain inclusive MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities, and doing so will contribute to building Myanmar into an equal and fair federal democratic union.*

**KEYWORDS:** EDUCATION REFORMS; MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION; FEDERALISM; MULTI-ETHNIC IDENTITIES; FUTURE NATIONAL SOLIDARITY.

## Introduction

In 2011, a new nominally civilian government led by the military's proxy party came to power and initiated several important reforms, including the passage of the 2014 National Education Law (NEL), amended in 2015). This new law made it possible to: teach ethnic minority languages, recruit language teaching assistants, and use minority nationalities' language as a language of instruction along with Burmese. Some researchers (Jolliffe, Kim and Mears 2016: 31–32) have asserted that the law was intended to set up a legal framework for education reform, including the introduction of mother tongue-based learning. In 2016, a new civilian government, led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), came to power, although the Burmese military kept control of certain key ministries and power structures, and it continued the education reform. The reform's stated objectives were, among others: "ensuring children who speak nationalities' languages get the best possible start in education" and "enabling the ethnic minority learners to gain a solid grounding in their local literature, culture, arts, customs, heritage and traditions" (MoE Myanmar 2016: 32, 117, 145).

This paper reviews some of the key laws and asks whether this new legal framework allows mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for all ethnic nationalities. It also analyses the challenges facing the implementation of MTB-MLE.

The paper argues that the reforms have failed to achieve their stated objective of ensuring MTB-MLE because, at best, the governments implemented MTB-MLE half-heartedly for all ethnic nationalities, and the content of the curricula continued to center on Bama culture (and Buddhism). Moreover, the language of instruction remained the same: Burmese.

This paper concludes by advocating for more inclusive MTB-MLE that would help transform Myanmar into an equal and fair federal democratic union. The

paper makes four recommendations for the country's future national and sub-national governments, as well as stakeholders, to make the MTB-MLE a success for all children in the country. First, it requires Bama leaders to change their chauvinistic Bama mindset. Second, all relevant policies and laws must guarantee the right to mother-tongue education for all. Third, official recognition of community-run MTB schools is essential. Finally, adequate resources need to be allocated to implement and maintain MTB-MLE.

The analysis here draws on 1) interviews with retired and in-service teachers, students of the 1970s, and alumni of the University for the Development of the National Races of the Union, 2) relevant laws and policies, and 3) newspapers, reports, and studies. The starting premise is that mother tongue-based education has 'significant cognitive and academic benefits for students' (UNESCO 2009; UNICEF 2016) and 'strengthens cultural identity and heritage' (Jomtien Declaration, 1990).

### **Brief literature of mother tongue-based education**

The concept of mother tongue-based education started to spread in Europe in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but the vernacular became the language of instruction in parts of Europe only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after centuries of schooling in Latin. However, vernacular education was not accessible to the wider public until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, when compulsory education began to take root on the continent. Thus, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, mother-tongue education played an important role in the nation-building process in Europe (Kroon 2003: 38). By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a UNESCO report (1953) stated that "vernacular is the vehicle for the transmission of knowledge" (pag. 8) and argued, "It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue" (pag. 11).

In principle, MTBE needs to have a contextualized curriculum with culturally (of a particular ethnic group) appropriate illustrations and child-centered reading materials in the mother tongue (MacKenzie 2009: 377–378, 380, 382). In a pluralistic society, the mother tongue is a means of self-expression and a source of one's own cultural identity, as well as a means of acknowledging otherness and understanding others (CSE Québec 1987: 42–43).

Academic and policy research suggests that MTB-MLE provides the best learning outcome because children can start their learning in the language they understand best. UNESCO (2012: 39) argues that "Children who receive a strong educational foundation in their mother tongue are in the best position to move forward with confidence, to learn other languages, and to make a contribution to their societies' future." For example, a four-year evaluation of mother-tongue instruction in northwest Cameroon by Chuo and Walter (2011) indicates that first-grade children taught in their mother tongue, Kom, perform significantly better across a range of subjects, including English and mathematics, than their peers taught solely in English. By contrast, they will often struggle to succeed academically if they do not understand what the teacher is saying (Trammell 2016: 44).

Moreover, MTB-MLE is critical to advancing equality between the genders in society. Recognizing and applying MTB-MLE empowers girls, and the use of

local languages improves maternal and child health (UNESCO 2012). In that sense, the annual commemoration of International Mother Language Day (IMLD) on 21 February signifies the importance of being able to learn through one's mother tongue or first language.

### **Brief review of MTB-MLE in Myanmar**

The concept of MTB-MLE in Myanmar (then-Burma) started in the 1920s and 1930s when Burmese (Bamar) nationalists demanded the British colonial government make Burmese the language of instruction and observe Buddhist as opposed to British holidays (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007; Salem-Gervais 2018; Lall 2020: 31). They invoked the idea that “being educated in a language other than a child's mother tongue could hamper their linguistic and intellectual development” (Salem-Gervais 2018).

The Education Policy announced in 1948 led the newly independent government to adopt centralized control<sup>1</sup> and the administration of education as an “interim and experimental” measure, (MoE Myanmar 1956: 10). The government gradually introduced Burmese to the national schools (Ma Khin Mya 1961: 200; Thein Lwin 2000: 6, 9), while the teaching of ethnic minority languages at schools was halted after the coup in 1962 (Lall 2020: 36). The 1947, 1974, and 2008 constitutions all made Burmese the country's only official language. Successive governments wanted all citizens of Myanmar, regardless of ethnicity, to use Burmese as the lingua franca (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007: 155).

Successive governments' lack of enthusiasm might derive from the fear that teaching and learning ethnic languages may lead to multiple national identities, as the literature indicates. Government and non-state educational organizations often use language policy to help build a national identity by constructing a national narrative, thus reinforcing the myths, rituals, and symbols that the education providers (i.e., government and non-state organizations) identify themselves with (South and Lall 2016: 133; UNESCO 2009: 5). The choice of curriculum content (i.e., culture, history, geography) is especially important concerning the identity that children are expected to adopt (South and Lall 2016: 134). In Myanmar, Thant Myint-U (2001: 254) argues that “the strength and political dominance of a Burmese/Myanmar identity based on older Ava-based memories has never allowed the development of a newer identity which would incorporate the diverse peoples inhabiting the modern state.”

### **Analysis of relevant legal framework and ministries for MTB-MLE**

This section presents the current legal framework and ministries within which the national education reform has been taking place. Specifically, the National Education Law (NEL) in 2014 allows the teaching of ethnic minority languages at public primary schools and the recruitment of teaching assistants for language teaching (MoEA Myanmar undated), allows ethnic language to be jointly used as “class work language” and grants the sub-national governments the mandate to implement the teaching of nationalities' language and literature and aspiration

<sup>1</sup> At the time, centralization was viewed as the best way to distribute resources because the country is wide and has sparsely populated areas and poorer districts and areas with uneven distribution of wealth (MoE Myanmar 1956: 10).

of the education budget allocation to reach up to 20 percent of government expenditure.

Four ministries are tasked with ensuring the linguistic and cultural rights of ethnic nationalities. First, the MoE is naturally the most important ministry to implement the national education principles and objectives as prescribed in the NEL. The MoE has three specific agencies responsible for the subject in question: the National Education Commission (NEC), the Department of Basic Education (DBE), and the Department of Myanmar Nationalities' Languages (DMNL). The NEC is enormously influential in the implementation of the national education objectives and basic principles. It guides, evaluates, reviews, advises, coordinates, and lays down policies to ensure the curriculum standards are in line with the stated policy objective for every level of the basic education system (Article 6 of the NEL). It has the right to form an independent National Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee (NAQAC) to carry out the scheme of quality assurance at every level of education (Article 54–55 of the NEL). The DBE is another powerful body as it oversees over 47,000 schools (primary, middle, and high) in the country (Eleven Media 2020). Among others, it is also responsible for training (and building the capacity of) teachers and curriculum and textbook development (MoE Myanmar 2022). The DMNL is the lead agency for the development of ethnic nationalities' languages – it functions as the coordination center for the translation and teaching of ethnic languages at different levels. The department was created on 20 July 2016.

Second, the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief, and Resettlement (MoSWRR) is responsible for giving every child the right to learn, use, and preserve their own literature, language, culture, arts, and traditions under the 2019 Child Rights Law.

Third, the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA) is also responsible for the development, promotion, and conservation of ethnic minority languages under the 2015 Ethnic Rights Protection Law. The MoEA was created in 2016. It has offices in the Department of Ethnic Literature and Culture in 16 major cities throughout the union (MoEA Myanmar 2022).

Fourth, the Ministry of Border Affairs (MoBA) has a mandate for the development, promotion, and preservation of ethnic minority languages under the University for the Development of the National Races of the Union Law (No. 9/91) and the Development of Border Areas and National Races Law (1993, amended in 2015). The MoBA is accountable to the Commander-in-Chief of the *Tatmadaw* because the 2008 constitution permits the military to control three ministries, including the MoBA.

Lastly, the amendment of the State/Region Legislative List in the 2008 constitution in July 2015 allows the sub-national governments to undertake the “management matters on basic education schools” in accordance with laws enacted by the union.

In short, the development, promotion, and preservation of ethnic minority languages are centralized. The failure or success of implementing and maintaining the MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities, therefore, reflects the government's attitude toward the ethnic minority languages and identities.

## **Analysis of challenges to implementing MTB-MLE**

The education reform efforts were plagued by governments' half-hearted political will as is clear from the country's long history of subjugating ethnic nationalities, the failure of legislation to stipulate MTB-MLE, an unwillingness to recognize schools run by ethnic minorities, structural challenges, and inadequate resource allocation.

### **Half-hearted political will**

The political will of the Bamar leaders to implement inclusive MTB-MLE can at best be characterized as half-hearted. They have ignored public demands and arrested activists asking for more comprehensive education reform. For example, when the NEL was still being drafted in 2014, the National Network for Education Reform (NNER, a civil society education coalition)<sup>2</sup> submitted an 11-point proposal (NNER 2013).

The NNER specifically advocated for the promotion of ethnic minority languages: "Ethnic languages will be used as school languages in ethnic areas for the preservation and promotion of the languages and cultures of the ethnic nationalities including Bamar;" "textbooks for teaching ethnic languages will be independently written by the respective ethnic scholars;" and the school governing body will have the authority to select ethnic language(s) for teaching." However, despite allowing the teaching and learning of ethnic nationality languages and jointly using them with Burmese as the "class work language" in primary school, the eventual NEL does not even contain the word or phrase "MTBE."

In February 2015, when the NEL was being reviewed for amendment, the NNER and the Action Committee for Movement of Education for Democracy held talks at the building of Yangon Region Hluttaw in Yangon and issued a joint statement. One of the agreements the four parties reached was "to adopt mother tongue-based multilingual education system" (GNLM 2015) The NNER representative, Dr. Thein Lwin, said the government had agreed at the quartet meeting to include the 11 points in the NEL amendment (DVBT English 2015). However, the government again chose to exclude the NNER's demands in the NEL amendment, which meant there was no improvement with regard to the MTB-MLE. The NNER and All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) leaders argue that less than 10% of their demands were included in the NEL in 2014 and subsequent amendment in 2015 (Thuza 2015).

The lack of improvement in the NEL amendment led to education activists organizing public protests in major cities across the country. The government responded with crackdowns that are documented by Fortify Rights, Harvard Law School International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC), and Amnesty International. On 10 March 2015 in Letpadan, Bago Region alone, the police arrested 127 protesters, journalists, and bystanders. At the time of the reports, 77 men and women arrested face charges that carry sentences from six months to nine years of imprisonment, and at the time of this writing, 50 of those arrested re-

<sup>2</sup>NNER members who represent university students, student unions, teachers' unions, basic and higher education teachers, parents, disability education groups, ethnic minority education groups, faith-based education groups, community-based education groups, academia, scholars, CSOs, and individuals: see GCE 2018. For more details on the NNER, see Thein Lwin 2021: 181.

main behind bars (Fortify Rights and IHRC 2015: 3). In the same period, the Amnesty report states that 68 out of 91 prisoners of conscience were student protesters – arrested and prosecuted with various charges for protesting against the newly passed NEL deemed to put too much restriction on academic freedom (Amnesty International 2015: 10–11). More than 100 other students faced a variety of criminal charges for taking part in what the government called “unlawful” assemblies inciting public unrest.

The NLD government also exhibited its half-hearted attitude toward education reform by expelling Dr. Thein Lwin from its auxiliary central committee for his leadership role in the NNER without approval from the party (BBC Burmese 2015; RFA Burmese 2015). In Myanmar’s education reform movement, Dr. Thein Lwin is perhaps the most recognizable representative and the leading figure of the NNER. While people from the education sector respect and support him for his expertise and advocacy for education reform, the NLD distanced itself from him by stating that he does not represent the party on education policy (Kyaw Hsu Mon 2015).

### **Long history of subjugating ethnic minority identities**

Successive Burmese governments and political leaders have long been accused of having no interest in developing and promoting the language, literature, culture, and traditions of the country’s ethnic minorities. In the 1930s, during the struggle for independence, the *Do Bama Asiayone*/We Bamar Association (DBA) famously rallied people around the love of language (Allott 1985: 140; Khin Khin Aye and Sercombe 2014: 154). The leading members of the DBA failed to promote the language and culture of ethnic and religious minorities; instead, the discourses of traditional nationalist leaders continued to focus on promoting Buddhism and the Burman language (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007: 153).

Duwa Zanhtha Sin (or Duwa Zan Hta Sin), the chief minister of Kachin State, observed in 1956 that in the central (lower) plain of Burma, many organizations and political leaders emerged during British and Japanese colonial times, but almost no one had an interest in the affairs of ethnic minorities (1989: 22). He argued that the first post-independence prime minister, U Nu, did not even want to give statehood to the ethnic minorities. U Nu had told Rakhine and Mon political leaders not to demand statehood because it is not a good thing (presumably from the Bamar perspective). Duwa Zanhtha Sin accused U Nu of squeezing the central government’s financial support to the states with inane excuses – thereby making it clear he had no intention to grant statehood to the ethnic minorities (Duwa Zanhtha Sin: 49–50).

Successive governments have curtailed the language rights of ethnic minorities. During the first decade of democracy after independence, ethnic minority languages were taught in public schools up to Grade IV. According to a retired primary school teacher from Waingmaw township in Kachin State who taught Grade II from 1956 to 1988, Jinghpaw (the lingua franca of the Kachin people) had been taught until Grade IV before 1956.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Interview on 20 June in Yangon. The teacher was 84 years old and passed away in August of the same year after contracting COVID-19, see Yaw Bawm Mangshang (2021).

Following the military coup in 1962, the military government nationalized all Christian missionary and private schools, thereby impeding the ethnic minorities' education and language rights.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the military government produced textbooks for several ethnic languages for the teaching of the main ethnic languages, usually those associated with one of the ethnic states, (Salem-Gervais 2018). However, it seemed that some schools in certain townships did not get to teach these languages. For example, this author studied at a government school in a remote village and was in Grade II in 1988 but did not learn Jinghpaw at school – only in church.

Education that includes the overt promotion of Bamar history, culture, and language persisted even under the nominal civilian governments: Under the new system, in Grade II and III textbooks of Social Studies, Myanmar Literature, and Morality & Ethics, the entire content is about Bamar culture/festivals, Bamar kings/war heroes, and Buddhism. Moreover, Burmese architecture designs are reflected in all pictures of buildings in the textbooks. The joint use of ethnic language as “class work language” along with Burmese (Article 43 (b) of the NEL) is not MTBE but more like what Ball (2010: 19) calls “code-switching.” The teacher teaches in two or more languages. Dr. Thein Lwin asserts that the NLD is exercising the same practice as previous governments as there is no evidence of policies and implementations for democratic education reform and the right to education (2021: 182).

In short, when it comes to the efforts of successive governments to preserve and develop the languages, literature, cultures, and traditions of ethnic nationalities, all efforts have always been centrally planned and implemented. The relevant ethnic communities have little or no say in the process.

### **Failure to include MTB-MLE in legal framework**

The fact that none of the education-related laws<sup>4</sup> contains the word or phrase “MTB-MLE” indicates that the Myanmar government is unwilling to commit to implementing it for all ethnic nationalities. Relevant provisions must include the MTB-MLE terminology for it is a well-established concept with a specific standard, and exclusion of the concept would mean the government is not required to implement MTB-MLE for wider groups.

Vague legal provisions, such as “right to use freely” or the “right to preserve their own languages, arts, literature, cultures,” make it difficult to hold the government responsible for implementing and maintaining MTB-MLE for all nationalities. The laws allow the teaching and learning of ethnic languages, which is recognized as the first step toward MTB-MLE implementation. However, this is not the same as providing the necessary resources and infrastructure that would make MTB-MLE a reality for non-Burmese-speaking children.

It is also crucial to note that legal provisions do not automatically mean the ethnic minorities enjoy their rights in practice. For example, the 2008 constitution and

<sup>4</sup> The 2008 constitution, National Education Law (2014) and amended in 2015, Ethnic Rights Protection Law (2015), Child Rights Law (2019), The University for the Development of the National Races of the Union Law (No. 9/91), Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) and National Education Strategic Plan (2016–2021) are the relevant laws and official plans. None of these documents include the phrases MTBE or MTB-MLE.

all relevant laws grant ethnic minorities the right to develop their cherished language, literature, culture, customs, and religion. In practice, however, the government schools only provide the ethnic minorities an “over-promotion of Bamar history, culture and language” (Pauli 2016: 34) and are viewed as “Burmanized schools” (ENAC 2018). Most ethnic minorities view themselves as being trapped in the colonial-style administration of the Bamar government (Sai Wansai 2016).

### **Unwillingness to recognize schools run by ethnic minorities**

Understandably, the government cannot provide all the support needed for MTB-MLE implementation in an inclusive way. Around 352,600 students are studying at 2,702 MTBE schools run by ethnic communities in 10 states and regions (MEC 2019: 2). However, the government does not even recognize the learning achievements of students in these schools, which results in limitations on their (students’) opportunities for employment or transfer to government schools for further education. The lack of recognition raises serious questions about the attitude of Bamar political leaders toward providing MTBE to all ethnic nationalities.

### **Structural challenges**

The centralization of power on education matters remains with the union government. For example, the amendment of the State/Region Legislative List in the 2008 constitution allows the sub-national governments to undertake “management matters on basic education schools” in accordance with the laws enacted by the union. In practice, however, the heads of State Education and the literature and culture associations of relevant ethnic groups have not been consulted or allowed to participate in reviewing and approving the development of the new school textbooks (Grade 7), which contains many errors in the names and descriptions of cultural events/ festivals, landmarks, historical figures/facts, and the categorization of sub-groups of ethnic minorities. The errors were widespread: with regard to the Rakhine (Arakan) (Narinjara News 2020), Kayan (Kayah) (RFA Burmese 2020), and Kachin people (Irrawaddy 2020). The heads of State Education and concerned ethnic groups’ literature and culture associations have all expressed in various local media that they were not responsible for these errors and that the responsibility for these mistakes lies with the Basic Education Department (of the central/union government).

### **Inadequate resource allocation**

The allocation of resources also indicates that the government is not enthusiastic about developing and promoting the languages of ethnic minorities. The budget for Fiscal Year (FY) 2016–2021 indicates an average of 0.009 percent of the MoE annual expenditure was for hiring ethnic language teachers (MoPF 2016: 21; 2017: 18; 2018: 18–19; 2019: 20–23; 2020: 27–29).<sup>5</sup> In addition to MoE, the MoEA also contributed to adding 7,010 ethnic language teachers in the 2019–2020 academic year (MoEA Myanmar undated).

The Department of Myanmar Nationalities’ Languages (DMNL) under the MoE is the lead agency for the development of ethnic nationalities’ languages. The department has two divisions: the Myanmar Language Division (tasked

<sup>5</sup> In November 2019, the government merged the MoPF with the Ministry of Industry. The combined ministries became the Ministry of Planning, Finance and Industry (MoPFI). For more details on the merger, see Irrawaddy (2019).

with one language, Burmese) and the Myanmar Nationalities' Language Division (tasked with all other ethnic minority languages). The Myanmar Language Division has 26 people (one chief editor, five editors, eight text editors, and 12 assistant text editors). Meanwhile, the Myanmar Nationalities' Language Division has 14 people (one chief editor, two editors, four text editors, and seven assistant text editors) (MoEA Myanmar undated). Myanmar recognizes 135 ethnic groups, so how much can these 14 people really accomplish?

Salaries might explain why the shortage of skilled ethnic language teachers has been a recurring challenge. The teaching assistants appointed as daily-wage workers initially only received 30,000 kyat (MMK) per month (about USD 20), and the salary increased to MMK 80,000 (about USD 50) in 2018 (Ei Shwe Phyu 2018). Often, it is not guaranteed for them to regularly receive even this modest salary due to corruption and discriminatory practice. For instance, in 2016 in the northern Shan State, more than 5,000 people protested because they did not receive their salaries (Mwe Khur 2017). There was also a report of ethnic Rakhine literature teachers in Rakhine State not receiving their salaries for two months in 2020 (DMG 2021).

Several teachers told this author that many of them take this language teaching job because they want to contribute to learning, developing, and preserving their language and that the salary is not the only determining factor. However, many people would not be able to continue for long without livable compensation. In short, the allocation of more resources, especially for training (ethnic minority) language teachers, is sensible given decades of marginalization (and the strict ban on minority languages).

### Case study of MTB-MLE in Mon State

Students in Mon State outperform their peers in the national matriculation exam. The national average pass rate has been between 30% and 38% but Mon State has consistently been in the Top 3.

Top Three Best-performing States/Regions in Matriculation Exam (2013–2020 Academic Year) Pass Rate (%)				
Academic Year	National Average	First	Second	Third
2013–2014	31.67% <sup>6</sup>	Mon State (46.75%) <sup>7</sup>	Ayeyarwady (44.86%) <sup>8</sup>	Yangon (36.07%) <sup>9</sup>
2014–2015	37.60% <sup>10</sup>	Ayeyarwady (51.78%)	Mon State (43.40%)	Magway (40.86%)
2015–2016	29.92% <sup>11</sup>	Mon State (39.37%)	Mandalay (35.50%)	Yangon (33.21%)
2016–2017	32.82%	Mandalay (38.17%)	Yangon (37.55%)	Mon State (37.42%)
2018–2019	32.06%	Mon State (37.54%) <sup>12</sup>	Mandalay (36.13%)	Sagaing (34%)
2019–2020	38.56% <sup>13</sup>	Mandalay (37.51%)	Sagaing (35.17%)	Mon State (34.71%) <sup>14</sup>

<sup>6</sup> May Thinza Naing (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Myanmar Alin, one of the government daily newspaper, 11 June 2014. Mon State with 47.38% ranked the first also in 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Thit Htoo Lwin (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mirror Daily (also known as KyayMone, a government newspaper) (2016b): 11.

<sup>11</sup> Mirror Daily (2016a): 1.

<sup>12</sup> Zin Lin Htet (2019).

<sup>13</sup> Mirror Daily (2020): 10.

<sup>14</sup> But Mon State ranked the first with 42.27% on the external exam pass rate, see Thet Zin Soe (2020).

Deeper research and analysis would be required to explain what exactly contributes to the high performance. One small contributing factor could be MTB-MLE because the Mon National Education Committee (MNEC) has been recognized (among the education experts and MTB-MLE advocates) as the most successful at providing MTB-MLE in its areas of influence within the state.

As of 2016, the MNEC runs 136 schools and supports a further 95 schools under mixed administration (between the New Mon State Party and the government). These schools use the Myanmar government curriculum, but all subjects (including the Mon language, history, and culture) are taught in Mon as mother tongue, with Burmese and English introduced as subjects at the primary level (MEC 2016: 2). Around 26,000 children benefit every year.

The 26,000 are only a fraction of the total students in Mon State because the number of students who take the matriculation exam in the state exceeds this figure: 27,657 students in the 2017–2018 academic year, 30,564 in 2018–2019 (Eleven Media 2019), and 32,520 (Mizzima 2022) in 2019–2020. Therefore, MTB-MLE's contribution to matriculation exam success could be small (at the state level), but it is nonetheless important because the exam result is the primary determining factor for a student's academic and career future. Students who pass the exam can pursue university education, while those who fail tend to see their academic dreams dashed.

### **Factors contributing to MNEC's success**

It raises the question of what makes the MNEC successful at delivering MTB-MLE in the areas it controls. Alternatively, why have other ethnic minorities been less successful in this regard? There are two key factors: the readiness of the Mon language for teaching and the prioritization of institutions/leaders.

First, in the context of language readiness, the MNEC has a huge advantage in terms of politically challenging language selection. William Mackey (1979: 48) observes that, "The more languages there are to choose from, the more complex the problems tend to become." However, the MNEC does not have to waste time and resources debating language selection because, unlike many other languages, Mon has no sub-tribe. Furthermore, the Mon language has a comparatively long and rich history, its written script is advanced enough for teaching, and it has enough teaching and learning materials (Jenny 2001).

Second, the teaching, learning, and preservation of the Mon language have clearly been the top priority of Mon national institutions and leaders. For instance, the provision of MTB-MLE in the Mon language as the medium of instruction started relatively early on. Following a brief disruption amid political turmoil in the 1960s, the New Mon State Party, which is the main Mon revolutionary armed group, began to build many Mon language schools in the state (Lawi Weng 2020). It is fair to conclude that Mon leaders also exceptionally managed to get a degree of understanding with the successive governments to implement MTB-MLE in their state.

### **Factors contributing to the failure of MTB-MLE emulations in other states/regions**

The two factors that contributed to the success of MNEC may also explain why other ethnic minorities have been less successful at adopting MTB-MLE. First, other major ethnic groups have numerous sub-ethnic tribes. Chin has 53 tribes, Kachin 12 tribes, Kayah nine tribes, Kayin 11 tribes, Rakhine seven tribes, and Shan 33 tribes, according to the government. Mackey (1979: 48) remarks that, “In situations of language contact, the servant adapted to the language of the master, the weak to the language of the strong, and the minority to the language of the majority.” It is undoubtedly a very sensitive matter to select one language/dialect of a particular tribe over others.

For instance, Jinghpaw (the language of the dominant tribe within Kachin and was invented by Christian missionaries in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) is the lingua franca, but not all sub-groups are happy about it. For the Shan, Mai Sung Lik Tai was approved for standard use by the Shan State government only in 1955 (Watkins 2006). There is no known lingua franca for the Chin people.

Because of language readiness matters, other ethnic minority groups are also behind when it comes to providing MTB-MLE. Only a few of them have the materials needed to take a child beyond the first few years of primary school. For instance, the languages (especially of smaller ethnic groups) still need to systematically develop tone mark symbols, grammar features, affixation, pronouns, locatives, cases, verb tenses, auxiliary verbs, plurality, mood, word order, and standard spelling rules.

Besides, the MTB-MLE (relative to Mon) was seemingly not the top priority of the institutions and political leaders of respective ethnic groups. Additionally, some (i.e., Kachin, Kayin/Karen, Shan) groups have been at war with the government, which has diverted their already limited resources away from social investments like education.

### **Multi-ethnic identities: Foundation for future national solidarity**

All future efforts of cultivating national solidarity should be based on recognizing and respecting multi-ethnic identities (unity in diversity) because the past efforts based on a single dominant ethnic identity and religion have failed to cultivate ethnic solidarity. The genuine implementation and maintenance of MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities is a concrete way to build national solidarity for the future Myanmar.

Successive post-colonial governments have attempted nation-building efforts based on the culture, language, and history of the ethnic majority, the Bamar (Salem-Gervais and Raynaud 2020; Khin Khin Aye and Sercombe 2014; Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007) because U Nu and some political leaders reasoned it would be easier to unify the minorities if they were Buddhists and had a common language. This rationale led to the promotion of teaching and learning of the Bamar language, and the expansion of Buddhist missionary work in minority areas (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007: 150; 156).

Burmese has always been the only official language. Thein Lwin (2011: 2, 15) views this language policy as the policy of Burmese domination over other ethnic minority languages or the policy to swallow other languages in the name of building national unity. Following the coup in 1962, the government nationalized all schools, including mission schools vital to ethnic minorities (Lall 2020: 31; MEC 2016: 1). The government centralized education to control ethnic minorities resulting in the penetration and spread of Burmese among ethnic minorities (Thein Lwin 2011: 2, 15). These efforts led to the consolidation of state power under the regime identified with the Bamar ethnic majority (South and Lall 2016: 133).

However, the current state of affairs is a clear demonstration that the centralized approach of cultivating national solidarity has failed despite over 70 years of efforts. Ethnic nationalism (Kyaw Zan Tha 2011) and schools run by ethnic minorities even without government recognition (MEC 2019) have only increased, and their armed resistance persists. In her speech delivered at the opening ceremony of the Third Session of Union Peace Conference-21<sup>st</sup> Century Panglong in July 2018, State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi finally conceded this reality when she said, “We [successive governments] were unable to establish a united union, trusted and valued by all” (GNLM 2018).

In short, ethnic minorities have resisted the forceful assimilation efforts for over seven decades, and there is no reason why they would stop the resistance if future governments pursued the same old policies. Therefore, any new government should actively implement and maintain MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities to prevent history from repeating.

### **Policy recommendations for key stakeholders**

A close review of the current education system in Myanmar indicates that only Bamar (and other children who speak Burmese as their first language) enjoy the known benefits of MTB-MLE. This puts the non-Bamar children at a great disadvantage in terms of their academic and career prospects. To break the circle of perpetual social injustice and inequality and transform the education system into a vehicle that helps build Myanmar into an equal and fair federal union, the following recommendations deserve serious consideration by future governments.

#### **Government**

First, recognize that past efforts to cultivate national solidarity based on the language, culture, and religion of the dominant ethnic group have failed. It is equally important to recognize the need for national languages, state/region languages, and international languages. This change of mindset is also needed at the sub-national level (i.e., dominant ethnic groups suppressing weaker ones). Myo Min (2020) rightly observes, “Myanmar’s political history teaches us that the imposition of specific national values as a means of integration has led the country into a perpetual state of conflict. For example, the promotion of a common language and education system ignites fears among many ethnic groups that there is no place for their own distinctive languages, threatening their cultures and ethnic identities.”

Second, amend all existing (and future) relevant legislation and policy frameworks that recognize and guarantee the MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities. Relevant laws must have specific provisions on MTB-MLE terminology because it is a well-established concept with specific standards, and exclusion of the concept would mean the government is not required to implement MTB-MLE for wider communities.

Ethnic nationality languages should be permitted for use in the public domain: at school, in administration, and in the realm of justice within their respective state/region and self-administered regions. The existing legal framework contains no provisions relating to language utility, even though the teaching, learning, and preservation of ethnic minority languages are permitted.

Third, design/create an institutional mechanism to ensure the meaningful participation of respective ethnic nationalities in all stages of decision-making processes for true MTB-MLE implementation, as well as for the teaching, learning, use, and preservation of respective nationality languages.

Fourth, recognize the learning achievements of students in the non-government schools (run by various ethnic organizations) because it is difficult for the government alone to implement MTB-MLE in an inclusive way. Without official recognition, students from the schools run by ethnic organizations will have limited academic and career opportunities.

The recognition of these learning achievements would also mean the decentralization of education management. The first post-independence government stated that centralization was only for experimental and interim measures because the government was aware of the value of local initiatives, which could develop only through local self-government and responsibility (MoE 1956: 10). Therefore, whoever forms the new national government (when stability returns) needs to put decentralization into practice.

Concerning government support, it is vital to create an enabling environment (i.e., equal protection and recognition under the law) where all ethnic languages can thrive. Owing to their varying degrees of language use and advancement, not all ethnic minorities may need the same level of government assistance. For example, major ethnic minority groups have managed to preserve their languages and have a substantial amount of literature written in their languages. Meanwhile, many smaller ethnic minorities either have a written language that is not yet well-developed or does not have any script at all. Therefore, in addition to legal protection and recognition, smaller minorities might need more (e.g., financial and technical) support.

### **Development partners and donors**

This author has heard development partners express reluctance to support the reasoning of the ethnic community-based schools that such direct support may lead to a parallel system of education. However, such assistance should be viewed as a contribution to local capacity-building efforts in preparation for fair federal democracy and cultivating new national solidarity based on a “unity in diversity” mindset. The essence of MTB-MLE is to recognize the linguistic/cultural diversity of a society/country. It is critical to put this recognition into practice.

## Conclusion

Future nation-building efforts in Myanmar need to reflect ethnic and religious diversity because previous efforts based on the dominant ethnic group have failed to cultivate national solidarity and bridge ethnic divisions. Ethnic minorities have resisted forceful assimilation efforts. They have also resisted the idea of a single national identity for over seven decades, and they have no reason to stop this resistance in the future if the government continues to pursue the same old policies.

MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities should be the template for a future education system that respects diversity in the form of allowing ethnic nationalities to teach, learn, develop, and preserve their language, cultural heritage, and identity.

Therefore, future governments should actively implement and maintain MTB-MLE for all ethnic nationalities so that they can enjoy the benefits of being able to study in their mother tongue from an early age, become more productive and responsible, and help in the building of a new federal democratic union.

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# The impact of the double crisis on the garment sector in Myanmar

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*Myanmar's military coup on 1 February 2021 sent shock waves across the nation and through an economy that was already reeling from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although previously poised for tremendous growth, Myanmar's economy now faces a double crisis: the pandemic and the coup. By September 2021, Myanmar's garment exports had decreased by about 30 percent, with exports to the European Union declining the most. As the largest market, the EU needs to resolve the ongoing dilemma of whether to continue doing business with Myanmar. The double crisis in the export-oriented garment sector is a microcosm of the country's overall industrial development. The data comes from a quantitative factory survey that applied a stratified random sampling technique and qualitative interviews with selected stakeholders. This paper investigates significant changes to the production level, working days and overtime hours, wages expenditure, and workforce since the military coup and later compounded by the third wave of COVID-19. Factories reported the greatest declines between January and June 2021. Large-sized and Chinese-owned factories have experienced a decline in production lines (-20%), and factories have experienced a decline in overtime hours (-64%). Myanmar- and joint venture-owned factories have experienced a greater decline (-45%) in expenditures on wages and large-sized factories (-36%). Furthermore, factories have seen a decline in their workforce (-24%). With regard to the most impacted factories, the data clearly shows that smaller-sized factories and Chinese-owned factories have struggled the most to recover since June 2021, as there has not been much significant positive growth. Most respondents indicated political instability, limiting cash withdrawals from banks, and the uncertainty of orders have negatively affected factory operations. The garment sector shows some reason for optimism but, for the most part, continues to have worrying levels of uncertainty.*

**KEYWORDS:** COVID-19; MILITARY COUP; GARMENT SECTOR; INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT.

## Introduction

While the country was still reeling from the impacts of the global coronavirus pandemic, the military coup carried out on 1 February 2021 sent shock waves through Myanmar as people now faced the looming possibility that their democratic era under the National League of Democracy (NLD) would be short-lived. According to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association (MGMA), 55 factories closed temporarily and 13 factories closed permanently in 2021. Garment factory workers, mostly young women, have faced several disruptions because of the coup.

This paper seeks to grasp the impact of the military coup and the COVID-19 pandemic, referred to as the “double crisis,” on the country's garment sector. The paper is divided into four parts: the first section deconstructs the term ‘double crisis’ to understand the changes in the garment sector from this perspective. The second section is the methodology, which outlines the data used to analyze these changes. The third section presents five different types of changes experienced in the garment factories, namely: (1) changes in export destinations, (2) order cancellations, (3) overtime and wage expenditures, (4) production levels, and (5) the size of the workforce. The fourth section presents the greatest challenges factories have faced in maintaining operations, as well as some perspectives on the future of the garment sector. The conclusion will draw on the key points and arguments made in the paper.

## The double crisis

Møller (2022) challenges other researchers using postcolonial critiques of Myanmar to avoid generalizations and instead allow local scholars to offer deeper insights about the situation. In that vein, this paper aims to amplify the voices of the Myanmar people and their experiences. Demonstrating the state of industrial development in the country, primarily through the available data and various sources, requires listening to what the female garment workers, as well as the factory owners, labor unionists, and researchers, have to say about the current events.

In this paper, the term ‘double crisis’ refers to two crises that have gripped Myanmar and had a significant impact on its industrial development. The first crisis is COVID-19, a global pandemic that has gripped the entire world, and the second crisis is the entire period since 1 February 2021. The term has been used by several authors and organizations to illustrate the unique challenges Myanmar is facing. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that under the “twin crises” or “combined crisis” (COVID-19 and military take-over after February 2021), half of Myanmar’s population is projected to be living in poverty by early 2022 (UNDP 2021: 4). The next section will provide more insight into how these crises have impacted the economy, specifically industrial development.

## Crisis and industrial development

### *COVID-19 pandemic*

The first crisis that will be analyzed (because it happened first) is the global pandemic. At the end of 2020, the World Bank (2020) estimated that Myanmar’s economic growth for Fiscal Year (FY) 19/20 would decline to 1.7 percent from 6.8 percent the previous year due to COVID-19. Furthermore, the World Bank estimated that the country’s economic growth would remain at 2 percent for the first part of FY20/21. The pandemic is expected to exacerbate the existing inequalities in the country. It was estimated that due to COVID-19, the poverty rate could increase to 27 percent in FY20/21 from 22.4 percent in FY18/19 (World Bank 2021).

The ILO (2020) stated that a global recession was looming because of the pandemic and would gravely affect developing economies already battling a string of inequalities. According to Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma, garment workers in Myanmar suffered an 8 percent loss of net income within six months of the COVID-19 pandemic due to supply chain disruptions and lockdown measures (Min Zar Ni Lin, *et al.* 2019). From the onset of COVID-19, one of the first challenges that Myanmar’s industrial sectors faced was the disruptions in the supply chains caused by earlier outbreaks in China. For a sector like the garment industry, which relies entirely on raw materials from China, this caused major delays in orders (ILO 2021: 6). Data indicated that imports of the raw materials needed in the garment sector declined 19 percent between 2019 and 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The garment sector faced additional hurdles when some brands canceled or suspended orders from key export destinations due to declining demand. The

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<sup>1</sup> Trade data retrieved from Myanmar Ministry of Commerce, cited in ILO 2021: 6.

garment factories in Myanmar reduced 27 percent of their workforce in 2020 to compensate for the loss of cutting, making and packing (CMP) prices from buyers and suppliers (ILO 2021). This has negatively impacted “the profits, wages, job security, and job safety,” (Castañeda-Navarrete, Hauge and López-Gómez 2020). Throughout this process, the vulnerability of (especially female) workers increased immensely as factories laid off their employees to maintain operations, and families who depended on these workers were pushed closer and closer to the brink of poverty.

#### *Political crisis: Military coup*

In the case of Myanmar, it is crucial to provide evidence of the factors that have negatively contributed to a decline in the garment sector since the coup. In March 2021, in response to growing civil unrest, the military instituted martial law in some townships, including Hlaing Tha Yar and Shwe Pyi Thar, where a majority of export-oriented garment factories are located. Some reports have suggested that anti-coup protesters mostly targeted Chinese-owned factories in these townships (Lin and Geddie 2021). Factory workers also joined the protests in solidarity with other citizens protesting the military regime. Under this political crisis, tripartite relations (between workers, employers, and government stakeholders) have been strained, as some trade union leaders have been arrested, and further escalation led to some trade unions being disbanded by the military and considered illegal (Donovon and Maung Moe 2021). Many garment workers have lost a significant degree of the rights they had secured before the coup (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma 2021b). In December 2021, Action, Collaboration, Transformation (ACT) decided to stop its operations in Myanmar because one of its members, IndustriALL, had a local trade union affiliate that could “no longer operate freely” (Glover 2021).

All these events indicate how COVID-19 and political instability have simultaneously disrupted operations of factories, risked the integrity of the sector, and resulted in job losses. This study does not seek to value one crisis over the other but instead illustrates how both have had a critical impact on Myanmar’s garment sector trajectory.

### **Methodology and limitations**

This study was made possible thanks to data obtained from the Foreign Trade Association of German Retailers (AVE) that was collected by the second author of this study in October 2021 under a twinning project between the AVE and the MGMA (see AVE and MGMA 2021). The sampling for the quantitative survey was based on the active garment factories list as of September 2021 provided by the MGMA.

Out of 494 active export-oriented factories, 438 factories in the Yangon region were selected: 324 foreign-owned factories and 114 Myanmar-owned and joint-venture (JV) factories (Lin and Geddie 2021). A stratified random sampling method was employed in the data collection process to select 49 factories: 37 foreign-owned and 12 Myanmar- and JV-owned. Additionally, six in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with employers, unions, and non-union workers to understand their experiences. Any factory-level data referred to in this paper is taken from the data collected by the AVE, unless otherwise stated.

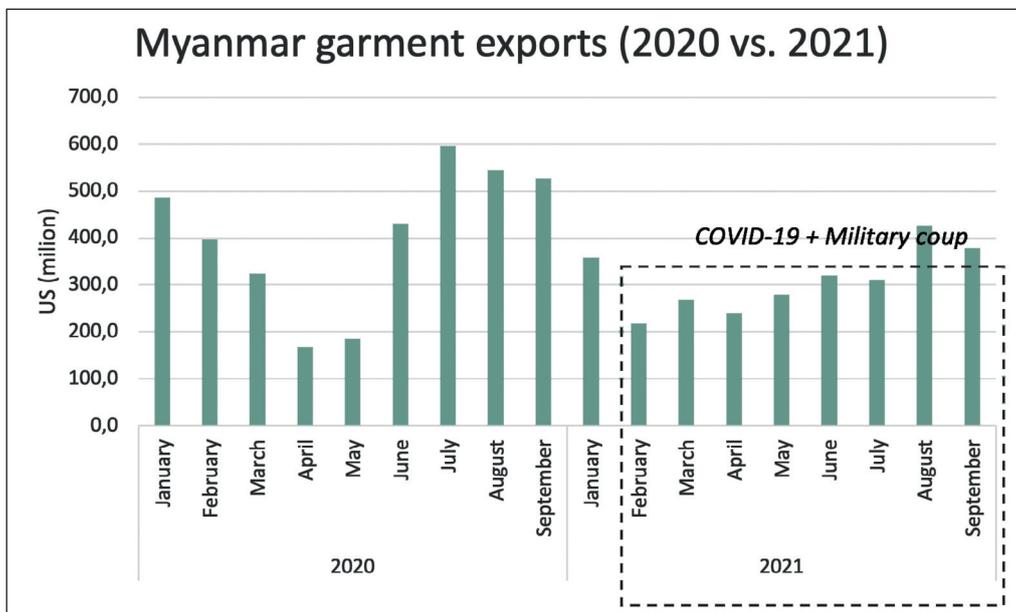
The survey data of the AVE was only collected in the Yangon region. Owing to travel restrictions and security reasons, no data was collected from export-oriented garment factories outside the Yangon region. This means the data only represents the situation in the Yangon region and does not entirely reflect the entire garment sector environment across the country. According to the MGMA's active factories list, as of September 2021, 89 percent of garment factories are located in the Yangon region.

### Changes brought about by the double crisis

This section explores four areas that demonstrate the changes the garment sector has experienced due to the double crisis, including (1) changes in export destinations, (2) order cancellations, (3) overtime and wages expenditures, (4) production levels, and (5) the size of the workforce.

#### Changes to Myanmar's garment export market

The Central Statistical Organization of Myanmar has reported that the total garment export value of the country in 2021 (January–September) declined by 31 percent year on year, as shown in Figure 1. The pattern shown in the decline of the value of garment exports is consistent with the double crisis narrative. As shown in Figure 1, the lowest levels of export value were in February 2021, when the coup took place. For the rest of 2021, it is evident that the levels remained lower than those in 2020. Based on the level of garment exports, it can be argued that the political instability created by the military coup has had a greater impact on garment exports than the pandemic. The political crisis in 2021 likely compounded the severity of the existing situation.

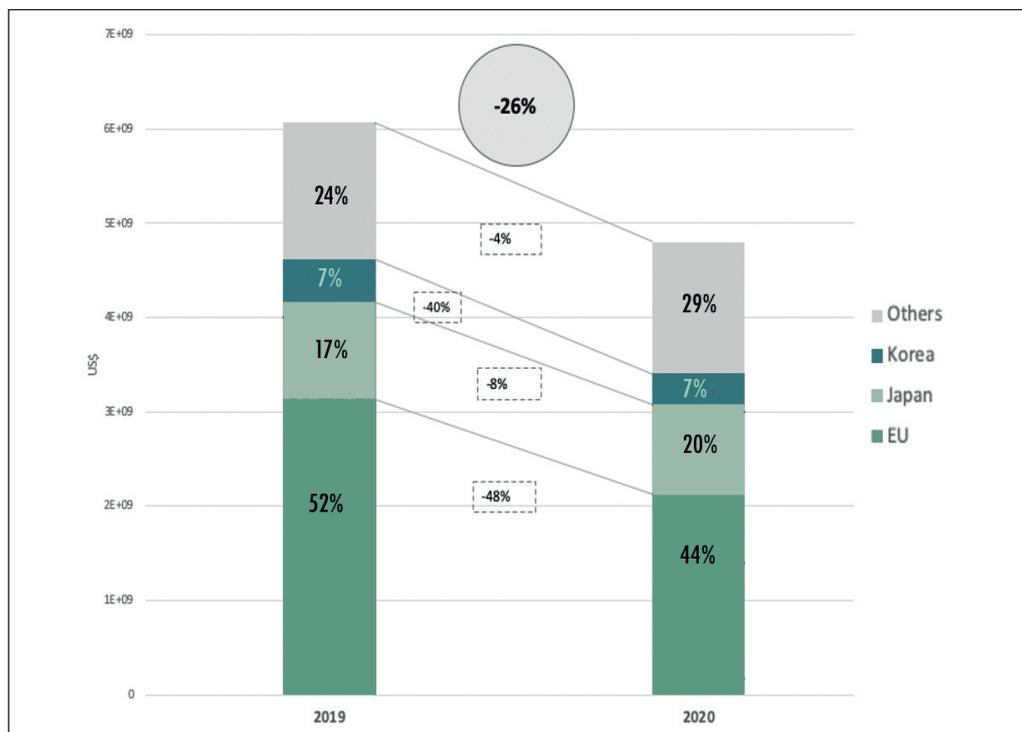


Source: Central Statistical Organization Myanmar.

The garment export market is significant because it illustrates Myanmar's key destination markets. Economic shocks produced by COVID-19 and the military coup have had an impact on the volume of exports and the market destinations. As shown in Figure 2a, UN ComTrade data shows the volume of garment exports between 2019 and 2020 experienced an overall decline of more than a quarter (-26%).

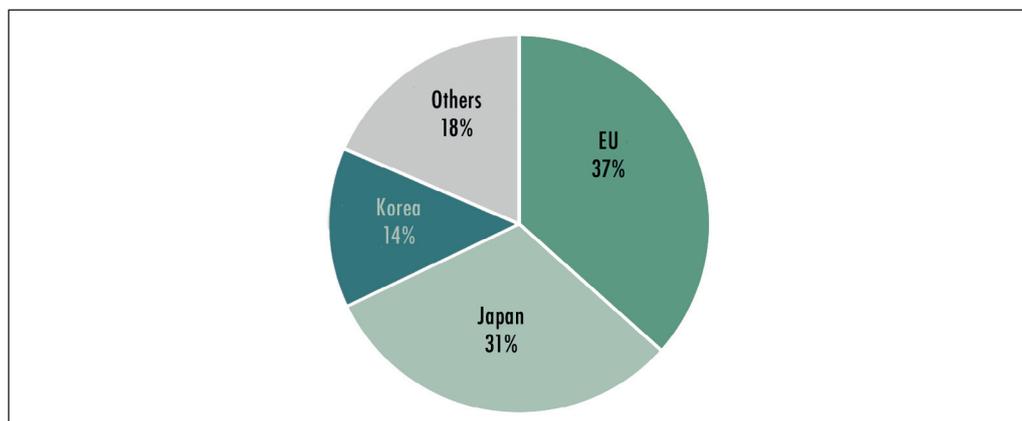
The EU as a destination market experienced the highest decline in export value (-48%) between 2019 and 2020 (see Figure 2a). Similarly, in 2019, the proportion of Myanmar garment exports to the EU compared with other markets was more than half (52%), but in 2020, it experienced a decline (-44%) (see Figure 2a). Figure 2b depicts survey data collected by the AVE (2021), which shows a further decline (-37%) in total exports to the EU in 2021. The decline in exports to the EU was further exacerbated by the military coup, which brought about a series of disruptions along the global supply chain and concerns over responsible sourcing. For example, international brands like H&M, Primark, Next, and Benetton announced they would suspend their operations in Myanmar between February and May because of the military coup and human rights concerns (Oh 2021).

Figure 2a. Proportion of total exports (2019–2020).



Source: UN ComTrade, 2021. HS code 61 and 62.

Figure 2b. Proportion of total exports (2021).



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

Figure 2a shows other destination markets that also experienced declines in Myanmar's garment export value between 2019 and 2020: South Korea (-40%), Japan (-8%), and others (-4%). However, in terms of the proportion of total garment exports, the proportion of exports to Japan increased from 17 percent in 2019 to 20 percent in 2020, while the European Union (EU) dropped from 52 percent in 2019 to 44 percent in 2020. Interestingly, compared with the proportion of total exports in 2020 reported in Figure 2a, Japan's market share of Myanmar garment exports increased, although there was a decline in export values to Japan.

It is also important to consider why the Japanese market did not decline as much as the EU. The survey conducted by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) found that more than half (52.3%) of the Japanese companies stated they would continue with their operations, and 13.5 percent indicated they would expand their business. Only 6.7 percent indicated they would move their operations to another country (Japan Times 2022). These findings indicate that Japanese investors are, for the most part, committed to operating in Myanmar regardless of the double crisis. Another reason for the relative stability of garment exports to Japan is that Japanese-owned factories in Myanmar mainly export to the Japanese market.

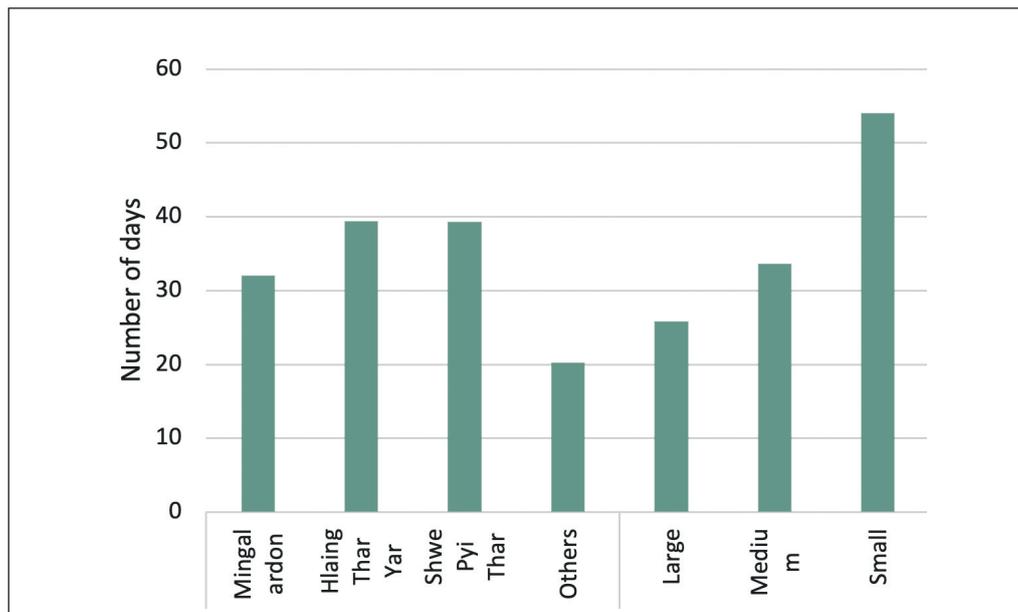
This part of the paper has shown the impact of the double crisis on the market destinations of garment exports. Myanmar's largest market, the EU, has experienced the greatest decline and, because of that, has the greatest effect on the sector's growth. SMART Myanmar estimated that 60 percent of garment workers work for factories that are highly dependent on European buyers (EuroCham Myanmar 2022: 5). This demonstrates the level of business the EU generates and the impact on local garment workers, most of whom are female workers. As mentioned earlier, the EU is an integral partner, and given the reinstatement of the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences, its investment has made a difference not just to the economy but also to the labor market, especially to female workers' lives. The decline in business engagement from the EU has had a devastating impact on all strata of Myanmar society.

### **Factory closures, order cancellations, and production levels**

The number of days a factory was closed during both crises indicates the level of disruptions that factories faced and the extent to which production was affected. It should be noted that these days of factory closures excluded public holidays and mandatory closure due to COVID-19 restrictions. Over half of the factories surveyed (62%) indicated they have closed their factories temporarily due to the crises in 2021.

As shown in Figure 3, the two townships that experienced the most factory closures (i.e., almost 40 days) between January and September 2021 were Hlaing Thayar and Shwe Pyi Thar. The most affected factories were smaller-sized ones, which experienced over 50 days of closure (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Days of factory closures.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

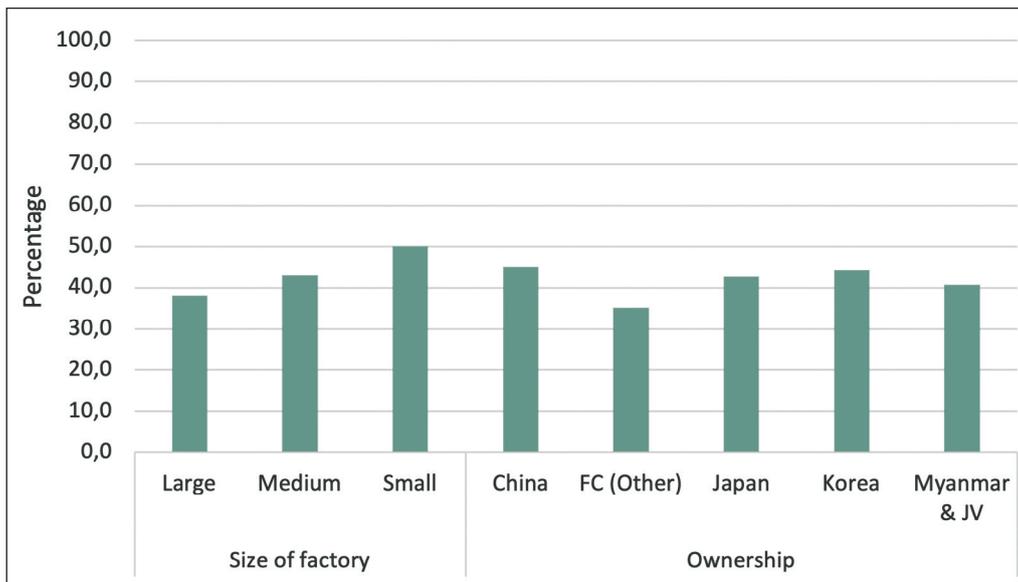
The supply chain disruption (e.g., the closure of the China-Myanmar border and the truck drivers' and civil servants' participation the CDM) (RFA 2021; Frontier Myanmar 2021) and the lack of orders resulted in the closure of some factories between March and April 2021 (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma 2021a). Another important reason for the increase in the number of days factories were closed was the anti-military protests in Hlaing Thayar and Shwe Pyi Thar, which resulted in the military imposing martial law and curfews in these townships (Bloomberg 2021). Although the data collected in Figure 3 focuses mainly on the temporary closure of factories, it is also important to consider that some factories in Myanmar have closed permanently.

Since the military coup, the once active labor dispute resolution bodies (tripartite mechanism with government, employers, and unions) are no longer operating (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma 2021b). The military-run Ministry of Labor does not follow or enforce the Labor Law to protect workers' rights. Some workers have received less than half of their daily wages for the days those factories were temporarily closed, while a significant number of workers have not received any compensation for the days of factory closure (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma).

Overall, many of the factories surveyed faced a decline in orders due to the cancellation (or) suspension of orders after the military coup. Figure 4 illustrates how smaller-sized (-50%) and medium-sized (-43%) factories experienced the greatest declines in orders. Regarding ownership, the factories that faced the greatest decline were Chinese-owned (-45%) and Korean-owned (-44%). Chinese-owned factories experienced the greatest decline because they predominantly supply the EU market. With the EU market facing the greatest decline in garment exports, the Chinese-owned factories were hit hard by the decline in orders. There are three reasons for these cancellations. The first is that, during the onset of the pandemic, brands and buyers decided to either cancel

orders they had already made or suspend orders for some time. Another reason was the general disruption experienced as a result of global supply chain disruptions in getting raw materials or even shipping completed orders. This was not unique to Myanmar but was experienced at a global level. Lastly, following the coup, tensions and disruptions arose in the industrial zones, which created challenges for the factories and the workers.

Figure 4. Percentage of orders by size and ownership.

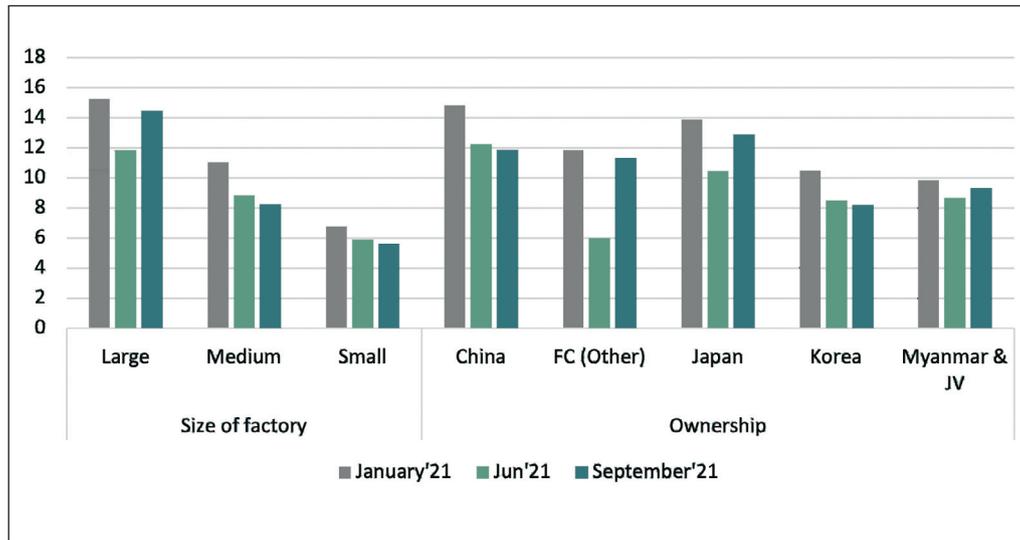


Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

The decline in the number of working days due to factory closures, as well as the decline in orders, ultimately led to a decline in production. Figure 5 shows the number of active production lines, which is significant because the more active production lines there are in a factory, the higher the number of orders that get produced. Over three months, large factories experienced a decline in active production lines. Between January and June 2021, large factories experienced a decline in production of 20 percent. However, between June and September 2021, they saw an increase of 17 percent.

In terms of factory ownership, Figure 5 shows that Chinese-owned factories also experienced a decline of 20 percent between January and June 2021 and a further decrease of 27 percent between June and September 2021. Large-sized and Chinese-owned factories both experienced a decline of about 20 percent in active production lines between January and June 2021. However, unlike large-sized factories, Chinese-owned factories did not experience an increase in active lines between June and September 2021 compared with other investors. This is due to the continued uncertainty in orders from the EU brands and buyers. On the other hand, the concern about the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment within industrial zones after the military coup is another reason (Nikkei Asia 2021). Furthermore, like large-owned factories, Chinese-owned factories did not achieve a higher number of active production lines than when they operated before the coup. During this time, the decline in production lines is consistent with the narrative that production in the garment sector declined due to the coup.

Figure 5. Number of active production lines.

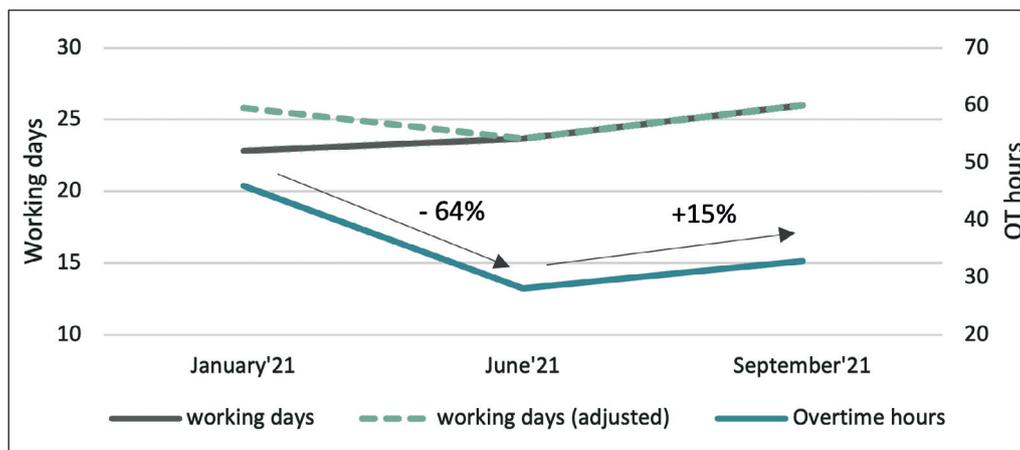


Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

### Overtime and wage expenditure

Another area that provides insight into the changes the garment sector has undergone during the double crisis is the changes in working days, workers' overtime hours, and the wage expenditures incurred by factories. Between January and June 2021, there was a decrease in working days from 25 days to about 23 days. This can be linked to the factory closures previously shown in Figure 3. As shown in Figure 6a, there was a decline in overtime (OT) hours (-64%) between January and June 2021, and then there was a slight increase (15%) between June and September 2021. The reason for this increase could be the resumption of orders received after factories had adjusted to the new normal during COVID-19 and the wave of uncertainty after the coup.

Figure 6a. Change in working days and overtime hours.



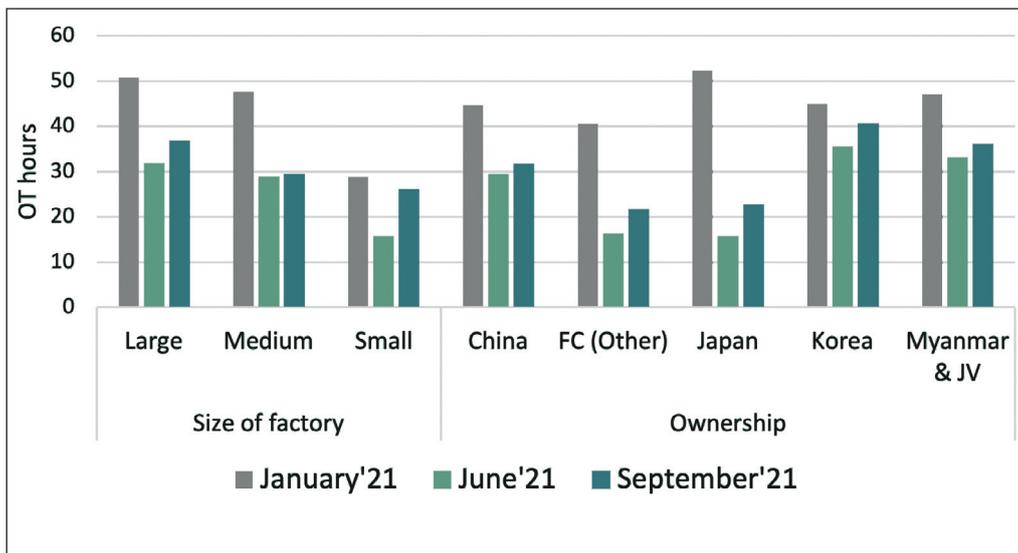
Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

To better understand the impact of the double crisis, Figure 6b shows the change in OT hours by factory size and ownership between January and September 2021. Larger-sized factories experienced a decline (-37%) in OT hours be-

tween January and June 2021, before OT hours increased (15%) between June and September 2021, although they still did not meet January levels. Smaller-sized factories experienced a decline of almost a half (-46%) between January and June 2021 and a significant increase between June and September 2021 (67%). In terms of ownership, the Chinese-owned factories experienced a decrease (-34%) in OT hours between January and June 2021 and a slight rise (8%) between June and September 2021. Myanmar- and joint venture-owned factories' OT hours decreased by almost a third (-30%) between January and June 2020 and increased slightly (9%) between June and September 2021.

Similar to the patterns in production levels, large (-37%), smaller-sized (-46%), Chinese-owned (-34%), and Myanmar- and joint venture-owned (-30%) factories all experienced a decline in their OT hours between January and June 2021. This is intrinsically linked to the decrease in orders and production lines, which resulted in factories not needing workers to work more hours. Furthermore, cutting workers' OT hours is another strategy factories use to survive and continue operating. This is supported by the fact that OT hours between June and September 2021 did not increase significantly for large (15%), Chinese-owned (8%), or Myanmar- and JV-owned (9%) factories. Thus, the OT hours remained relatively low even after orders had resumed between June and September 2021. The only exception is the smaller-sized factories (67%), whose OT hours increased close back to the level before military coup. But the OT level of smaller factories was still lower compared to medium and large-sized factories.

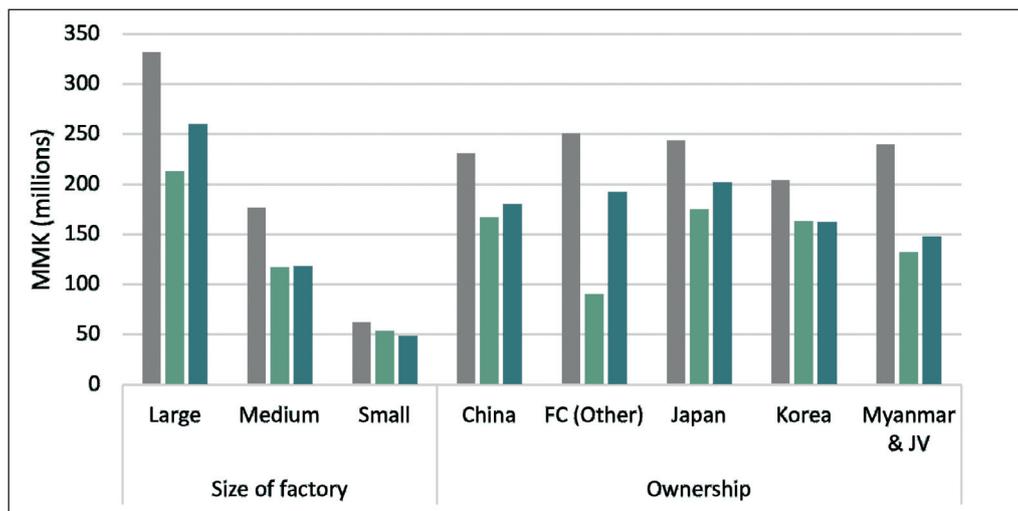
Figure 6b. Change in OT by factory size and ownership.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

OT hours are essential to garment workers because the remuneration is double the minimum wage. EuroCham Myanmar (2022: 5) also supported this, stating that “some workers are on reduced hours or furlough.”

Figure 7. Changes in the expenditure on wages.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

Figure 7 shows the changes in factories' wage expenditure by factory size and ownership between January and September 2021. Larger-sized factories saw a decline in wages between January and June 2021 (-36%), and then they increased by almost a quarter (22%) between June and September 2021; however, as with production levels and OT hours, they still did not meet the January levels. Smaller-sized factories experienced a slight decline (-14%) between January and June 2021 and a slight increase (10%) between June and September 2021. Chinese-owned factories had a decline of over a quarter (-28%) in the expenditure of wages between January and June 2021 and a slight rise (8%) between June and September 2021. Myanmar- and joint venture-owned factories' expenditure on wages decreased (-45%) between January and June 2021 and increased slightly (12%) between June and September 2021.

Myanmar no longer follows the rule of law when it comes to preserving workers' rights. The only benefit that remains unscathed is the minimum wages workers still receive (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma 2021b). Before the coup, under Minimum Wage Notification 1/2018, workers were entitled to a minimum wage and OT payment but received different performance bonuses (ILO 2021: 16). Some factories have drastically decreased workers' wages and their payments to only the minimum wage. During qualitative interviews with non-union workers, one worker explained that she could not remit any money to her family because she was not earning enough (Min Zar Ni Lin and Ngwenya-Tshuma 2021a).

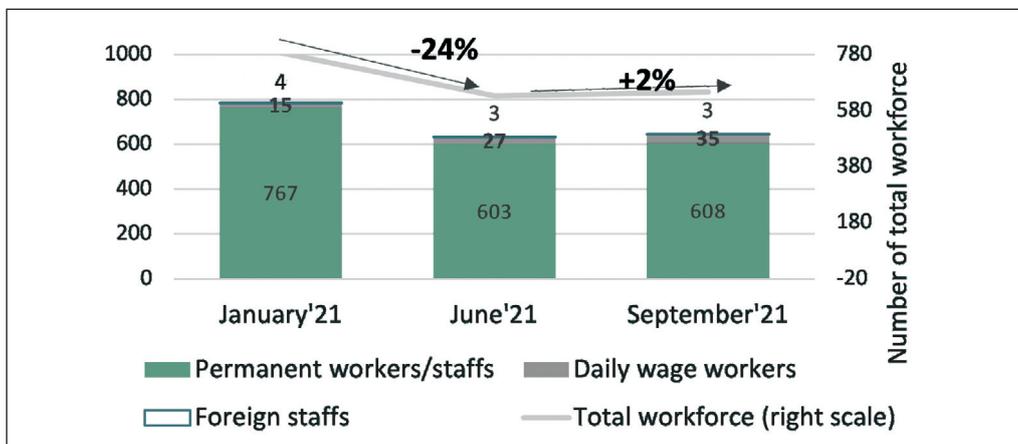
### Changes experienced by the workforce

The MGMA estimates that around 60,000 garment workers lost their jobs before and a further 25,000 after the coup (Myanmar Now 2021). This study observed that between January and June 2021, there was a decline in the workforce of almost a quarter (-24%), and between June and September 2021, there was a minor increase (2%). Figure 8b shows changes in factories' workforce by factory size and ownership between January and September 2021. Larger-sized factories experienced a decline (-17%) in their workforce between

January and June 2021, and then they slightly increased (8%) between June and September 2021; however, as with production levels, OT hours, and wages, they still did not meet the January levels. Smaller-sized factories experienced a slight decline in the workforce between January and June 2021 (-12%) and a continued decrease (-2%) between June and September 2021. Chinese-owned factories experienced a decrease (-24%) in the workforce between January and June 2021 and a continued decrease (-4%) between June and September 2021.

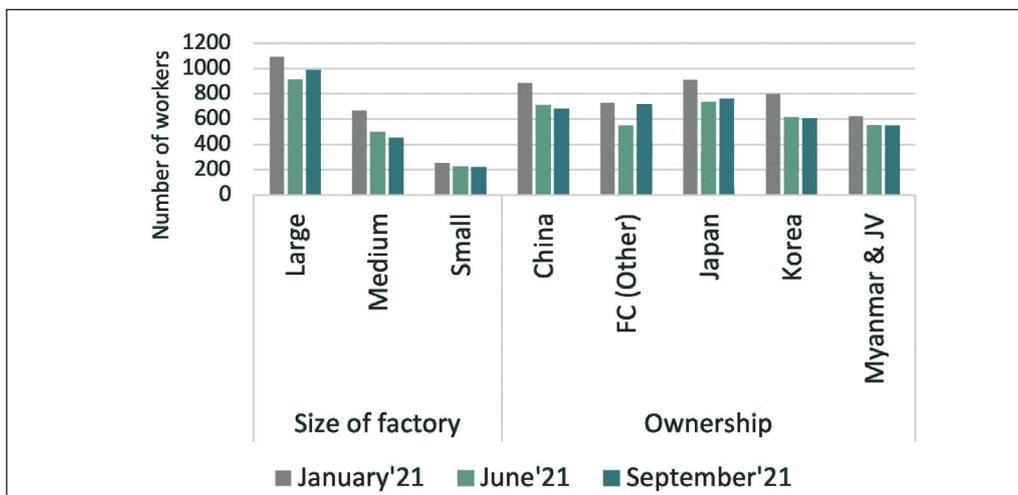
Between January and June 2021, the data indicated a decline in active production lines (Figure 5), OT hours (Figure 6b), and wages (Figure 7). However, with the change in the workforce, there was a steady decline between January and June 2021 and between June and September 2021 for all factory types, except for a slight increase (8%) for larger-sized factories between June and September 2021.

Figure 8a. Change in workforce.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

Figure 8b. Change in workforce by size and ownership.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

The findings show that the garment sector experienced significant job losses during the double crisis. To survive and continue operating, factories decided to downgrade their workforce. One of their strategies after the military coup was to hire more daily wage workers instead of contracted permanent workers.

As shown in Figure 9a, the number of daily wage workers increased from 15 workers in January (2% of the total workforce) to 35 workers in September (5% of the total workforce), although the total labor force declined during this period. Hiring daily wage workers is more affordable because factories do not have to pay severance payments if the work ends abruptly due to uncertainty over orders. They also do not have to provide social security and other benefits such as performance bonuses and transportation fees. This shows that some factories consider it cheaper and more economical to hire daily wage workers during these uncertain times instead of following the labor laws.

### **Challenges to factory operations and perspectives on the future**

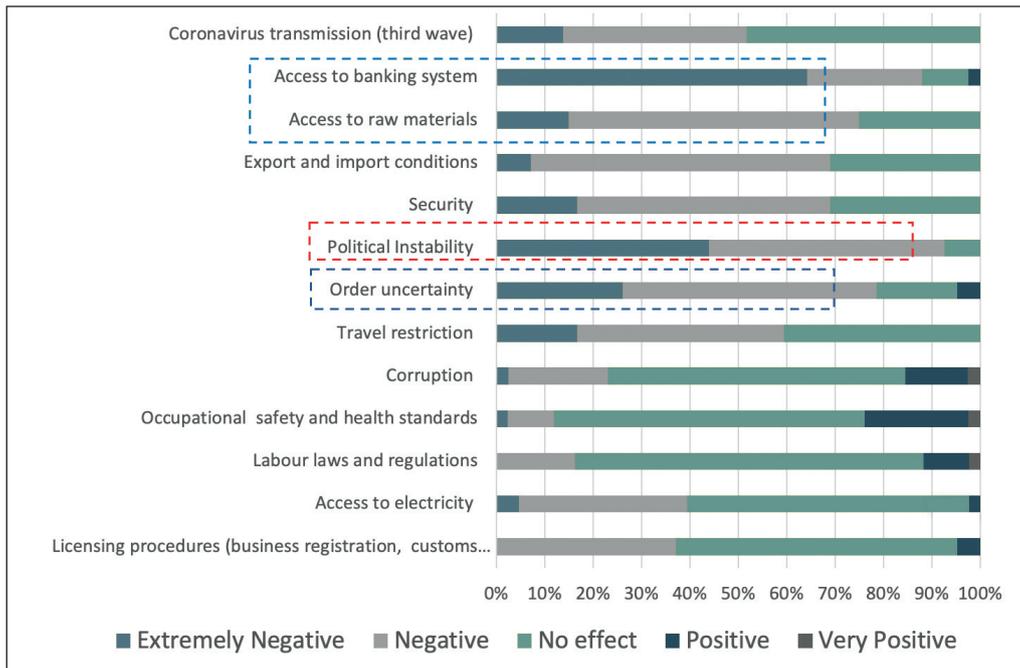
Despite all the challenges and the negative trends discussed in this paper, Myanmar's garment factories are still operating. It is important to understand the factories' greatest challenges and coping strategies to survive. The factories surveyed indicate four pertinent challenges that affected their operations (as shown in Figure 9). Firstly, most of the interviewed factories indicated that the political instability since the military coup has negatively affected their ability to do business. As previously mentioned, some international brands have been hesitant about continuing to do business with Myanmar suppliers, and some have canceled orders altogether – also because of overall security concerns. In the long term, factories will continue to face difficulties attracting international brands/suppliers if the general political and economic climate does not attract and maintain foreign investment.

The second challenge reported by the factories was access to the banking system, which has become a real problem since the coup. Within a month after the military coup, the Central Bank of Myanmar put limits on withdrawals from banks and ATMs for both individuals and companies (Ellis 2021). Given the need to access money for paying labor wages, ordering raw materials, and paying for shipping services and associated operational costs, the difficulties in the banking system make it difficult for export-oriented factories to do business.

The third challenge is the uncertainty over orders due to COVID-19 and the military coup. At the onset of the pandemic, the demand for orders declined; however, three to six months later, the orders picked up again, and factories adapted to doing business during the pandemic and ensured that their operations all complied with COVID-19 regulations. At that time, the factories employed the strategy of terminating their full-time workers and employing more daily wage workers who could help them meet their production targets and not worry about keeping them if there were no new orders (ILO 2021: 19). Given the added political instability, factories now face additional hurdles in securing new orders.

The last challenge – and the one that was cited the most by respondents (as shown in Figure 10) – was access to raw materials, which is connected to the previous point relating to the banking system and how difficult it has been to access money to purchase raw materials. However, another reason stems from the disruptions in the global value chains at the beginning of the pandemic. Most factories in Myanmar get 90 percent of their raw supplies from China,

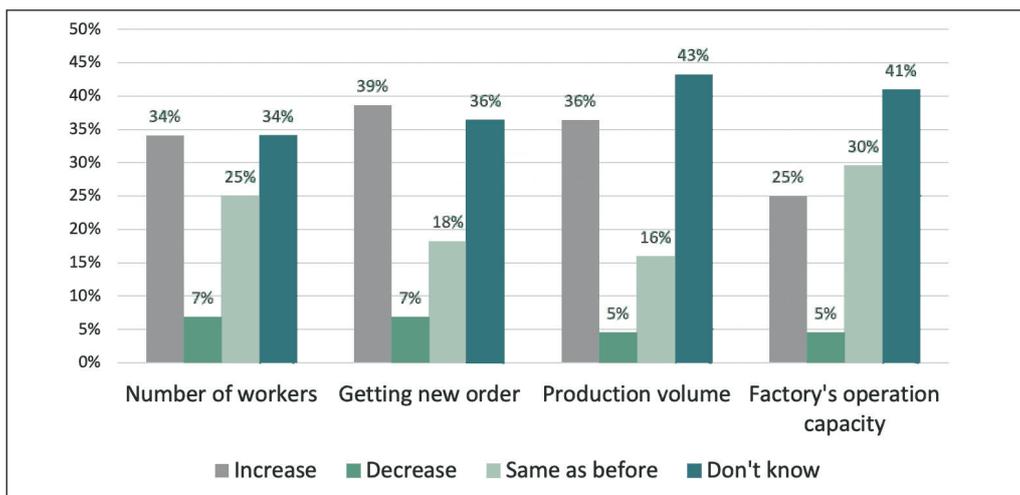
Figure 9. Factors that have affected factories' operations (January–September 2021).



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

and when China first experienced lockdowns, this crippled the supply chain and affected Myanmar buyers. China also imposed restrictions on any border trade-related activities (ILO 2021: 3;6). Furthermore, during the political crisis, China has maintained its decision to keep the country's borders closed, given the conflict has spread to border regions (Shih and Li 2021). Interestingly, a significant number of respondents shared that the third wave of COVID-19 did not badly affect their factory operations.

Figure 10. Prospects for the factory's operations in the next 12 months.



Source: AVE and MGMA (2021).

Factories were asked questions about their perceptions of their future operations, as shown in Figure 10. Over a third (34%) indicated that their workforce would increase, and another 34 percent indicated they were uncertain, while a quarter indicated that the size of the workforce would remain the same. According to

our findings, some factories (34%) were optimistic they would get new orders, but more factories (36%) seemed uncertain about getting new orders. Over a third of factories (36%) indicated they believed their production value would increase, but more factories (43%) were uncertain about that. The last question asked factories about their operation capacity; a quarter indicated it could increase, while more factories (41%) were uncertain about that. These findings indicate there is still a level of optimism among factory owners that Myanmar's garment sector will prevail; however, a greater proportion of factories are uncertain about the times ahead. The garment sector has survived two crises and is still operating, which shows a level of resilience in the sector.

## **Conclusion**

Using survey data, this paper illustrated how the double crisis in Myanmar has placed industrial development in peril – specifically, in the garment sector. In this conclusion, we will summarize some of the key findings of this paper and the implications for Myanmar's garment sector.

Brands are facing immense pressure from international trade unions and human rights movements to withdraw (Liu and Frontier 2021). By contrast, some stakeholders, including the National Unity Government (NUG), have raised concerns about withdrawing international brands since it would have a significant impact on the well-being of hundreds of thousands of (especially female) workers, whose livelihoods and that of their families depend on their business (Myanmar Financial Service Monitor 2021). EuroCham Myanmar (2022) has stated that unethical sourcing in the garment sector and the potential to directly support the military regime is very unlikely. The aim is to build more confidence in doing business in Myanmar despite a double crisis and to preserve the well-being of the mostly female garment workers. However, since political tensions are stagnating, it is unlikely they will be resolved anytime soon, and it is hard to predict whether some EU brands will remain committed to placing orders in the medium to long term.

The data clearly shows that smaller-sized factories and Chinese-owned factories have struggled the most to recover since June 2021, as there has not been much significant positive growth in many areas. Despite the decline in the share of the EU market during the double crisis, the EU is still the largest export destination for Myanmar's garment products. Furthermore, a drastic decline in workers' incomes due to the double crisis threatens to drive mostly female workers and their families into abject poverty. The re-employment rate during the double crisis was also very low, and laid-off garment workers are still vulnerable.

The factories surveyed indicated four challenges to their operations, including access to the banking system, political instability, order uncertainty, and access to raw materials. Last but not least, the paper presented findings on the prospects of the garment sector, which showed some levels of optimism but also, for the most part, significant levels of uncertainty. Therefore, it will be crucial to continuously observe the changes in the garment sector and Myanmar's industrial development to see how resilient it is and whether it will survive this double crisis in the medium term as the political tension is unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.

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# Myanmar's experiment with trade in live cattle with China: Breakthrough, collapse, and resurgence?

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*Myanmar has long been a major supplier of live cattle to countries in the Greater Mekong subregion, including Yunnan Province in China, which has seen a sustained rise in income per capita but has relatively scarce grazing land. After a few months of fattening, some of Myanmar's cattle had been re-exported to China via Thailand and Laos, but in recent years, with improvements in transportation and the reduced need for draft animals in farming households, China has started buying cattle directly from Myanmar. In Myanmar, cattle are both draft animals and commodities. In the Irrawaddy Delta, which is the major rice-growing area in the country, there is significant use of draft animals; hence, fewer are available for export in comparison with dry zone cattle, where the exportable supply of cattle is linked to rural labor migration to the city and associated farm mechanization. On the administrative side, the Myanmar Livestock Department achieved a breakthrough in 2017 when it acquired legal power over the cattle movement from local authorities. It generated a big rise in the legalized export volume of cattle to China. Just as officials were ready to develop the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to support the cattle trade, the country was hit by the "double shock" of the COVID-19 pandemic and the military coup. This complicated Myanmar's attempts to build capacities with neighboring and trading countries, develop disease control infrastructure, and upgrade the country's capacity to handle foot-and-mouth (FMD) disease, bird flu, and others. Because quantifying the impact of the double shock is constrained by the scarcity of the latest data, this paper provides insights into the impact of the double shock on Myanmar's cattle trade mainly by drawing on interviews with farmers and collectors in the field and consultations with local experts with prior experience. The narratives are supplemented by data from secondary sources.*

**KEYWORDS:** CATTLE EXPORT; TRADE LIBERALIZATION; SHOCKS; MYANMAR.

## Introduction

Myanmar has a multitude of underutilized agricultural resources, particularly cattle with a strong potential for regional export. Moving from the currently smuggling-dominant mode to a more formalized model of cattle trading will boost trade and have benefit-redistribution effects that will improve both efficiency and equity and address the goals of inclusion and sustainability. At the moment, Myanmar's local farmers are mainly engaged in subsistence agriculture and participate little in the global supply chains. Most of the benefits of cattle smuggling to China would accrue to Chinese buyers, local traders, and influential individuals connected to the Chinese network, while farmers who supply surplus cattle tend to gain little. Long-standing armed conflicts along the Myanmar–China border have added to the unstable trade environment. We argue there is a strong case for formalizing and standardizing the cattle trade between the two countries. Formalization will improve the distribution of benefits by being more equitable for local farmers. Standardization will reduce uncertainty (especially, regarding animal diseases), improve transparency, and increase travel volume, thereby benefiting all the parties involved: Myanmar farmers, transporters, traders, Chinese consumers, regional residents, and potential foreign investors.

Marginalized farmers across Myanmar are facing enormous challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 military coup. Rural cattle farmers and local traders have severely felt the harsh effect of the pandemic-related restrictions on mobility. In addition, Myanmar experiences unitary border closures from China, which has had a devastating impact on live cattle exports. The inability to continue legally exporting live cattle to China has had a knock-down effect on all the actors across the cattle value chains in Myanmar. Hence, there has been a re-emergence of illegal cattle exports. Legitimate cattle trade numbers increased after Myanmar eased the ban on live cattle exports in October 2017, but China's closure of its border, along with the coup in Myanmar, has exacerbated the existing ineffective cattle trading, and the lack of functioning cattle markets made the existing cattle trade disrupted by COVID-19 even worse. Thus, the actors along the cattle value chain (i.e., cattle farmer, collector/aggregator/agent, transporter, and trader/exporter) are forced to find any means of trading within the opaque regulatory environment.

This study attempts to assess the current situation, solidify available information, and recommend further research. The information in this paper comes from multiple phone interviews with cattle traders, key informants, industry pundits, and extensive desk research. The paper is organized into six parts: (1) cattle trade policy since Burma's independence, (2) the cattle population, (3) the structure and performance of the cattle market, (4) the impact of the double shock in the past two years, (5) animal disease control, and (6) policy prescriptions for policy stakeholders.

## **Cattle market policies of successive Myanmar governments**

### **Beef consumption prohibited era (1948–1957)**

The history of the cattle and beef industry in modern-day Burma can be classified into four periods. The first is the post-British colonial period between 1948 and 1957. During this time, slaughtering cattle for the beef market for public consumption was entirely prohibited by the Union of Burma government as cattle were considered sacred animals, an idea that comes from Buddhism, which is the dominant religious belief in the country. However, slaughtering cattle was allowed in the proximity of military camps. Licenses to slaughter cattle were given to areas near army encampments, and the license was wholly preserved to supply beef to soldiers. Thus, the general Burmese population could not purchase beef on the market (Hla 2022).

### **Relaxation of cattle slaughtering (1957–1972)**

The second period was between 1957 and 1972. In 1962, Burma had its first military coup. It came around the time when the democratic government had handed over power from the caretaker government to General U Ne Win. U Ne Win abolished the policy that had prevented the public consumption of beef. He subsequently granted permits to slaughter cattle older than 13 years. Cattle-slaughtering licenses were issued at the townships' municipal offices across the country. At the time, beef was inexpensive thanks to the glut supply of ruminant cattle. However, the relaxation of the policy faced significant public backlash in some townships in lower Burma, especially conservative Buddhist strongholds, because killing an animal is not in line with Buddhism. In the delta

areas of Burma, mainly the Tanintharyi region, Buddhist associations bid for cattle slaughtering licenses in some townships and tried to save cattle by out-bidding the butchers.

Public backlash was rampant throughout the delta areas, especially in Patheingyi city and Kyonpyaw town in the Irrawaddy region, where monks, among others, were firmly opposed to cattle slaughtering. Butchers could not compete against the Buddhist associations in obtaining slaughtering permits in these areas. As a result, local beef markets did not develop in such townships because selling beef was permitted only within license-issued municipalities. In some townships, the practice continues to this day. Owing to the strict regulatory environment on cattle meat in the country, approximately 40% of the country's population has never tasted beef, according to anecdotal information.

The cattle market can be segmented into two categories: draft animals and animals for slaughter. Unlike lower Burma, people in upper and central Burma enjoy beef consumption because of the abundance of cattle in Sagaing, Mandalay, and Magway. Farmers in these regions breed cattle for the beef market and draft animals. They supply a surplus of cattle to lower Burma for draft animals to be used in intensified paddy cultivation practiced in lower Burma such as the Irrawaddy, Yangon, and Bago regions (Hla 2022).

#### **Protecting farmers vs. exporting live cattle illegally (1972–2017)**

From 1972 to 1988, the Socialist government's policy gave much attention to the welfare of workers and peasants. The government considered workers and peasants to be the ruling class and was firmly against capitalism. Therefore, no market-oriented transformation could take place under the Burmese Way to Socialism. Debate over cattle slaughtering played an essential role in national politics since farmers were the sole producers of beef cattle. In this era, farmers constantly raised the issue of the shortage of livestock and called on policymakers to constrain the granting of slaughtering licenses. As a result, the government increased the cattle slaughter age from 13 to 16 years between 1982 and 1983. The new law resulted in an increase in cattle stock in the country. At the same time, some illicit cattle trading emerged on the Thai-Burma border during this period. Nevertheless, illegal traders encountered enormous challenges in transporting live cattle within Burma due to strict regulations. Hence, traders had to bribe local authorities to move through different townships until cattle arrived at the illegal trade post on the border with Thailand. They also had to pay informal taxes to ethnic armed groups along the transportation route from some towns within Burma close to the Thailand border (Hla 2022).

#### **Liberalization of cattle trade (2017–present)**

The fourth period began in 2017 during the second term of the quasi-civilian government. This was when the cattle market was liberalized for the first time, and the official live cattle export experiment started under the rule of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Before 2017, the General Administrative Department (GAD) governed legal power related to cattle. The GAD is a department under the Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA). The controversial 2008 constitution of Myanmar states that the military chief appoints the MOHA minister. The NLD government reshuffled this institutional arrangement by moving

the nation's cattle-business governing body from the GAD to the Livestock Breeding and Veterinary Department (LBVD), which falls under the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (MOALI). This was an institutional breakthrough. This liberalization was initiated in part by the government's realization that massive illegal live cattle export was taking place on various land borders between Myanmar and China. This realization gave the government an incentive to create revenue sources by placing proper procedures, including issuing export licenses, doing inspections, etc. (Hla 2022). The government collects the 2% advance income tax for sales from the cattle exported to other countries. This policy change led to a significant increase in cattle exports: from USD 50 million annually in 2014–2017 to almost USD 400 million in 2019 (Diao, Masias and Lwin 2020).

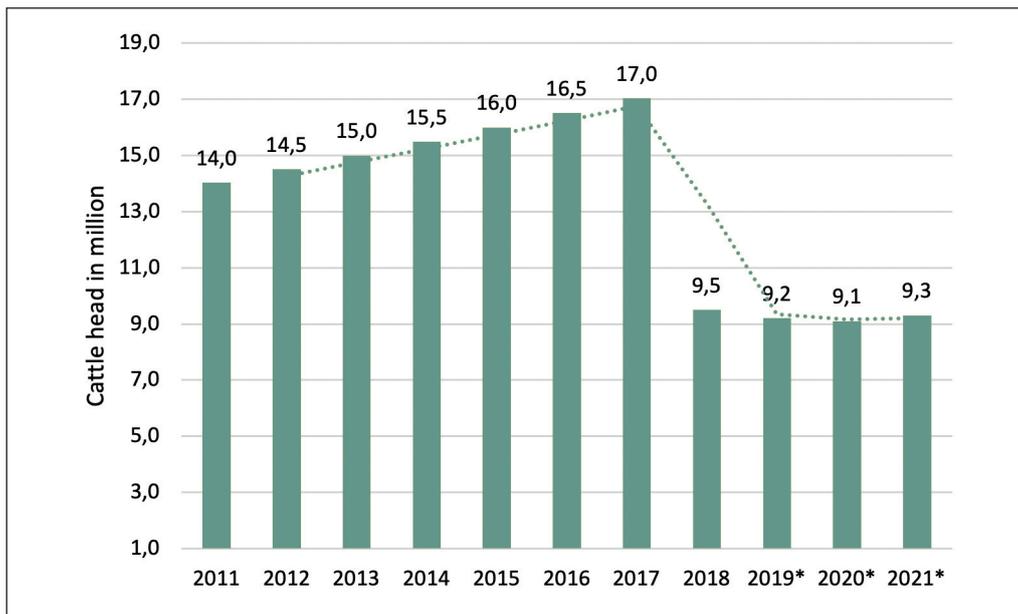
At the same time, however, the greater volume of cattle heading to China alarmed the government and caused it to focus its attention on the sustainability of the cattle market. Recognizing a need for better-controlled facilitation of cattle trade, after a few months of liberalization, the Myanmar government immediately suspended formal cattle trade and started drawing up the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) on cattle movement and trade, spearheaded by the LBVD. The SOP ensures that farmers are not selling female cattle and introduces cattle collection points, ear-tagging before moving to the border, and quarantine at the border. With the new SOP in place, cattle trading resumed in 2019. Cattle export destination countries include China, Laos, Thailand, and, to a much lesser extent, Bangladesh and India. China remains the largest importer of Myanmar cattle and represented approximately 70% of total exports in 2019.

### **Cattle populations in Myanmar**

There was a copious cattle population in Burma during the post-colonial period since there was so little consumption of beef. There were about 3 million mature females and 5 million working cattle at any given time (Cattle census, 1980–1990). In 1994, the cattle population was recorded as between 9.5 million and 10 million, although this number was merely an extrapolation from the previous year. The then-minister responsible for the cattle census skipped and saved the cost of running the census (between 3 million and 4 million kyat) to satisfy the priority of the military regime's intelligence general at the time, U Khin Nyunt. Since then, the cattle census has been skipped for many years, and no reliable statistical information on the cattle population in Myanmar is available between Fiscal Year (FY) 1993/94 and FY2016/17. Published official numbers during this period appear to have applied simple upward extrapolation (see Figure 1). In 2017, the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT), which is a multi-donor fund established to tackle the issue of poverty and hunger directly in Myanmar's rural communities, offered financial and technical assistance to the Myanmar government to reinstate the cattle population census. It was found that 1.5 million male cattle were missing compared with the then-minister's estimate of around 5 million. It is believed that the missing numbers were illegally exported to China. By contrast, a slight reduction in the number of mature females was identified. This was because farmers rarely sold females as they kept breeding calves (Hla 2022).

The latest estimate of Myanmar's cattle herd is around 9.5 million, according to a National Livestock Baseline Survey conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the LBVD and published in January 2019. This number is an apparent decline from 15.5 million in 2015–2016 and 17 million in 2016–2017. Concerns about cattle number declines have been raised by academia and cattle market observers, but the Mandalay Region Cattle Exporters Association claimed there are sufficient cattle in Myanmar for domestic consumption. It further stated that each cow can produce one calf every year; therefore, new calves will bridge the supply and demand gaps each year.

Figure 1. Cattle population in Myanmar (2011–2021).



Data source: LBVD and authors' estimate.

Since the political-economic reform began in Myanmar in 2011, an unprecedented transformation has occurred from farm to fork. New farming machinery was imported to the country, gradually replacing draft cattle in rice-cultivation regions in lower Myanmar (Belton, *et al.* 2021). Owing to farm mechanization, the demand for male cattle as draft animals started to diminish, and farmers have increasingly tended to opt selling male cattle to export them to China. Before the political transition, farmers had relied on bullock carts to transport the crops they produce in rural areas. Now motorbikes, almost all of which are imported from China and available at more affordable prices than before thanks to the economic openings, are a more convenient mode of transport. Farmers also began adopting new technology and utilizing small tractors, power tillers, big tractors for plowing, and combined harvesters. In tandem with high labor demand in cities at construction sites, there is a massive rural-to-urban migration underway within Myanmar. Similarly, the younger generation tends to migrate to neighboring countries for better job opportunities, and remittances become an essential component of rural livelihoods. This also results in a shortage of farmworkers in rural areas (ILO 2020).

### **Structure and performance of cattle market**

While the policy trend reviewed above has pointed to a change in favor of the trade of live cattle from the production perspective of breeding and animal husbandry. Raising cattle in Myanmar is still dominated by smallholders who rely on it for draft power in their farms. Cattle raising on a commercial basis is largely for milk (Myint, Mu and San 2018, among others), and commercial beef cattle farms are rare. Hence, during the first year of trade legalization, price rises in cattle sold for export generated concerns among smallholders because of the shortage of cattle as draft animals.

In recent years, however, China's meat consumption structure has changed, and beef consumption has increased significantly. The proportion of beef in red meat consumption has increased from about 4% before to about 11% in 2018. It is conceivable that Myanmar's cattle-owning farm households would realize the potential of generating greater income by converting the use of their cattle to the beef market in China. But this would require the formalization and standardization of the cattle trade with public sector support in both countries and the transfer of technologies by external investments or assistance. Much to the disappointment of all the stakeholders involved, the initial breakthrough to such direction in 2017 has been severely disrupted by the "double shock" of COVID-19 since early 2020 and the military coup in February 2021, to which we turn in the next section.

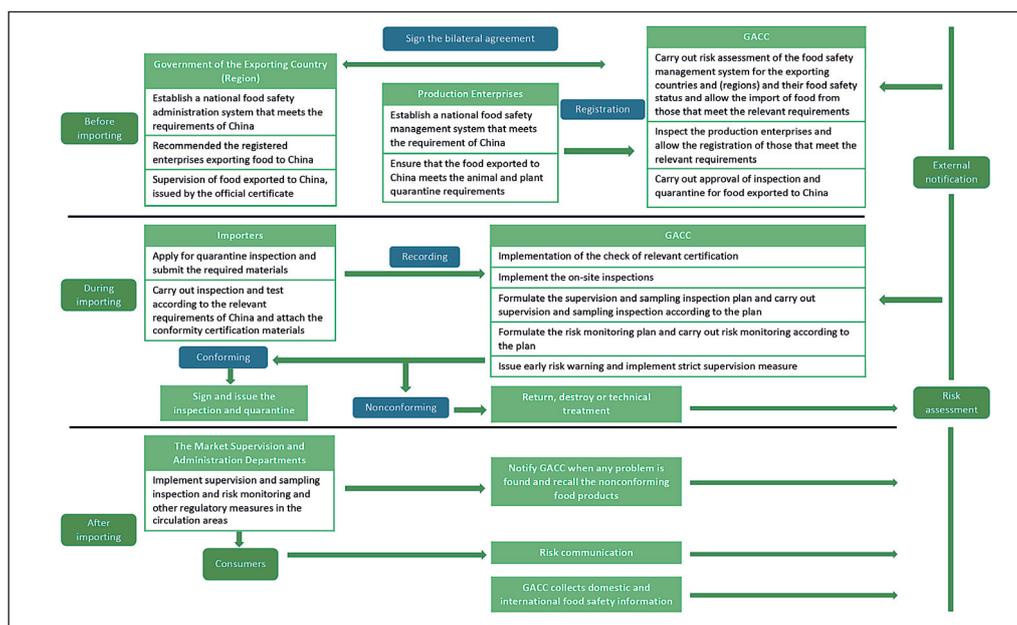
### **Impact of the double shock on cattle trade**

Access to the China market plays a vital role in stabilizing cattle prices as it represents the primary destination of Myanmar's cattle exports. In late 2020, China stopped buying cattle from Myanmar due to the resurgence of COVID-19 in the latter. To resume cattle trading, bilateral trade negotiations between the relevant authorities from the two countries have been taking place since late 2020 (Thant 2020). Initially, the General Administration of Customs (GACC) of the People's Republic of China provided nine recommendations to Myanmar, and an additional seven recommendations were made in early 2021. Until Myanmar fulfills all the GACC recommendations shown in Figure 2, formal exports are unlikely to resume. For legal trade, China permits live cattle imports only after ensuring the cattle is free from 20 different kinds of diseases. To meet the GACC's procedures, the Myanmar government recently planned to run three control zones (see Appendix). Myanmar cattle traders' hopes for a resumption of legal cattle exports have not materialized during this report writing. However, the Mandalay Region Cattle Exporters Association argues that by the time the Chinese government agrees to legal cattle imports from Myanmar, almost all the cattle will have been smuggled to China.

### **Upstream impact**

Cattle can be found across Myanmar, but cattle farms are most prevalent in the Mandalay, Sagaing, and Magway regions. Calves are self-breeding (but bulls are distributed between households to impregnate their cows) or bought from the market. Farmers mainly rely on the LBVD's services for animal health. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) initiated an AI development project in Myanmar between 1972 and 1976. However, AI breeding

Figure 2. Chinese import food safety governance.



Source: General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China (GACC).

is still in its nascent stage in Myanmar. The LBVD indicated the total number of AI service cows in 2019 was 25,812 (see Table 1). This number covered only the distribution of the LBVD, and there may be more if we account for private sector initiatives. Locally bred cattle still dominate the market, but development partners have introduced foreign species in recent years – mainly for milk production.

Table 1. AI service, pregnant and calving.

Sr. No	State/Region	No. of AI service cow				No. of Pregnant cow	No. of calving
		Draught	Dairy	Beef	Total		
1	Naypyitaw	318	358	203	879	244	282
2	Kachin	102	81	35	218	29	5
3	Kayah	25	49	43	117	2	6
4	Kayin	48	123	17	188	38	43
5	Chin			15	15	-	-
6	Sagain	534	329	284	1147	300	92
7	Tanintaryi	15	147	15	177	98	13
8	Bago	1491	922	1064	3477	1775	1461
9	Magwe	320	146		466	179	92
10	Mandalay	462	2082	924	3468	510	347
11	Mon	184	630	530	1344	237	189
12	Rakhaine	14	66	2	82	-	-
13	Yangon	2853	7178	2968	12999	5076	3581
14	Shan	88	179	55	322	405	205
15	Ayeyarwady	333	459	121	913	344	177
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6787</b>	<b>12749</b>	<b>6276</b>	<b>25812</b>	<b>9237</b>	<b>6493</b>

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Irrigation (MOALI), Myanmar.

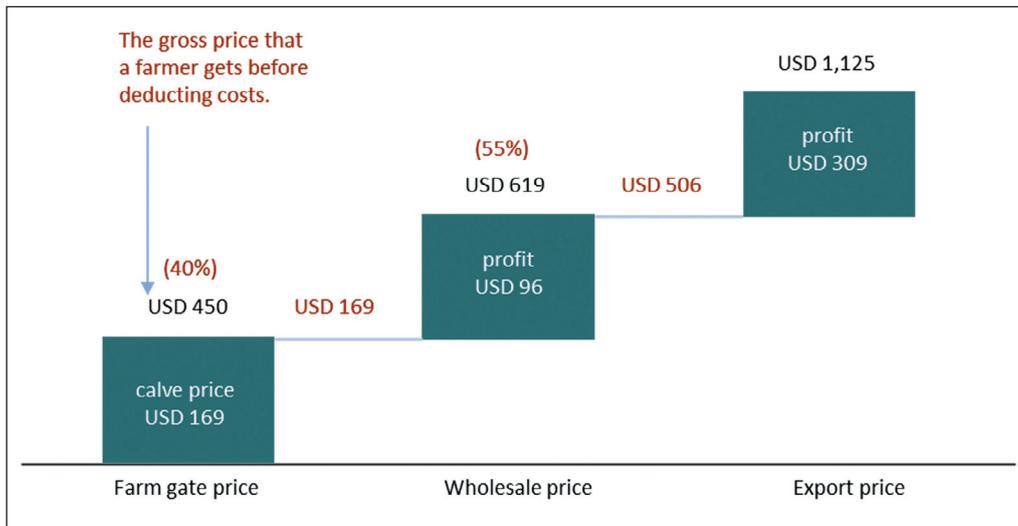
Smallholding farmers in Myanmar breed cattle with low input to economize their asset maintenance. Straw mixed with water is widely used as feed, and grazing on unimproved pasture happens often. Some farmers grow imported grass varieties (e.g., Napier) for their cattle and sell the surplus grass stock to

cattle farm owners. In 2021, cattle farmers in Mandalay faced significant challenges accessing grazing land and feed. The grass has withered due to erratic weather conditions. Farmers have also faced difficulties finding pastureland near cattle-raising villages and towns, and access to land is inhibited by farmers' insecure farmland ownership. Myanmar's currency, the kyat (abbreviated as MMK) has lost more than 30% of its value in a 12-month period, which has pushed up the price of fuel and feed. As a result, cattle farmers reduced investment in feeds such as rice bran and other feeds (USDA 2021). The feed price surges are a combination of travel restrictions to prevent the outbreak of COVID-19, a reduction in human mobility due to security reasons, and a rise in transportation costs resulting from fuel price rises. Farmers mainly access market information through other farmers' and traders' social media posts. Owing to COVID-19 and the coup, Myanmar's cattle export markets have been severely disrupted. Cattle farmers have little or no alternative source of income. The lack of income has forced some farmers to sell their cattle at reduced prices. Farmgate cattle prices slumped by 47% and domestic beef prices by 17% year on year.

### **Midstream impact**

Live cattle demand from China remains the main driver of collecting cattle at the farm gate combined with demand from Bangladesh and Thailand. Chinese consumers prefer Myanmar beef cattle as it is bred organically. The domestic beef market in Myanmar is closely linked to the export market and cattle-related diseases in the country. For domestic traders, procuring cattle to slaughter or export to neighboring countries is not a big hurdle, but transporting live cattle has become more and more difficult since the coup. Unlike rice and other essential commodities, which are tax-free, cattle are considered tax-deserving in Myanmar. As a result, local traders for cattle trading have to pay different fees imposed on them by different authorities. For example, a collector based in Mektilla in the Mandalay region has to pay MMK 7,000 (USD 4) to the township administrator for a transportation permit. Transportation costs paid to truckers are MMK 30,000 (USD 17) per head, and the cost can be higher depending on the distance. In addition, traders have to pay variable sums of money to uniformed personnel when transporting cattle from one town to another, and these payments are around MMK 25,000 (USD 14) per checkpoint. The transaction costs along the cattle supply chain have increased since the military coup. Moreover, when transporting cattle to Muse, which handles about 70% of border trades between Myanmar and China, traders are required to pay at least three different ethnic armed groups. The payments are based on the number of animals on the truck, and the usual fee is MMK 10,000 (USD 5.62) per head. Total amount of these payments, the collector can make a profit of between MMK 70,000 (about USD 39 as of February 2022) and MMK 100,000 per head for moving cattle from Mandalay or Bago and handing them over to traders at the Chinese border. The estimated distribution of profit margin among cattle trade participants is shown in Figure 3. However, transporting live cattle is risky, particularly in conflict-affected areas like Shan State and, more specifically, on the Mandalay–Lashio Road. Between 2019 and 2020 and in 2021, there were 36 gun-related events faced by cattle exporters, and 31 people died. The fatalities included truck drivers and truck helpers, according to the Mandalay Region Cattle Exporters Association (MRCEA).

Figure 3. Estimated profit margins among actors in cattle market value chains (in USD).

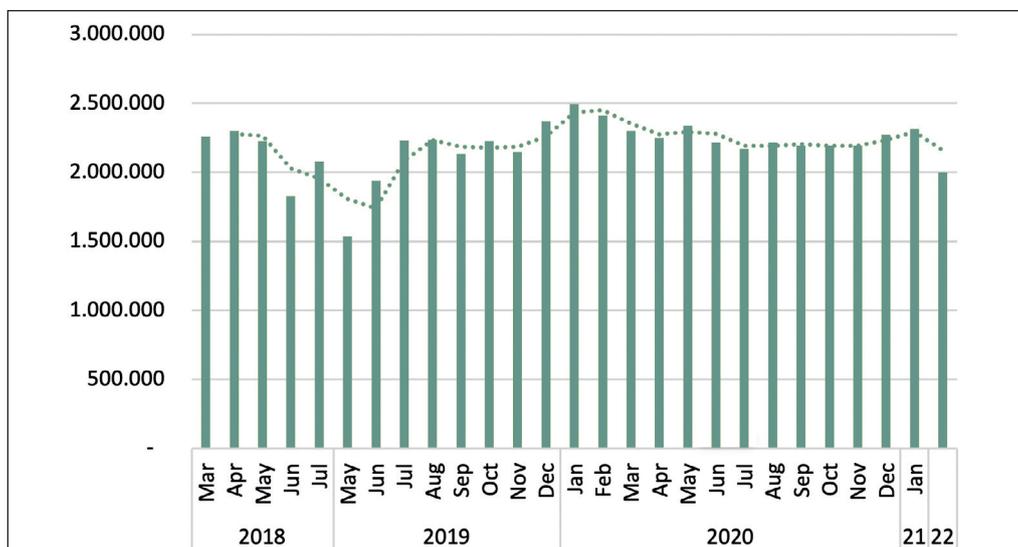


Source: Authors' elaboration.

### Downstream impact

Myanmar had been exporting cattle to China illegally, and liberalization in October 2017 prompted legal exports from Myanmar. However, the liberalization did not stop illegal cattle exports. Under normal circumstances (i.e., before COVID-19 and the coup), 1,000 cattle heads were legally exported to China every day, while 4,000 (the estimate of the chair of MRCEA) cattle heads were also going to China illegally. At that time, cattle/buffalo price ranged from MMK 1,500,000 (USD 843.60) to MMK 2,500,000 (USD 1,406) per head (see Figure 4). Myanmar's annual cattle export to China is approximately 500,000 heads. In anticipation of the new cattle trading regulation that would take effect in early 2021, herds of cattle were kept at the Muse border trade post in January 2021. However, since the border continued to be closed, about 15,000 heads of cattle, owned by 150 companies, were stranded in the China-Myanmar bor-

Figure 4. Live cattle price in the Muse 105-Mile Trade Zone (MMK/cattle head).

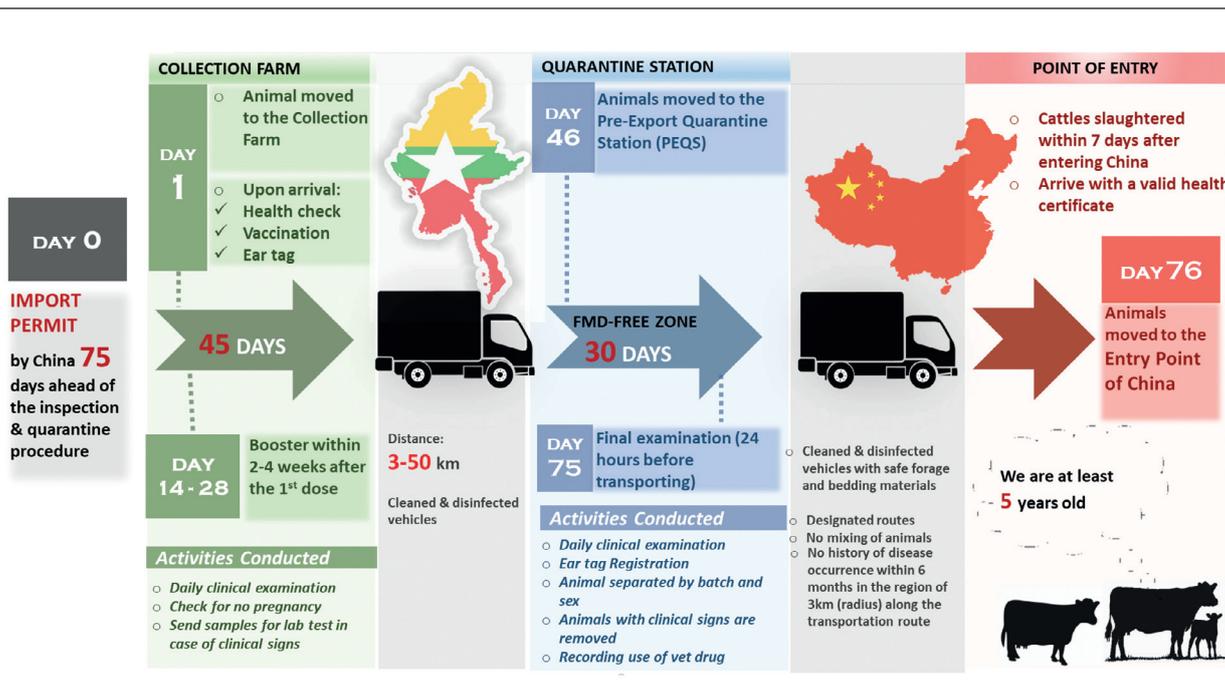


Data source: Department of Trade (DoT), Myanmar.

der areas (Myanmar Digital News 2021). In response to the situation, the Myanmar authorities gave transportation permits to five trading companies to transport the stranded cattle back to central Myanmar, but the herds of the other traders are left stranded in the Muse 105-Mile Trade Zone (located 105 miles from the Shan State town of Lashio). Meanwhile, widespread illegal export trade routes provide ample opportunity for illicit cattle trading due to porous borders between Myanmar and China. The cattle exporters association has been urging the Myanmar government to facilitate a well-functioning cattle market system by strengthening the enforcement of rules and regulations. However, regulatory compliance and enforcement have been lacking.

Chinese traders prefer purchasing cattle on the black market as it is cheaper to do so. Trading cattle legally costs over MMK 500,000 (USD 281) per head, including transport costs and various payments, but illegal export costs only around MMK 300,000 (USD 169). Legal cattle export procedures and trade protocols in place infographic are depicted in Figure 6. A price quote provided by a trader at the Thailand border estimates the current cattle price at over MMK 2,000,000 (USD 1,125) per head. Currently, the major junction for illegal export routes is 20 miles away from Lashio, Shan State, on the way to the Lweje (Kachin State), Chinshwehaw (Kokang Autonomous Region), and Wa Autonomous Administration border areas. Traders stated that six companies currently export cattle illegally via the Kokang region. Some traders claim that several traders at the border collaborate with government officers, taking advantage of the current haphazard situation and for high risk/high return. The Myanmar government news outlet on 29 October 2021 reported that the cattle trade is booming on Myanmar’s black market, with 2,000 heads sent to China every day (GNLM 2021).

Figure 5. Trade protocol of exporting live cattle from Myanmar to China.



Source: Unpublished report submitted to the FAO (2019).

Figure 5 shows the current trade regulations on the part of China as a buying country requiring live cattle to be kept in quarantine for 75 days. Legal trade becomes less profitable and disease control is rendered ineffective, which forms the basis for the Myanmar Livestock Department, with the help of an FAO consultant, to develop a trade protocol that involves a shorter quarantine period, so long as the risk of disease spread remains unchanged. This is to disincentivize traders from going underground.

### **Animal disease control in Myanmar**

The double shock inevitably had an impact on the operations of the LBVD, a veterinary service authority in Myanmar. In 2017, Myanmar lifted the prohibition on live cattle export, and the LBVD has played an important role in disease control and monitoring to prevent the animal disease from spreading to neighboring countries. China has been interested in importing live cattle from Myanmar to serve Chinese beef consumers, especially in southern China. Therefore, the Chinese authority attempted to set up the protocol to import live cattle free of animal diseases, particularly foot-and-mouth disease (FMD), by issuing export certificates and controlling the disease by setting up animal posts at the border. The live cattle transportation route passes through Mandalay to the Muse-Ruili border. However, the double shock has disrupted these developments, and the initiation of legal trade free of animal disease has been postponed.

This situation may lead to a return of illegal live cattle trade at Myanmar's borders. Reverting to illegal venues will lead to a higher risk of animal disease spreading across the border. In November 2021, the first case of lumpy skin disease (LSD) was reported in Myanmar (ProMed 2020), and then in March 2021, Thailand announced the first case of LSD (Arjkumpa, *et al.* 2021). These two countries are the main live cattle traders in South-East Asia. Thailand imports approximately 100,000 live cattle per year through the borderland. It is possible that LSD crossed the Myanmar-Thailand border with live cattle, although LSD can be transmitted via blood-feeding insects (FAO 2020). The LBVD takes full responsibility for animal disease monitoring and control; however, the LBVD alone cannot prevent the animal disease from spreading in the region. All countries in the region must collaborate to control the disease and prevent its spread.

Back in 2001, the Myanmar-Thailand-Malaysia Peninsular Campaign was developed to prevent FMD from spreading in the region and aimed to eventually eradicate the disease (Wongsathapornchai, *et al.* 2003). This campaign demonstrated the importance of collaboration among countries in South-East Asia to battle transborder animal diseases transmitted through the live animal trade. The campaign focused in particular on the live cattle trade from Myanmar through Thailand to Malaysia. The Regional Coordination Unit of the World Organization for Animal Health encouraged and coordinated the collaboration among three countries to apply FMD control strategies. Even though the eradication of FMD did not fully succeed, this approach is a model for multi-country collaboration to prevent the spread of animal diseases.

The current institutional disruption in Myanmar might affect the functioning of the LBVD in terms of animal disease control, but livestock activities, includ-

ing animal trading, moving, or breeding, are not waiting for institutional repositioning. The farmers in the livestock community can be empowered to inspect animal diseases in their community and report them to the LBVD. This bottom-up approach can increase the LBVD's capability in animal disease surveillance during the disruption period. Increasingly widespread usage of digital devices might lead to a breakthrough. For example, in Thailand, the "Participatory One-health Digital Disease Detection" (PODD) system has been developed, which integrated the one-health approach into disease surveillance activities at the community level. This system allows farmers to report animal disease or abnormal signs to authorities via smartphone. Authorities at the city and community levels can cooperate to solve the problems rapidly with the support of farmers who send the report (Yano 2018).

The PODD system is a digital surveillance tool that can be used to monitor animal diseases by the community and respond to the authorities. It is different from conventional surveillance methods (e.g., passive surveillance by animal authority) because the data flows from the source of the problem to all relevant stakeholders simultaneously. They can integrate resources to solve the problem immediately. The system also empowers farmers and the community to play an important role in animal health. They can monitor the problems and manage them before they get out of control.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on the observations above, along with prior suggestions by Khaing (2017) and Zhuning (2018), we lay out which types of policies and institutional changes could guide Myanmar's cattle market and trade to achieve win-win outcomes, particularly for rural cattle-owning farm households.

### **Scenarios for win-win outcomes**

- Cattle in Myanmar remain an important means of agriculture production as they are mainly used for farming purposes. The unlimited export of cattle could have a detrimental effect on farming.
- Myanmar farmers lack the funds, technologies, and experience to raise cattle for beef consumption, and public support is needed to safeguard their interest in investing in the new industry.
- The relevant departments of the Chinese and Myanmar governments must work closely together to coordinate and streamline the import process the cattle trade protocols and have better control of smuggling and transborder animal diseases.
- The number of smuggled cattle from Myanmar into China is estimated to have increased to more than 1,500 a day (some estimates put the figure even higher).
- Seeing the huge market potential, the Myanmar government is willing to approve the export of cattle to China, and the Chinese government is willing to cooperate with Myanmar to normalize the cross-border trade in cattle.
- If managed well, the cattle trade can generate economic income and create job opportunities in Myanmar's rural areas, which will be conducive to the agricultural development of Myanmar.

**Issues to be addressed in the development of formalized live cattle trade**

- Beef cattle farming is in an initial state, and production is traditional mixed with livestock systems. Some cities have very few commercial cattle farms.
- The market value chain involves several actors/traders before the animals reach their destination markets.
- Live cattle prices inside Myanmar are significantly lower than in neighboring countries, which leads to unofficial exports.
- Cross-border price differentials have played a crucial role in shaping cattle trade patterns.
- Porous border issues need to be addressed and are closely tied to peace and stability along the cattle trade routes.
- The Myanmar government's bargaining power in negotiations with its Chinese counterpart needs to be strengthened.

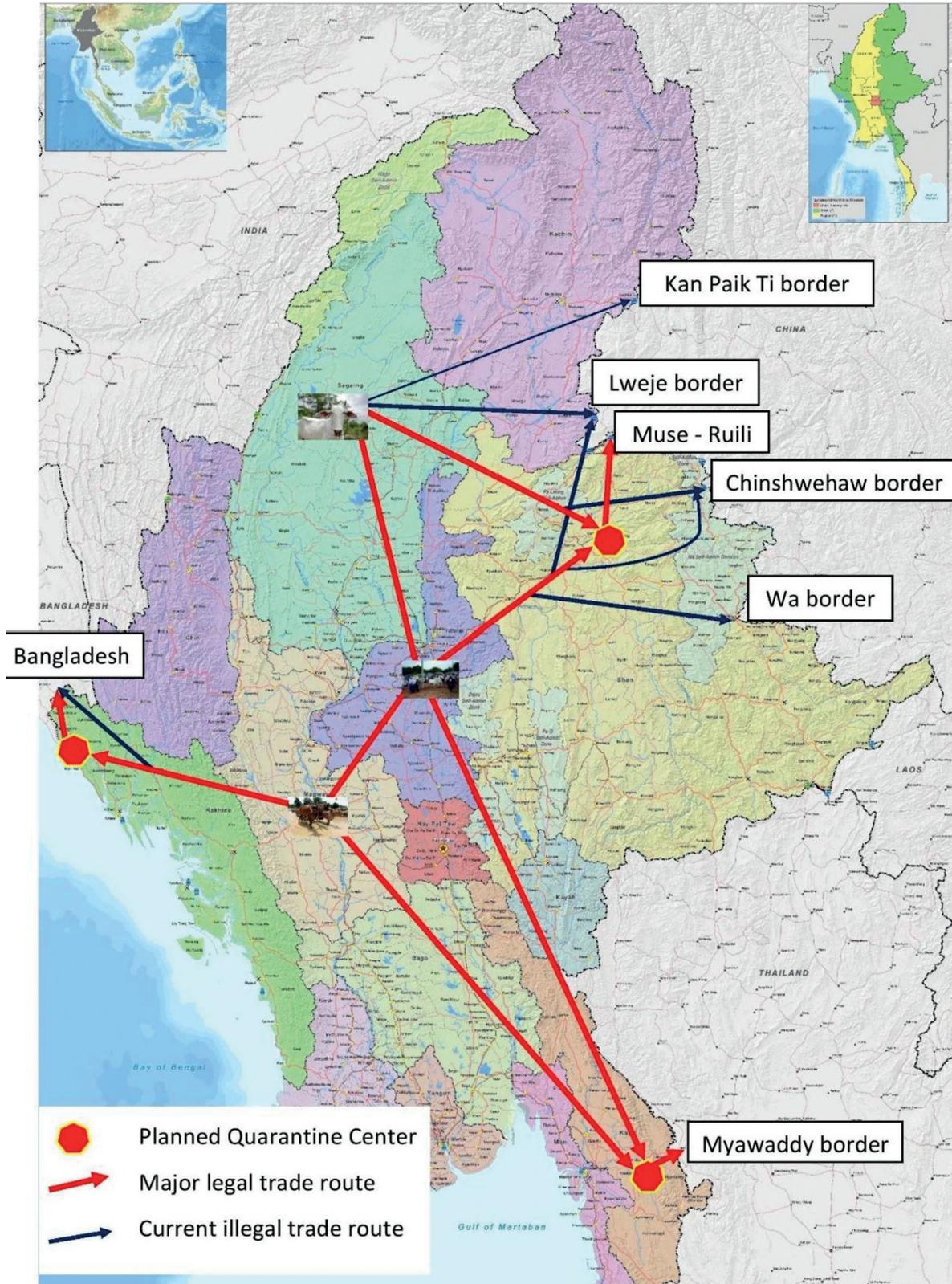
**Suggestions for public interventions and external assistance**

- The LBVD could develop a system like PODD to monitor animal diseases, especially emerging and re-emerging animal diseases. The participation of the livestock community can help the LBVD rapidly prevent, detect, and respond to animal disease outbreaks. Moreover, a vast amount of data will reach the LBVD. They can share the data from the field with neighboring countries that work together to prevent the disease from spreading in the region.
- The data sharing among countries in the region could encourage collaboration on animal disease surveillance and prevention. The data can be used to prepare disease prevention at the regional level. During the disruption period in Myanmar, neighboring countries (especially China and Thailand) could support the animal health service capacity in Myanmar. If Myanmar can control animal disease outbreaks in the country, there is a lower risk of diseases spreading to China and Thailand via live animal trade.
- The relevant departments of the Myanmar and Chinese governments should reach a consensus on the quarantine procedures and formalities for the cattle/livestock trade as soon as possible.
- The Myanmar side should develop an export quota system based on the incremental number of cattle to protect cattle as the mainstay of the means of agriculture production. And while normalizing the livestock trade, the two governments should work more closely on combating the smuggling of cattle.
- It is necessary to ensure that farmers receive more benefits from this cross-border trade. At present, farmers get very little, while the smugglers get the lion's share.
- The Chinese side should provide technology, funding, and training programs to help Myanmar farmers improve the breeding technology to raise beef cattle.
- In the initial stage, a pilot project on beef cattle raising should be based on local peasant households. If the pilot stage proves promising, plans for scaling it up should be considered by appealing to external development partners.

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*Appendix. Official current cattle trade map and animal control zones.*



Map source: MIMU.

# Comparative study of ASEAN's roles in the Cambodian conflict of the Third Indochina War and the 2021 military coup in Myanmar

Aung Kyaw Min

*The military coup in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 created an alarming situation for the region. Since then, the military has committed a slew of atrocities and crimes against humanity, and ASEAN has an obligation to tackle the issue. By conducting a comparative study of the Cambodian conflict during the Third Indochina War, this paper seeks to identify the best possible options for ASEAN to improve the status quo in Myanmar. This study fleshes out ASEAN's role during the conflict in Cambodia and investigates the progress made thanks to ASEAN-initiated mechanisms relating to the crisis in Myanmar. This study seeks to better understand how ASEAN became involved in the Cambodian conflict, what its role was, what the alliance's current progress is regarding the issue of Myanmar, which lessons should be learned from the Cambodian conflict, and how it should reconsider its role in the Myanmar crisis today. ASEAN should examine alternative possible options to avoid taking on so many responsibilities and jeopardizing the alliance's reputation. To this end, moving beyond the five-point consensus and working together with the UN could be more effective options for the alliance.*

**KEYWORDS:** MYANMAR; MILITARY COUP; ASEAN; THIRD INDOCHINA WAR; DIPLOMACY.

## Introduction

South-East Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world, and because of its location between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, it also has major geopolitical significance. Not only does its geography make the region politically important, but because of its access to vital passages such as the Strait of Malacca, it is also economically important.

The region's economic, political, and geographic importance also plays a role when it comes to several related issues, including the South China Sea. As a regional organization, the Association of South-East Asia Nations (ASEAN) has an important voice on these matters. ASEAN is regarded as one of the most successful regional organizations in the world, and its role on key topics in the region has to be critically assessed.

The military coup in Myanmar (Burma) on 1 February 2021 was an alarming situation for the region. The military has been committing a series of atrocities and crimes against humanity inside the country, and ASEAN has to tackle this issue. However, it has not been able to produce a significant result on the issue of Myanmar as there are many restrictions, including the organization's key principle of non-interference. By conducting a cooperative, comparative study of the issue of Cambodia during the Third Indochina War, this paper will try to analyze the best possible options for ASEAN concerning the issue of Myanmar. The Cambodian conflict might be quite different from what is happening in Myanmar today, but it would be compelling to better understand ASEAN's role in that conflict as it is one of the most difficult issues the organization has had to face since it was established 1967. It can also provide greater insight into

how ASEAN approaches regional issues. When discussing the Cambodian conflict, most people focus on the role of the United Nations (UN). Although the UN played an important role in the conflict, ASEAN and the South-East Asia countries were also key players.

This study will try to flesh out ASEAN's role during the conflict in Cambodia and investigate the progress made thanks to ASEAN-initiated mechanisms relating to the crisis in Myanmar. Another objective of this paper is to find the best possible option for ASEAN by drawing on lessons learned from the Cambodian conflict.

To fulfill the objectives above, this study will seek to answer how ASEAN became involved in the Cambodian conflict and what its role was, what ASEAN's current progress is with regard to the issue of Myanmar, which lessons should be learned from the Cambodian conflict, and how ASEAN should reconsider its role regarding the situation in Myanmar today.

The study will focus mainly on qualitative methods by using historical documents and academic papers to examine the role of ASEAN in the Cambodian conflict, as well as news articles and documents that examine the progress ASEAN has made with respect to the Myanmar issue. In addition to these historical documents, research papers, and news articles about the events, this study will also show how other studies have perceived ASEAN's role. Having a more precise understanding of ASEAN could give a more specific analysis of its role in the Cambodian conflict and during and after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021.

This paper is divided into five parts. The first part will describe how ASEAN developed into a regional organization in South-East Asia. In the second part, the regional order and world order will be discussed as they relate to ASEAN. The third part will examine the conflict in Cambodia, how ASEAN reacted to the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, and the organization's effectiveness during the Cambodian conflict. The fourth part will analyze the current progress of ASEAN-led mechanisms with regard to the Myanmar issue and responses by individual ASEAN member countries (e.g., Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia). The last part will evaluate the role that ASEAN (has) played during the Cambodian and Myanmar conflicts, compare it with the ASEAN-led mechanisms pertaining to these issues, and examine which lessons ASEAN should learn from the Cambodian conflict and apply to the current situation in Myanmar.

### **The emergence of ASEAN as a regional organization in South-East Asia**

ASEAN's development and emergence as a regional organization in the South-East Asian region will also need to be explored. Although ASEAN is currently the most prominent regional organization, it is not the only one to emerge in the region. Before discussing the role of ASEAN in particular conflicts, it is important to look back at the organizations that preceded it.

It could be said that regional organizations emerged in the South-East Asia region after the Second World War. In 1954, Thailand and the Philippines signed

the South-East Asia Collective Defense Treaty, which would later be known as the Manila Pact. Following the ratification of the treaty, the South-East Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) was created. The SEATO was focused more on collective defense and security than on being a regional organization (Murfett 2012), and some countries in the region, including Malaysia and Singapore, were not part of the SEATO at the time.

The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) had a major influence on the South-East Asia region (Acharya 2021). The Colombo meeting in April 1954 in Sri Lanka and the Bandung Conference in April 1955 in Indonesia paved the way for the NAM.

In 1959, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman proposed the establishment of the South-East Asia Friendship and Economic Treaty (SEAFTE), although that process would ultimately be unsuccessful (Weatherbee 2019). Following the failure of establishing the SEAFTE, the Association of South-East Asia (ASA) was founded in June 1961 in Bangkok by Thailand, Malaysia, and the Philippines. However, the ASA did not deliver any significant results. In July 1963, the Manila Accord was signed by Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia with the intention to establish MAPHILINDO.

On 8 August 1967, the Bangkok Declaration (ASEAN 1967) was adopted by Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore and resulted in the creation of ASEAN. Unlike its predecessors, ASEAN could make significant progress as a regional organization thanks to the creation of the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), the signing of the Treaty of Amenity and Cooperation (TAC), and the Bali Concord.

Despite many challenges and criticisms, ASEAN has undeniably maintained its status as a regional organization for over five decades and become one of the most successful regional organizations in the world. With more than 50 years of experience as a regional organization, the role of ASEAN will need to be reviewed through the prism of previous studies on ASEAN before analyzing its role in the Cambodian conflict during the Third Indochina War and the military coup in Myanmar in 2021.

### **Regional order and the limitations of ASEAN**

Before considering the role of ASEAN on two issues that are critical to the South-East Asia region (i.e., the Cambodian conflict during the Third Indochina War and the military coup in Myanmar in 2021), ASEAN's role in the region and the changing world order also needs to be examined.

ASEAN is facing a different kind of world order than the one in place at the time it was formed in 1967 (Natalegawa 2018). Because of the changing world order and dynamics of power, the organization has had to redefine its role in the region. When ASEAN was established in 1967, it was the era of the Cold War, and there was a rivalry between the communist world led by the Soviet Union and the liberal world led by the United States. Today, there is a different world order, with the rivalry between the People's Republic of China and the United States taking center stage. These changes in the world order and power dynamics are central to a consideration of the regional issues.

The norms that defined the role of ASEAN in the region came from a mix of sources that included the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), and it could be said that the establishment of ASEAN was the product of a desire by its five original members to create a mechanism to prevent war and manage conflict (Acharya 2021). The need for such a mechanism of war prevention and conflict management was highlighted by the fact that ASEAN's predecessors had struggled to mitigate intra-regional mistrust and hostility (Acharya 2009).

When considering the issues in the region, the diversity of the region is a very important factor for ASEAN. As one of the most diverse regions in the world, it is no wonder that many factors need to be considered for ASEAN when resolving or becoming involved in regional issues, and these considerations are also important with respect to the limitations on ASEAN's ability to tackle regional issues (Mahbubani and Sng 2019).

One consideration with regard to the role of ASEAN in the region is that no single country in South-East Asia can be considered the great power of the world. While none of the members of ASEAN are among the great powers of the world, the organization needs to pay attention to the regional order when tackling regional issues (Acharya 2021).

ASEAN has limitations with regard to regional issues. This also exposes ASEAN to criticism for its role in regional issues, especially when they relate to politics. Because of the region's diversity, ASEAN has to consider different approaches when preparing to address regional issues.

### **ASEAN's role in the Cambodian conflict**

In December 1978, when Cambodia was under the control of the Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge, Vietnam invaded the country, creating one of the biggest challenges for ASEAN since its founding in 1967. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia was also part of the Third Indochina War and could be viewed as an issue liable to threaten regional stability. After the invasion, Vietnam installed a new government led by Heng Samrin. Former Khmer Rouge members, like Hun Sen, were also included in the government (Gottesman 2003). The country was renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), and there were a series of ongoing conflicts with the Khmer Rouge. For ASEAN, it was a serious threat to regional stability, and the organization had to offer a strong voice to condemn the conflict.

In January 1979, a special meeting of ASEAN foreign ministers was held in Bangkok. In a statement, they mentioned that ASEAN saw this conflict as an issue for regional stability and that they had decided to raise their voices against the ongoing Cambodian conflict (ASEAN 1979). In addition, ASEAN urged the United Nations Security Council to act on the Cambodian conflict. In March 1979, ASEAN presented a draft resolution to the UN Security Council. In November 1979, the resolution would be adopted. At the 35<sup>th</sup> session of the UN General Assembly in October 1980, ASEAN sponsored UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/35/6 calling for international action to resolve the conflict in Cambodia.

In March 1980, the meeting between the ASEAN member states' foreign ministers and their counterparts from the European Community countries was held

in Kuala Lumpur, and the issue of Cambodia was also mentioned in the statement of that Second ASEAN–EEC Ministerial Meeting (ASEAN 1980).

In February 1985, there was a special ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting in Bangkok. The participants in that meeting issued a strong statement on the Kampuchea (Cambodia) issue. Subsequently, in March 1986, an eight-point peace proposal for resolving the Kampuchean (Cambodian) conflict was announced (Caballero-Anthony 2005: 83–112).

In July 1988, an informal meeting known as the Jakarta Informal Meeting (JIM I) was held in the Indonesian capital (Pou, *et al.* 2021). The Cambodian factions involved in the conflict also attended the JIM I meetings to discuss the crisis. The following points were agreed to at that meeting:

- Vietnamese forces would be withdrawn.
- External aid to the Khmer forces would be suspended.
- There would be international supervision to monitor the withdrawal of forces.
- After the external forces withdraw, there would be free elections and an interim government.
- There should be a sovereign, independent, and neutral Cambodia.

JIM II was established in February 1989, which led to the Paris Conference on Cambodia (PICC) from July to August 1989, where Indonesia joined France as co-chair. At that PICC, all the Cambodian factions, the six ASEAN countries, and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (P5) were in attendance, along with Vietnam, Laos, Australia, Canada, and India, among others.

The turning point in the Cambodian conflict came in 1991, when the P5 decided to take over the leadership role that ASEAN had had with regard to the Cambodian conflict (Caballero-Anthony 2005: 83–112). In October 1991, the Agreement on a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Cambodian Conflict was signed with the Cambodian factions and the international participants. This settlement paved the way for the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC). In November 1991, a UN Advanced Mission to Cambodia (UNAMIC) was sent to Cambodia (Sullivan 2016). The UNTAC was given full authority to govern Cambodia from March 1992 to September 1993. These events were followed by a general election in May 1993.

From the perspective of the ASEAN member countries, it was obvious that the ASEAN member countries had considered the Cambodian conflict a regional issue. ASEAN-initiated actions included resolutions at the UN General Assembly. Until the leadership role was handed over to the UN, ASEAN member countries played both individual and joint roles in seeking to resolve the Cambodian conflict.

Eleven years after it was established, ASEAN tackled the Cambodian conflict as a regional issue. Given the context of the Cold War, ASEAN was paying special attention to the issue as it could have spilled over into the South-East Asia region, especially the ASEAN member countries. The Khmer Rouge and refugees from Cambodia were also major problems for South-East Asia. The

Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia escalated the existing instability in Cambodia and brought a more intense threat to the South-East Asia region.

Although the United States and China were also on the side of ASEAN in standing against the Vietnamese invasion, ASEAN as an organization could not make significant progress beyond issuing statements and supporting the resolutions at the United Nations. It was obvious that ASEAN had to work together with other international organizations like the UN. Although ASEAN could not make a significant impact as an organization, the individual actions of the members of ASEAN countries such as Indonesia played a crucial role in the Cambodian conflict. The JIMs are one example of that.

Although ASEAN is an important organization in the region, the Cambodian conflict reflected the limitations of ASEAN and its reluctance to become deeply involved in regional affairs. The impact of those limitations during the military coup in Myanmar in 2021 also need to be considered.

### **ASEAN's role in the Myanmar conflict**

Both ASEAN's and the individual member countries' responses to the current crisis in Myanmar should be discussed. When the military coup happened on 1 February 2021, the member states had a variety of responses. Some countries mentioned their concern about the issue, while others regarded it as an internal conflict. Most of the countries were too cautious to comment on the coup at all. Malaysia was one of the first countries to raise their voice in protest, with the Malaysian Foreign Ministry making an announcement on 1 February (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia 2021). On 2 February, the ASEAN Chairman also issued a statement on the situation in Myanmar (ASEAN 2021d).

A few days after ASEAN's statement, Indonesia and Malaysia pushed the organization on the Myanmar issue. On 5 February, the leaders of the two countries discussed the situation in Myanmar. After the meeting, they asked Brunei, which chaired the organization at the time, to initiate a special meeting on Myanmar. In his meeting with the Indonesian President, the Malaysian Prime Minister mentioned the coup was "one step backward in the process of democracy in that country" (Reuters 2021).

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi visited Brunei on February 17 and Singapore on February 18 to discuss the crisis in Myanmar. In the meeting in Brunei, she mentioned that "Many countries, including Indonesia, have raised concerns. Raising concerns is one thing, but the question is: What can Indonesia and ASEAN do to help Myanmar get out of this delicate situation?" (Strangio 2021) Indonesia also spoke to the military side and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which had been formed by the elected parliamentary representatives of Myanmar.

On 2 March, an Informal ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (IAMM) was held and a statement issued by ASEAN (ASEAN 2021c). On 24 April, there was a special meeting by the ASEAN member countries, where the following "Five-Point Consensus" was drawn up (ASEAN 2021b). This consensus became the main pathway for the international community on the issue of Myanmar:

- 1 There shall be an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, and all parties shall exercise utmost restraint.
- 2 Constructive dialogue among all parties concerned shall commence by seeking a peaceful resolution in the interests of the people.
- 3 A special envoy of the ASEAN Chair shall facilitate mediation of the dialogue process, with support from the ASEAN Secretary-General.
- 4 ASEAN shall provide humanitarian assistance through the AHA Center.
- 5 The special envoy and delegation shall visit Myanmar to meet with all the parties concerned.

After the meeting, Indonesian President Joko Widodo issued a press statement about the situation and the decision of the ASEAN consensus on Myanmar (Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia in Hanoi 2021). It was also mentioned that the Indonesian President had spoken on the phone to Brunei so that this special meeting could happen, and it also stated that Indonesia was among the leading ASEAN countries having a strong voice on the Myanmar issue.

Progress on the Five-Point Consensus was relatively slow. Four months later, in August 2021, Brunei's second minister for foreign affairs, Erywan Yusof, was appointed ASEAN Special Envoy to Myanmar. But in this capacity he did not make significant progress as the Myanmar military did not cooperate with ASEAN's efforts. Myanmar's military rejected the ASEAN Special Envoy's request to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi (Al Jazeera 2021).

The Myanmar military's lack of cooperation created barriers to progress by ASEAN. After the Emergency ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting in October 2021, only the non-political representative was allowed to attend the ASEAN summit.

Although it was stated that non-political representatives could attend the ASEAN summit, even the non-political representative did not attend the meeting, and the ASEAN summit had to go on without the representative from Myanmar. In the Chairman's statement of the 38<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> ASEAN summit, Myanmar was mentioned as one of the regional issues (ASEAN 2021a). Although ASEAN always stated its concern about the Myanmar issue, there has been little progress on ASEAN action in this respect.

Regarding ASEAN's progress on the Myanmar issue before the ASEAN summit, only two actions were apparent: It had appointed a special envoy, and no political representatives from Myanmar (neither the Myanmar military nor the opposition sides) were allowed to attend the ASEAN summit.

More than 50 years after ASEAN was established, the issue of Myanmar has become the benchmark for considering ASEAN's ability to handle regional issues. And yet, ASEAN still fails to deliver significant results with regard to the issue of Myanmar beyond prohibiting the Myanmar military from attending the ASEAN summit. Although ASEAN drafted a Five-Point Consensus on the Myanmar issue, the plan did not produce any breakthroughs and has failed to stop Myanmar's military from committing further atrocities.

The issue of Myanmar also reflects ASEAN's limitations when it comes to regional conflicts. Even though the organization had made statements relating to

the Myanmar issue, it was unable to take a strong stand. When Hun Sen, the Prime Minister of Cambodia, which had held the chairmanship of ASEAN since January, visited Myanmar, he faced criticism that his visit would legitimize the military (ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights 2022), which was committing atrocities, although he rejected the accusation (Bala 2022).

While the issue of Myanmar has been the benchmark for considering ASEAN's ability to resolve regional issues, ASEAN has not made any clear progress. The lack of significant progress affects the image of ASEAN, which is why the organization should find alternative options for the Myanmar issue.

### **Evaluation**

The Cambodian conflict, which happened during the Third Indochina War, is one of the most critical regional issues ASEAN has had to handle. It was an especially alarming situation for the ASEAN member countries, which were very wary of the threat of communism during the Cold War. In the context of the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, the Cambodian conflict has been discussed here to assess the role of ASEAN at the time and help identify the best possible outcome for the current crisis.

There are differences between the two conflicts. First, there is the global world order. The Cambodian conflict happened during the Third Indochina War, when the world was vigilant about possible communist influence, and ASEAN was viewed as an anti-communist organization. Moreover, during the Cold War, one conflict in the region could have an impact on the other countries in the region, which is why the ASEAN member countries were particularly concerned about the conflict.

Second, there was the China factor. During the Cambodian conflict, there was tension between China and Vietnam, which led ASEAN and China to take a stand against Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia. By contrast, there are Chinese economic and strategic interests in Myanmar, which makes it difficult for China to take a firm stand on the conflict today. This might also affect how ASEAN acts on the issue of Myanmar.

Third, there are economic ties. During the Cambodian conflict, there were no real economic ties between Cambodia, Vietnam, and the five ASEAN countries. When it comes to the conflict in Myanmar, the ASEAN countries' foreign direct investment in Myanmar is visible (DICA 2021). These kinds of economic ties might also be a factor in the ASEAN countries' reluctance to take stronger decisions and actions.

Despite the differences, there are also similarities. Both conflicts could affect the neighboring countries, especially the ASEAN countries, especially in the form of migration and refugees. Another similarity is civilian casualties. Millions of people died during the Cambodian conflict, and there have already been thousands of deaths in Myanmar since the coup (AAPP 2021). Such numbers of casualties could affect the image of the region. The final similarity is that a poor handling of regional issues could also affect ASEAN's credibility.

There were also the obvious outcomes of the two conflicts. The first outcome was the Indonesia-initiated conflict-resolution mechanism. Although Indonesia

was actively involved in the resolution of both conflicts, it played a greater role in the Cambodian conflict (e.g., the JIM meetings). The second outcome was the ASEAN-led resolutions at the UN. During the Cambodian conflict, ASEAN sponsored and initiated UN resolutions to improve the situation, and this ASEAN involvement may have affected the participation of the UN's P5 countries in the Cambodian conflict. ASEAN has not been actively involved at the UN in the same way during the conflict in Myanmar.

The two conflicts were regional issues and could not be ignored. As a regional organization, ASEAN (has) had to take care of both issues. The issue of Myanmar is still ongoing, and ASEAN should learn lessons about the Cambodian conflict. ASEAN has been unable to make significant progress on Myanmar and should therefore be considering alternative options. One of those options might be ASEAN initiating or sponsoring a resolution at the UN or cooperating with UNSC member countries to achieve some measure of progress.

It took years to make significant progress on the Cambodian conflict. ASEAN issued statements on the issue, but it took a long time for any real progress to be made. When the UN decided to take over the leadership role of ASEAN, it made significant progress. This is a great example showing why ASEAN should decide on an alternative option with regard to the current issue in Myanmar instead of solely focusing on the Five-Point Consensus and making statements.

## Conclusion

South-East Asia is one of the most diverse regions in the world in many respects, including in terms of ethnicity and religion. As a result, the issues and problems in the region can be challenging to resolve, which means that ASEAN's ability to handle regional issues is often limited. Moreover, none of the ASEAN members are major global powers. Therefore, it is difficult for the organization to take full responsibility for regional issues, which further limits ASEAN and compels it to heed the world order, regional order, and power dynamics when considering how to tackle regional issues.

Another possible reason for these limitations is that ASEAN's predecessors were not successful, and these previous failures might make the founding countries of the ASEAN reconsider having such limitations placed on the organization. In addition, South-East Asia's history with conflicts like *Konfrontasi* may have informed ASEAN's non-interference policy and the ASEAN Way. Despite these limitations, ASEAN has been a regional organization in South-East Asia for over five decades and may be reluctant to move beyond the approach it has had to for such a long time.

Over the past 50 years, ASEAN has developed into a rules-based organization following the development of the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration. Although ASEAN has seen major developments and become more organized compared with the organization that faced the Cambodian conflict 40 years ago, the issue of Myanmar has posed a serious challenge, and the Five-Point Consensus has proved to be unsuccessful at preventing the atrocities committed by the Myanmar military.

Understandably, ASEAN has limitations when it comes to resolving regional issues, and these limitations are linked to the organization's norms and principles, which serve to prevent conflict and war among the member states. However, ASEAN's failure to make any real progress on the Myanmar issue could affect its image as a regional organization.

The Cambodian conflict showed that ASEAN cannot achieve significant results on critical regional issues on its own. Regarding the issue of Myanmar, the international community has mostly focused exclusively on the Five-Point Consensus, but the association is limited in what it can achieve and cannot take full responsibility for regional issues. Alternative options should be considered for ASEAN to resolve the issue of Myanmar.

The following alternative options should be considered to avoid taking on so many responsibilities regarding the Myanmar issue. The first option might be for ASEAN to cooperate more with the United Nations, the European Union, and other international organizations. Unlike during the Cambodian conflict, there has been no significant involvement of ASEAN or the UN to resolve the Myanmar issue. Therefore, they should consider more concrete cooperation rather than focusing on the Five-Point Consensus alone.

Another possible option would be for individual member countries like Indonesia and Malaysia to take more diplomatic actions as individual countries. Indonesia has been heavily involved in both issues. The JIM, which happened during the Cambodian conflict, is a good example of an approach that could achieve results by moving beyond the Five-Point Consensus.

Finally, another possible alternative should be that ASEAN engage in discussions with the permanent member countries of the United Nations Security Council to look for alternative options on the issue of Myanmar. In the Cambodian case, handing over the leading role to the UNSC and the UN made a significant difference and delivered major results.

As discussed above, ASEAN continues to be limited in its ability to handle regional issues. These limitations are clear in the Cambodian conflict, and the current issue of the military coup in Myanmar shows those limitations are still in place for ASEAN. It is understandable that it is difficult for ASEAN to overcome those limitations. This is why ASEAN should consider its central role in the issue of Myanmar before the crisis damages the image of ASEAN as a regional organization.

As this study only focused on ASEAN's role in the Cambodian conflict during the Third Indochina War, the roles of UNTAC and the UN during that time were not discussed or analyzed in this study. The role of UNTAC and whether it succeeded in post-conflict Cambodia should also be examined in future research. The impact of the UN resolutions sponsored and supported by ASEAN should also be investigated. Identifying the role of international communities in conflicts in South-East Asia could provide more options and alternatives for the current issue of Myanmar.

Although there were differences between the Cambodian conflict and the issue of Myanmar, they both affect the image of ASEAN as they are both regional is-

sues. Hence, ASEAN should consider alternative possible options to avoid taking on so many responsibilities and affecting the image of the organization. Moving beyond the Five-Point Consensus and working together with the UN could be more effective for ASEAN when engaging with the Myanmar issue.

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