

2023 Myanmar Update - From Coup to Revolution

Friday 21 July and Saturday 22 July 2023

Abstracts

Panel 1: The Revolutionary Movement

Samuel Hmung and Michael Dunford, “Understanding Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement: Goals, consequences, and lessons”

Since the Myanmar’s military coup in 2021, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) has been one of the strongest tools for non-violent resistance. The movement began as a public sector strike, when health workers working in hospitals, medical institutes, and COVID-19 testing centres, left their jobs in protest of the coup. The movement quickly turned into one of the country’s largest mass resistance campaigns joined by workers across both the public and private sectors. “CDM” eventually came to be used as a shorthand for every anti-military action in Myanmar, including boycotts, general strikes, and direct actions such as disrupting roads. However, due to the severe repression of the military and the growing popularity of the armed struggle, not only have the CDM participants faced many difficulties, but the entire CDM movement has slowed down since the movement started. While some claim the CDM as vanguard of the entire “Spring” revolution, some openly call CDM ineffective, incapable of bringing down the government. This paper thus focuses on what is CDM in Myanmar’s civil service? How do CDM participants frame their objectives? And how does CDM action work, and how has it changed over two years? Through key informants’ interviews living in and outside of the country and examining online discourse and public statements about the CDM, this paper provides the summary of the CDM by reviewing the key trends, the multitude of goals and inspirations that have been articulated since its beginning and various perspectives on CDM-related actions and their intended and unintended consequences. The paper also illustrates a comparative view of CDMs in other countries and draw examples that highlight impactful targeting and examples of poor targeting

Lukas Nagel, “Myanmar Peace Warriors. Creative resistance and nationalism among youth activists in post-coup Myanmar”

When large parts of the Myanmar population protested against the military coup in February 2021, most analysts predicted an eventual collapse of the so-called Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). More than two years later, the colourful civilian opposition persists, has armed itself, established an exile government (National Unity Government (NUG)), challenges regime legitimacy and is lobbying for international support. Observers are puzzled by the creativity, tenacious resistance and novel leadership that seems to flow particularly from a highly political generation of young activists. Their prominent role and influence within the Civil Disobedience Movement

(CDM) is highly dynamic and complex. Therefore, this paper asks how youth activism in Myanmar has changed since the military coup d'état in February 2021.

Based on an extensive literature review and personal experience from activities as a scholar-activist in a European NGO supporting the Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the paper presents a series of observations on Myanmar youth activists and their responses to the coup: The usage of social media; youths' views on interethnic solidarity and Myanmar nationality; the role of young women in the resistance; creative forms of protest and the U-turn on self-censorship among young activists. Accordingly, the paper argues that a new generation of young activists imagines a democratic and ethnically inclusive Myanmar by building a movement that draws on a confluence of the past student uprisings and contemporary liberal values, which creates a powerful ideology of pan-Myanmar youth nationalism. This contributes to the understanding of youth identity formation and youth participation in conflict settings in the Global South and amplifies the authentic voices of youths during civil war and how they believe it must be solved.

Ellen, "Women's agency in armed struggles in Myanmar's Spring Revolution"

The politics of sex hierarchy in Myanmar has created a narrative that portrays males as protectors of state sovereignty, kinship, and family, while women are relegated to the role of reproduction and preservation of culture and tradition. Within Myanmar's particularly militarized context, dominant discourses that emphasize the necessity of men to defend physical security has resulted in women's subordination in the security sector. Moreover, men seeking security have aimed to form strong male-bonded alliances, often based on patrilineal ties, with these coalitions seeking security through domination. Women have long been an indispensable part of this security provision mechanism, as they are the ones who biologically reproduce the group, generating brothers and sons for the male alliances. Because the fraternity relies on women, men must exert control over women. However, it is noteworthy that the 2021 revolution against Myanmar's military dictatorship is also attempting to revolutionize gender norms and the role of women in armed struggles. The paper will examine to what extent women are viewed as the agents in current armed struggles and whether societal attitudes toward female combatants have changed compared to the previous armed revolutions in Myanmar. In this regard, the study will investigate four independent variables (the motivation of female combatants, institutional reforms or armed group policies welcoming female militants, the roles taken by female militants and the challenges they have encountered) as factors to examine the changes in gender stereotypes, and their accessibility to resources and power.

Panel 2: Revolutionary Governance

Gerard McCarthy and Kyle Nyana "Governing revolution: Post-coup insurgent social order in Chin State and Sagaing Region"

The State Administrative Council's attempt to remilitarise local administration after the February 2021 coup has led to the collapse of Myanmar government administrative and service delivery functions in much of the country. This vacuum has upheaved the lives and livelihoods of millions of people and prompted a variety of new governance actors - often linked to resistance forces - to assume roles in administration and social service

delivery. This paper examines the diverse social governance functions fulfilled by non-state social actors in post-coup Myanmar at a sub-township level and theorises the norms and practices of reciprocity underpinning them. Informed by more than 60 interviews with diverse stakeholders in Chin State and Sagaing Region since May 2022 we theorise the role grassroots dynamics of resource pooling and solidarity play in sustaining the fight against renewed dictatorship. Grounded in literature on moral economy and insurgent governance, we argue that the highly decentralised nature of justice, education, health care and support for displaced people in the wake of the coup is forming the organisational bedrock crucial to sustaining Myanmar's larger democratic resistance. The central social governance role played by local non-state resistance forces suggests the dire need to reimagine models of state-society relations in Myanmar more appropriate to a federalised and democratic future.

Tayzar Myo Win, “Emerging local governance in Anyar amidst massive post-coup destruction”

Following the brutal crackdown on peaceful protests, several newly founded militia groups emerged across the country. Unlike during other uprisings in Myanmar's history since independence, Anyar, a central part of Myanmar including the Sagaing and Magway regions, became a stronghold for anti-coup resistance. Communities in Anyar, who predominantly belong to the Bamar majority group, have traditionally been spared from the military violence that armed groups in ethnic states have faced for more than 70 years. Following fierce junta attacks since the coup, Anyar is now struggling to cope with complete destruction. In addition to armed fighting, the resistance groups in Anyar are thus playing a crucial role in meeting public needs in the administration and judicial sectors as communities rely on them for instance in relation to social welfare or criminal issues. However, decades of highly centralised system of government means that Myanmar citizens of the central dry zone are not accustomed to such decentralised local governance practices. Drawing on interviews, this paper examines how local governance (both formal and informal) in Anyar is structured on the ground to respond to local needs and analyses the interaction between communities and resistance groups.

Panel 3: Social and Humanitarian Crisis

Anne Decobert, Tamas Wells and Pyae Phyo Maung “Myanmar's humanitarian crisis and the conflict paradox for local aid organisations”

Amidst Myanmar's ongoing revolution there is a vast humanitarian crisis, with almost one third of the country requiring humanitarian assistance in 2023. In this extreme context, what are the key challenges faced by Myanmar humanitarian organisations, and what new opportunities have been created for the work of these groups? This paper draws on 35 interviews - with Myanmar humanitarian agency leaders and international donors and aid agencies conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 - and argues that the attempted coup and revolution has in fact created a paradox for local humanitarian organisations. On one hand, they are deeply hampered in their work both by the regime and by the compliance demands and risk aversion of international aid agencies, yet on the other hand, they are able to operate more autonomously than international agencies who often have more restricted access within the country. The

broader agenda of aid localisation - where local and national actors take an increasingly central role in humanitarian responses - has been both accelerated and constrained. The paper concludes that in response to this conflict paradox, large Myanmar humanitarian agencies are increasingly positioning themselves in an intermediary role between international aid agencies and local groups - helping to buffer and protect smaller groups from the challenging compliance demands of international agencies while also challenging international aid systems. Alongside the current revolution of Myanmar citizens against military elites, Myanmar humanitarian organisations are also seeking to renegotiate power relations with international aid agencies.

Panel 4: Reimagining Myanmar

Khin Zaw Win, “Reimagining the goals of the Spring Revolution”

The massive disruptions following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar have brought an opportunity to view the national ‘saga’, past and present, in a new light. Indeed, it is in the nature of revolutions to do so. What is required goes far beyond stabilising the status quo or restoring the democratic order. The country’s entire future depends on the choices that committed people make in the coming months and years. This paper shall first assess the untenability of the nation-state concept as applied to Myanmar – and the postcolonial modernity that went with it. With the lessons of 75 years of continuous political and armed conflict in mind, would it be feasible to reverse, overturn, or amend it? At least the false paths taken should be admitted. Since 2010, there have been three general elections and much discussion about the constitution and federalism. During this period, relations between the leading political party and the military were supposed to have been relatively cordial. At the same time, illiberal and anti-democratic tendencies became more pronounced. In the Rohingya crisis and the war in Rakhine, both sides drew together, yet the coup still took place. The result has been a sharp reversal of democracy, renewed fighting across much of the country, and a surge in poverty and human suffering. Nonetheless, building upon the Spring Revolution and looking to a new future with the scars of the past in mind, there are definite opportunities to be seen.