



Christian Conference of Asia

**Towards a Global Advocacy  
for Democratisation, People's Security,  
and Peace with Justice in Myanmar**

**Report of the International Conference**

Bangna, Bangkok  
22-25 November 2024



Christian Conference of Asia

**Towards a Global Advocacy  
for Democratisation, People's Security,  
and Peace with Justice in Myanmar**

**Report of the International Conference**

**Bangna, Bangkok  
22-25 November 2024**

Towards a Global Advocacy for Democratisation,  
People's Security, and Peace with Justice in Myanmar

Report of the International Conference – November 2024

© Christian Conference of Asia

Christian Conference of Asia

Payap University

P.O. Box 183 | Mueang | Chiang Mai 50000

Thailand

Telephone: (66) 53-243-906

[www.cca.org.hk](http://www.cca.org.hk)

Printed in Thailand

# Contents

|                                                                                                                                                                        |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| • <b>Foreword</b> -----                                                                                                                                                | 5   |
| • Report of the International Conference<br>on ‘Towards a Global Advocacy for<br>Democratisation, People’s Security, and Peace<br>with Justice in Myanmar’ -----       | 7   |
| • <b>Communiqué</b> -----                                                                                                                                              | 22  |
| • Thematic Address:<br>Towards Democratisation, People’s Security,<br>and Peace with Justice in Myanmar -----<br>- <i>Dr Mathews George Chunakara</i>                  | 29  |
| • Myanmar’s Conundrum: Failed Nation-Building,<br>Civil War, and Other Political Consequences-----<br>- <i>Dr Michal Lubina</i>                                        | 44  |
| • People’s Security in Myanmar: Challenges<br>Within and Beyond Borders -----<br>- <i>Dr Hayso Thako</i>                                                               | 64  |
| • Education in Politically Contested Territories of<br>Myanmar: A Rigorous Review of Evidence and<br>an Agenda for Educational Research-----<br>- <i>Gray Rinehart</i> | 72  |
| • Myanmar’s Foreign Policy and the Post-2021 Coup:<br>Reactions of the International Community-----<br>- <i>Dr Michal Lubina</i>                                       | 80  |
| • Collective Struggles: Education Reform<br>Movements and Youth Displacements -----<br>- <i>Haymarn Soe Nyunt</i>                                                      | 103 |
| • The Plights of Myanmar’s Youth Since the<br>Coup in 2021: Reflections of a Young Burmese ----<br>- <i>Mary</i>                                                       | 109 |



## Foreword

Myanmar has been facing a devastating civil war and humanitarian crisis since the 2021 military coup. With the junta now controlling less than a quarter of the country and steadily losing territory to ethnic and resistance groups, the nation is gripped by catastrophic conditions: ethnic strife, rampant militarisation, indiscriminate shelling and firing on civilians, gross and systematic human rights violations, massive displacements, widespread food shortages, declining public services, forced evacuations, and the compulsory recruitment of young people for military service, often sending them into war zones. The situation has continued to deteriorate, and since October 2023 the conflict has spilled into many more parts of the country, intensifying the displacement of innocent civilians and resulting in massive outflows across the borders. The humanitarian outlook is increasingly bleak and expected to worsen further. Its impact is already being felt beyond Myanmar's borders, triggering refugee movements across the region.

An international conference organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) in November 2024 brought together representatives of Asian churches, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, human rights and social activists, academicians, journalists, church and ecumenical partners from around the world, as well as peace activists from Myanmar and representatives of Myanmar diaspora organisations.

The international conference addressed key issues and challenges arising from the ongoing plight of the people of Myanmar and their struggle for democratisation, human rights, and people's security. Participants deliberated on emerging concerns and explored measures to strengthen ecumenical advocacy on

democratisation and human rights in Myanmar. They observed that achieving lasting peace and justice in Myanmar requires stronger collaborative ecumenical efforts at local, regional, and international levels. To this end, the establishment of a new ecumenical platform – the Myanmar Ecumenical Solidarity Accompaniment Programme (MESAP) – was proposed. It is hoped that this initiative, based on the conference’s discussions and recommendations, will help synthesise strategies and shape concrete actions to be implemented by the international ecumenical community in the near future.

The summary of the discussions, as well as certain important issues and recommendations suggested during the conference, included in this publication, will be a helpful tool for reference in future planning.

Dr Mathews George Chunakara  
*General Secretary, CCA*

# **Report of the International Conference on Towards a Global Advocacy for Democratisation, People's Security, and Peace with Justice in Myanmar**

## **Introduction**

The international conference on 'Towards a Global Advocacy for Democratisation, People's Security, and Peace with Justice in Myanmar' organised by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) brought together over sixty participants. The international conference, held in Bangna, Bangkok, Thailand, from 22–25 November 2024, was attended by representatives from diverse backgrounds, including advocacy groups, faith-based organisations, civil society, educators, journalists, diplomats, and stakeholders from Asia, North America, and Europe.

The gathering aimed to address Myanmar's escalating political, economic, and humanitarian crises. Participants underscored the urgency of collective global action to foster justice, peace, and inclusivity in Myanmar. The Conference provided a platform for in-depth discussions, fostering shared understanding of the current situation on the ground and consensus on advocacy strategies.

Through a series of presentations, dialogues, and collaborative sessions, participants explored actionable solutions to Myanmar's challenges. They shared insights and reaffirmed their commitment to supporting affected communities and raising awareness on international platforms. This report provides a detailed summary of key discussions and contributions made during the event, encapsulating collective efforts to address Myanmar's multifaceted crises effectively.

## **Context of the Crises**

Myanmar's historical and political trajectory is shaped by its identity as a multiethnic and pluralistic society, with its nation-building process heavily influenced by colonial legacies and

deep-seated ethnic divisions. During the precolonial period, governance centred on a Bamar-dominated hegemony, leaving ethnic minorities marginalised. British colonisation exacerbated divisions by favouring ethnic minorities in administrative and military roles, fostering societal fractures. This legacy of division persisted after independence in 1948, with communist rebellions and ethnic insurgencies destabilising the country. The Tatmadaw, trained during World War II, emerged as a dominant force, engaging in counterinsurgency campaigns that perpetuated cycles of mistrust and violence.

Post-independence Myanmar witnessed one of the world's longest-running civil wars, characterised by violence and economic decline. Key historical moments, such as the 8888 Revolution in 1988 and the rise of the National League for Democracy (NLD) under Aung San Suu Kyi, marked the nation's resistance to military rule. However, the fragile progress achieved during the democratic reforms of the 2010s was undone by the Tatmadaw's coup in 2021, which nullified the NLD's electoral victory and plunged the nation into renewed turmoil. The "Spring Revolution" united diverse groups in resistance, leading to the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) and the armed People's Defence Forces (PDFs), intensifying the ongoing civil war.

The 2021 military coup further highlighted Myanmar's challenges with nation-building and governance. The Tatmadaw, unwilling to relinquish power yet unable to suppress resistance, faces a protracted conflict with ethnic armed organisations and grassroots movements. The nation's multiethnic society remains divided, with competing visions of identity and governance. The resulting instability has deepened violence, economic decline, and humanitarian crises, leaving Myanmar's future precarious without inclusive governance and reconciliation.

Recent developments underscore the severity of the crisis. Following the coup, widespread protests erupted, met with lethal force from security forces. The military junta's actions have driven the nation into economic freefall, disproportionately

affecting ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, who face systemic discrimination and limited access to basic necessities. The regime's participation in illicit economic activities has fuelled corruption and further entrenched power. Compounded by challenges such as climate change and the displacement of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons, Myanmar's crisis necessitates urgent attention to women's rights, youth participation, and grassroots-led leadership for lasting peace and security.

## **Displacement and Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar**

The humanitarian situation in Myanmar worsened significantly in the first quarter of 2024, driven by escalating conflict, widespread insecurity, increasing displacement, and disruptions to essential services. Intensified fighting, aerial bombardments in urban areas, and the growing presence of explosive ordnance have had devastating consequences for millions of civilians. Food shortages and restricted access to critical services such as healthcare and WASH have further exacerbated humanitarian needs. The crisis is compounded by the cyclone season, adding urgency to the need for resources to protect vulnerable populations.

The military junta has been accused of obstructing humanitarian aid through bureaucratic, legal, and financial hurdles while intensifying attacks on civilians. Airstrikes, village burnings, and other violent acts have persisted despite a five-point peace plan agreed upon with ASEAN in 2021. Amnesty International reported that since the 2021 coup, Myanmar's military has killed more than 6,000 people, arbitrarily detained more than 20,000, and carried out judicial executions. More than 3.5 million people have been displaced. Human rights organisations have documented widespread torture, indiscriminate attacks, and obstruction of humanitarian aid—actions that may constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes. Additionally, Aung San Suu Kyi has been sentenced to 27 years in prison following a secret trial, underscoring the worsening human rights crisis in the country.

The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) had surged to 2.9 million as per the statistics of 31 March 2024, reflecting a sharp rise from the start of the year. Shifts in territorial control across various regions have complicated humanitarian operations, while rising tensions in Rakhine continue to deepen intercommunal divisions.

Despite immense challenges, humanitarian organisations remain committed to their efforts, reaching nearly 950,000 people in the first quarter. However, the proportion of the targeted population reached has declined from 27% in early 2023 to just 18% in 2024, primarily due to severe underfunding and operational constraints. Alarming, the 2024 Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan (HNRP) remains critically underfunded, with only 5% of the required resources secured as of March 31, according to the Financial Tracking Service (FTS). This shortfall persists despite growing humanitarian needs, rising displacement, and soaring inflation, all of which have further strained already limited resources across aid sectors.

Compounding these difficulties, humanitarian workers have increasingly become targets in the conflict. Between January and March, aid organisations reported 359 access incidents nationwide, significantly hindering the delivery of life-saving assistance to affected communities.

## **Thematic Overview**

Since the Myanmar military's coup on 1 February 2021, the country has experienced escalating violence, a severe humanitarian crisis, and widespread displacement. The military junta has systematically suppressed dissent through torture, forced displacements, and unlawful killings, targeting civilians, villages, and infrastructure. Across Myanmar, millions of people are in need of humanitarian assistance in 2024, struggling to survive amid conflict, insecurity, threats to civilian safety and protection, as well as soaring inflation that is affecting their ability to meet basic needs. Conflict spans various parts of the country, with a deteriorating situation in Rakhine, as well as the Northwest and Southeast, driving new displacement.

The resistance movement, spearheaded by the National Unity Government (NUG) and the People's Defence Forces (PDFs), has made significant strides, notably with Operation 1027 launched by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which has secured key territories. Although Operation 1027 is limited in scope and regional in scale, its broader impact remains uncertain. However, its potential to influence the national landscape is undeniable.

Since the military coup in early 2021, Myanmar has faced ongoing political turmoil, with widespread public demands for transformative change. At present, both the junta and pro-democracy forces remain locked in a prolonged struggle, with neither side achieving a decisive victory. This has led to a state of military and political deadlock—what political theorist Francis Fukuyama refers to as a “dysfunctional equilibrium.”

In this context, Operation 1027 has the potential to disrupt the current impasse, reshaping Myanmar's political and security dynamics. Nevertheless, governance challenges remain, emphasising the urgent need for a comprehensive political strategy to establish an inclusive federal democratic state.

Ethnic diversity remains a critical factor in Myanmar's political struggles. Marginalised ethnic groups continue to fight for autonomy and equality, while the military fuels inter-ethnic conflicts. A reimagined federal democracy could address historical grievances, but this requires dismantling military control and fostering unity among ethnic groups.

The military's conscription policy has exacerbated youth emigration, while drug production and trafficking have surged, further destabilising the region. International intervention is vital to address the worsening crisis. The UN, ASEAN, and key multilateral bodies are expected to prioritise humanitarian aid, mediate conflicts, and support Myanmar's pro-democracy movement. However, ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus has failed to yield tangible results. At the same time, China's economic and strategic interests in the region, especially gaining economic dominance in connivance with the military junta, complicate its role as a mediator.

The need for an effective global advocacy has been echoed from many corners. The global advocacy initiatives must focus on isolating the junta, facilitating humanitarian corridors, and empowering the NUG and ethnic groups to build a peaceful, democratic Myanmar. The international consultation organised by the CCA succeeded in discussing and analysing some of these important issues and emphasised the need for fostering dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders for advancing justice, stability, and democracy for the people of Myanmar.

## **People's Security in Myanmar: Challenges Within and Beyond Borders**

### **Myanmar and the Global Online Scamming Crisis**

The global online scamming crisis has become a serious challenge, fuelled by transnational criminal networks. Myanmar has emerged as a key hub for such activities, worsening issues related to governance, security, and economic development. These powerful criminal networks operate globally and are difficult to disrupt. Human labour trafficking is widespread, with victims from over 12 countries trafficked to Myanmar, and they were exploited through fraudulent recruitment and investment traps. Online scam operations have particularly become a significant issue in Myanmar, with Chinese criminal syndicates exploiting the country's instability and lack of law enforcement. These Chinese syndicates have established large-scale scam centres, often near the Thai-Myanmar border, by trafficking persons and forcing individuals into online fraud operations. Thailand, China, and Myanmar are now collaborating to combat these criminal activities. In September 2023, Chinese officials admitted that Myanmar authorities have handed over 31,000 telecom network fraud suspects, all of whom are Chinese nationals, to China since police agencies of both countries launched a crackdown on online fraud. Most of the suspects were arrested in northern Myanmar regions bordering southwest China. According to Chinese media, more than 100,000 people commit telecom fraud every day in at least 1,000 scam centres in Myanmar. The centres are protected by border guard forces aligned with Myanmar's military junta, according to the U.S. Institute for Peace.

The increasing online scamming in Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia limits opportunities for alternative investments, while porous borders and corruption enable trafficking and scam operations. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn are exploited for recruitment and fraud, further increasing the crisis.

Neighbouring countries, such as Thailand, face significant economic and security risks due to cross-border scamming. Vulnerable populations in Myanmar are coerced into scam operations, perpetuating a nexus of armed conflict and criminal activity. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches that involve adopting “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society” strategies, raising awareness about scams, and enhancing protections for victims and media personnel. Efforts must target entire criminal networks, crack down on enabling technologies such as cryptocurrency and social media platforms, and tackle corruption in immigration and border management systems.

International collaboration is essential, including fostering cooperation among law enforcement agencies, sharing intelligence, enhancing monitoring, and building governance capacity in vulnerable states. Legal actions, such as issuing sanctions and arrest warrants for key actors, are also critical to dismantling these networks. The participants pointed out the urgent need for addressing the online scamming crisis in Myanmar, which requires urgent, coordinated international efforts. By tackling key enablers and fostering collaboration, the global community can mitigate this crisis and promote stability and justice. However, solving this online scam issue is problematic for two reasons. One, both the security forces and some armed ethnic groups are complicit in the illegal operations, as they receive corruption money from the scammers. Two, how can the security forces be tasked to investigate, arrest, and prosecute the scammers if they are complicit?

Addressing the issue of online scams presents significant challenges for two key reasons. First, both security forces and certain armed ethnic groups are implicated in these illegal

activities, benefiting from corruption payments made by the scammers. Second, expecting security forces to investigate, arrest, and prosecute those involved becomes inherently problematic when they themselves are complicit. This entanglement creates a deep-rooted dilemma, making the problem even more difficult to resolve.

## **Ethnic Diversity, Ethnic Strife, and the Future of Democratic and Federal Myanmar**

Myanmar's remarkable ethnic diversity, comprising over 135 recognised groups, has been both a source of cultural richness and persistent conflict. Ethnicity, a socially constructed concept, evolves through inter-group interactions and historical contexts. Perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and political science highlight its complexity, ranging from inherent identity to a tool for political gain.

Ethnic tensions in Myanmar have deep historical roots. During British colonial rule, the “divide-and-rule” strategy exacerbated divisions, favouring groups such as the Karen and Kachin ethnic groups, while marginalising others. Post-independence policies, such as the 1947 Panglong Agreement—promising autonomy for frontier areas—were undermined by constitutional centralisation and Burmanisation, fuelling resentment among minorities. The military rule that began in 1962 escalated repression, fuelling prolonged civil wars, while the reforms of the 2010s sparked hopes that were ultimately shattered by the 2021 coup.

A federal system offers a potential solution to Myanmar's ethnic strife by promoting self-governance, resource sharing, and unity within diversity. Challenges include balancing ethnic and civic identities, ensuring inclusivity, and addressing the role of the Bamar majority. International support must aid without fostering neocolonialism. However, such a federal system cannot be under the current military rule. It must be under civilian supremacy.

The Karenni people exemplify Myanmar's broader ethnic struggles. Marginalised and subjected to violence, their quest for autonomy highlights the need for localised solutions within a

federal framework. Their experiences underscore the importance of inclusive governance and unity.

Myanmar's path to democracy and federalism requires addressing historical injustices, fostering dialogue, and building a shared vision of unity amidst diversity. Continued collaboration among stakeholders is essential to achieve reconciliation and progress.

## **The Role of Civil Society and Faith-Based Organisations in Peacebuilding and Mental Health Initiatives**

Myanmar's rich cultural and religious diversity has been both a strength and a challenge amid decades of political turmoil and conflict. Civil society and faith-based organisations (FBOs) have played a critical role in fostering peacebuilding and addressing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) needs in conflict-affected communities. These organisations draw from traditional social structures and formal civil society frameworks to provide inclusive, community-based support.

Over the years, civil society organisations (CSOs) and FBOs evolved from grassroots efforts into formal entities. However, the 2021 military coup forced many CSOs to adapt by relocating, rebranding, or reviving traditional community-based networks. Interfaith initiatives, led by groups like Religions for Peace, have further promoted dialogue and mutual understanding, bridging divides between religious communities.

Faith-sensitive MHPSS initiatives have empowered religious leaders to integrate spiritual guidance with mental health support. As an example, some efforts include training 159 trainers and reaching over 700 participants across diverse communities, emphasising marginalised groups. These programmes highlight the importance of culturally tailored interventions and the advocacy for mental health resources, particularly for internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Challenges persist, including limited resources, stigma surrounding mental health, and the complexity of addressing diverse cultural contexts. Recommendations include strengthening interfaith dialogue, fostering intergenerational collaboration, enhancing

advocacy for mental health policy integration, and building partnerships between local and international actors to ensure sustainability.

Civil society and FBOs remain vital pillars in Myanmar's peacebuilding and recovery efforts. Through community empowerment, interfaith collaboration, and localised strategies, they contribute significantly to fostering resilience and inclusivity, paving the way for sustainable peace and long-term recovery.

## **Loss of Freedom of Expression in Myanmar**

The loss of freedom of expression, a fundamental civil right, has become a critical issue in Myanmar, where expressing opinions or sharing truths often leads to severe consequences. Independent media is systematically suppressed, forcing reliance on limited information channels, such as the Irawaddy's journal, accessible only in liberated areas. This suppression mirrors a return to the "Dark Age" of information.

The military junta's atrocities, including arbitrary arrests, airstrikes, and landmine usage, have inflicted immense suffering on the civilian population. Over 1,391 days (from February 1, 2024, to November 22, 2024), the junta's actions have deepened the human rights crisis, highlighting the dire need for change.

Journalists face immense challenges, operating covertly to avoid arrests and threats. Despite these risks, they play a critical role in exposing injustices and providing credible information. However, the junta's propaganda machinery manipulates narratives through platforms, such as Telegram and TikTok, while restricting key social media platforms and banning VPNs to further isolate the population.

The junta's "four-cut policy," targeting access to food, funds, information, and recruitment, severely hampers journalists and media outlets, exacerbating the suppression of freedom of expression. These measures contribute to collective trauma, leaving psychological scars on Myanmar's people.

By documenting human rights violations and highlighting the resilience of Myanmar's population, this effort underscores the urgent need for global action to protect human rights, ensure accountability, and support the restoration of democracy.

The fight for freedom of expression in Myanmar reflects a broader struggle for justice and human dignity. The international community has an obligation to support independent media and stand in solidarity with the people of Myanmar in their pursuit of truth and freedom.

### **Towards Policy Solutions for a Peaceful and Democratic Myanmar**

Myanmar is grappling with a complex crisis marked by historical conflicts, political divisions, and the Rohingya genocide, all of which are compounded by misinformation and entrenched divisions. The Tatmadaw (military) has historically held power through centralised propaganda and superior military strength. However, recent shifts in the conflict dynamic show growing resistance from People's Defence Forces (PDFs), Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), and local arms production, all of which are challenging the Tatmadaw's dominance.

The legitimacy of the Tatmadaw as a governing body and the international recognition of regime-led elections are pressing concerns. To address these issues, comprehensive policy solutions are needed, with a focus on promoting peaceful and democratic transitions.

Policymakers should adopt holistic resolutions of the deeply rooted problems that embrace diverse perspectives and avoid oversimplified solutions. Internationally, efforts should be focused on demanding free and fair elections to restore legitimate power, providing humanitarian aid that does not support the regime, and creating safe zones to protect civilians in conflict areas. Advocacy should also centre on ending airstrikes that target civilians.

On the local level, there is a need to support governance in areas free from regime control by building local capacities and providing humanitarian assistance. Promoting bottom-up

governance models that empower communities is essential to fostering long-term stability. Education should be a key focus, with peace-oriented curricula in schools and the use of digital platforms and local media to spread messages of unity. Empowering the younger generation through education will be critical for advancing peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts.

The future of Myanmar depends on a collaborative approach that bridges international and local efforts to overcome divisions and foster sustainable governance. By amplifying the voices of Myanmar's diverse communities and ensuring their rights, stakeholders can help pave the way toward a more peaceful and democratic society.

## **Global Advocacy and Solidarity with Myanmar Human Rights Movements**

The Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) Art-Based Research Project is a collaborative initiative focused on civilian protection amidst Myanmar's ongoing armed conflict. Conducted in Kachin, Central Myanmar, and Chin (Mizoram, India), and supported by Winchester University and the Network Plus initiative, this project explores effective strategies for safeguarding civilians in war-torn areas.

Key findings reveal the significant role of religious leaders and actors in protecting civilians. These individuals serve as first responders during attacks, providing shelter, food, and safe passage, while using the legitimacy of religious institutions to house internally displaced persons (IDPs). Additionally, they negotiate with armed groups to protect civilians and offer emotional support to survivors. Communities have also developed innovative protection strategies, such as using kinship networks for escape routes and establishing early warning systems through local informants. Furthermore, interfaith collaboration has been essential in creating safer spaces for vulnerable populations across religious and ethnic lines.

However, several challenges exist, including significant resource gaps, such as insufficient support for IDPs and refugees, and a lack of funding for community mediation initiatives. Civic space

is shrinking, particularly for minority religious groups, due to new restrictive laws. Technical and strategic challenges include limited conflict analysis capacity, inadequate digital security, and the need for greater inclusion of women, youth, and minority voices in peacebuilding efforts.

Recommendations for global advocacy and support include increased funding and technical assistance to expand Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) programmes, as well as training for civilian groups in trauma healing and psychological resilience. The use of arts and storytelling is encouraged to foster intercommunal harmony and raise awareness of human rights issues. Policymakers are urged to engage with religious leaders in mediation efforts and to promote inclusive dialogues. Strengthening education access and infrastructure in conflict zones is also crucial for supporting long-term peace. Religious leaders, grassroots actors, and interfaith efforts play a pivotal role in protecting civilians and promoting peace. Collaborative, inclusive, and creative approaches are key to advancing justice, peace, and democracy in Myanmar.

## **International Community and Multilateral Organisations in Peacebuilding in Myanmar**

The roles of the international community and multilateral organisations in peacebuilding efforts in Myanmar are complex and multifaceted, addressing aspirations, ongoing efforts, challenges, and potential pathways forward.

People in Myanmar have diverse aspirations for peace, with many calling for either a total military victory or a negotiated transition to a federal democratic union. The Federal Democratic Charter (FDC) remains underdeveloped after three and a half years, with debates over whether federalism should be implemented top-down or through grassroots involvement. Calls for ceasefires and humanitarian pauses reflect urgent needs, while international interventions, such as R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and UN involvement, are being considered.

Efforts by international and regional actors have largely been ineffective, frustrating all stakeholders. Diplomatic initiatives,

such as the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus, have failed to yield results, and China's role has been divisive. Third-party mediators, including Switzerland and Norway, have lacked cohesion, and inadequate support from Western states has undermined pro-democracy efforts.

For progress to be realised, ground-level realities and a bottom-up approach must be emphasised. Amplifying diverse voices, especially those of women, youth, and interfaith and interethnic leaders, and fostering collaboration that reflects the grassroots aspirations of Myanmar's people, is crucial.

Effective advocacy requires innovative, context-specific messages and targeted assistance. Advocacy efforts should avoid oversimplified narratives and focus on practical insights into non-violent resistance. Additionally, there should be efforts to counter the SAC's planned 2025 elections, seen as a strategy for consolidating military power rather than facilitating peace and civilian authority.

Elections in Myanmar pose significant risks, as the SAC intends to hold elections in 2025 to legitimise its rule. Concerns over the election's fairness and the potential for increased violence highlight the need to expose its flaws and manipulative strategies. Independent media plays a crucial role in peacebuilding but faces threats from both the SAC and resistance forces. Reduced funding from Western donors exacerbates the situation, undermining human rights reporting and accountability efforts.

A sustainable solution for Myanmar requires a collective, inclusive vision led by the people. This includes addressing security arrangements, empowering women in peace and security roles, and ensuring the inclusion of minorities. Establishing frameworks for truth-telling, justice, and reconciliation is essential for lasting peace. In conclusion, peacebuilding in Myanmar requires a grassroots-driven approach, realistic international advocacy, and strong support for independent media. Collaboration and commitment from both local and international actors are essential to achieving peace, justice, and democratisation.

## **Recommendations for ASEAN and International Action on Myanmar's Crisis**

At the recent conference, participants expressed deep concerns to ASEAN member states regarding the ineffectiveness of their diplomatic efforts to implement the Five-Point Consensus. This agreement, made in 2021, outlines key actions to address the crisis in Myanmar, including 1) an immediate cessation of violence, 2) constructive dialogue among all stakeholders, 3) the appointment of a special ASEAN envoy, 4) provision of humanitarian assistance, and 5) a visit to Myanmar by the ASEAN envoy. The conference participants emphasised the failure of the Five-Point Consensus and called for ASEAN to reconsider its approach. They urged ASEAN to adopt a new strategy that effectively engages key stakeholders to address the ongoing crisis.

Furthermore, the participants appealed to United Nations agencies and international humanitarian organisations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross, to take more decisive actions. The conference adopted a communiqué on the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis and prospects for peace with justice in Myanmar.

Finally, the conference participants called on the Christian Conference of Asia, the World Council of Churches, and other ecumenical partners to launch a special initiative—the Myanmar Ecumenical Solidarity Accompaniment (MESA). This programme aims to collaborate with the WCC and global ecumenical partners to strengthen international advocacy for Myanmar and foster solidarity efforts through a unified global platform.

In conclusion, the conference calls for a concerted, multi-level approach involving governments, international organisations, faith-based communities, and civil society to address Myanmar's ongoing crisis. Effective advocacy, support for democratic processes, and a coordinated humanitarian response are essential for fostering peace, justice, and stability in the region.

## **Communiqué**

### **Bangna Communiqué on Political, Economic, and Humanitarian Crisis and Prospects for Peace with Justice in Myanmar**

#### **Introduction**

With the aim to discuss 'Towards a Global Advocacy for Democratisation, People's Security, and Peace with Justice in Myanmar,' nearly sixty participants from across Asia, the majority of whom were from Myanmar and its diaspora, as well as North America and Western Europe, convened in Bangna, Bangkok, Thailand. We represented diverse groups, including advocacy and development partners, civil disobedience movement activists, civil society organisations, diplomats, educators, ethnic regional groups, faith-based organisations, human rights organisations, journalists, non-governmental organisations, non-violent civil disobedience activists, researchers, peace activists, pro-democracy movements, professionals, members of various religious faiths, scholars, social activists, and students.

In line with our commitment to peace with justice, human rights, people's security, and sustainable development, this communiqué draws the attention of governments and international organisations to the distressing situation in Myanmar. We affirm that the international community must undertake collective efforts to advance a just, peaceful, and inclusive tomorrow for all Myanmar citizens.

We address this communiqué to national governments, regional organisations, specifically ASEAN, international organisations such as the United Nations and its specialised agencies, and faith-based organisations. Myanmar is in dire straits, and we call for collective actions to achieve peace with justice in Myanmar.

#### **Context**

Since the February 2021 coup d'état, Myanmar has been engulfed in an escalating political, humanitarian, and economic

crisis that demands urgent international action. The military's overthrow of the democratically elected government has led to a cascade of dire consequences. Democratic institutions have been suspended, long-standing ethnic conflicts have been exacerbated, and political opposition faces severe repression. The military regime's actions have resulted in widespread human rights abuses, including unlawful killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, and indiscriminate airstrikes against civilian residences, schools, religious buildings, hospitals, and clinics.

The regime has fostered an illicit economy, including trafficking and scam centres, profiting billions of dollars and further consolidating its power. This has led to severe economic and humanitarian consequences as well as aggravated the armed conflict situation with different ethnic communities. The ongoing challenges of climate change and the urgent need for climate justice also exacerbate the crisis, worsening conditions for the population. Meanwhile, millions of internally displaced persons and refugees continue to flee violence and persecution, adding to the humanitarian crisis. Critical issues, such as women's rights, youth participation, peace, people's security, and bottom-up grassroots-led leadership, are essential for Myanmar's future durable stability.

The situation has further deteriorated with the launch of Operation 1027 by the alliance of three ethnic armed groups in October 2023, intensifying conflicts in north-eastern Myanmar. The military's announcement of conscription in February 2024 has exacerbated the crisis, leading to increased emigration and vulnerability among Myanmar's youth. These developments have intensified the forced displacement of civilians from various ethnic groups, creating a surge in internally displaced persons and refugees, many of whom are not on record.

There is an urgent need for emergency services, including food, shelter, healthcare, mental health support, and effective grassroots-oriented education, peace-oriented education at all levels for peacebuilding and liberation. According to the U.N. Human Rights briefing on Myanmar, September 17, 2024: "Over

18.6 million need humanitarian assistance and over 15 million are food insecure. Over half the population has fallen below the poverty line, with the country's GDP dropping 12 percent on average since the coup." The military regime's obstruction of humanitarian aid delivery, particularly in regions such as northwest Myanmar, has further compounded the crisis, violating international humanitarian law and restricting access to those in dire need.

The planning for the regime's election lacks legitimacy, and any attempt to hold the election will not be legitimate. Therefore, any result will be nothing but a sham election. Our concern is that this election will further fuel intensified armed conflicts.

Despite the military regime's promise to hold these sham elections, its continued human rights violations, the imprisonment of thousands of political prisoners, and widespread atrocities against civilians have undermined any credibility in its governance. The international community's response has been largely ineffective in halting the military's abuses or facilitating a return to democratic rule.

This multifaceted crisis not only threatens the human rights and security of Myanmar's people but also poses significant challenges to regional stability and international peace. The situation demands coordinated and decisive action from the global community to address this emergency and support Myanmar's path towards democracy, justice, and sustainable peace.

## **Key Concerns**

We are deeply concerned about ongoing human rights abuses, as reported by civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, faith-based organisations, international organisations, and independent news media. These flagrant human rights violations have led to a humanitarian crisis, creating an urgent need for support for displaced persons nationwide.

Tens of thousands of families live in precarious conditions in internally displaced persons camps, camp-like sites, and

urban settings, with many more seeking refuge in camps along Myanmar's borders. The unmet basic needs for food, shelter, physical health, mental health, and education are worrying. The closure of border trade, coupled with food and medicine shortages and rising commodity prices, has exacerbated the suffering. Sustained and coordinated international humanitarian assistance is urgently needed to alleviate the suffering of the people.

Myanmar's rich diversity, with over one hundred ethnic groups, has been historically marked by conflict. The failure to recognise the status and rights of these groups has fuelled armed resistance to central authorities. The resolution of these armed conflicts necessitates an inclusive approach that respects specific local contexts.

The revival of democratic institutions is key to ensuring people's security and restoring trust in central authorities. The role of inclusive civil society organisations composed of all ethnic groups, including women, youth, people with disabilities, older people, and other disenfranchised communities, is fundamental in the transitional process for the sustainable rebuilding of democratic institutions in the country.

The critical situation in Myanmar has also intensified illegal trans-border activities, such as human trafficking, drug trafficking, irregular border crossing, and exploitation. Furthermore, the interests of global powers, such as China, India, Russia, and the U.S., complicate the resolution of the domestic conflict in Myanmar. This situation also has significant implications for regional stability, particularly for neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, India, Thailand, and other bordering countries.

## **Holistic Tasks Ahead for Peace with Justice and Global Solidarity**

We express our concerns to ASEAN member states regarding the ineffectiveness of their diplomatic efforts to ensure the realisation of the Five-Point Consensus. The Five-Point Consensus, agreed upon in 2021, calls for 1) the immediate cessation of violence, 2)

constructive dialogue among all stakeholders, 3) appointment of a special ASEAN envoy, 4) humanitarian assistance, and 5) ASEAN envoy's visit to Myanmar.

We appeal to ASEAN member states to reconsider their approach and acknowledge that the current approach has proven ineffective. We urge ASEAN to adopt a new approach in engaging with the relevant key stakeholders.

We appeal to United Nations agencies and international humanitarian organisations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, to:

1. Monitor the implementation of international human rights law and international humanitarian law;
2. Protect civilian lives and property;
3. Provide more resources for unarmed civilian protection activities;
4. Advocate for the cessation of air strikes against civilian communities;
5. Reinforce monitoring mechanisms;
6. Organise a context-specific, ethical, religiously sensitive, flexible, needs-based, and culturally tailored emergency humanitarian response, including the provision of legal documents to displaced persons to protect them and facilitate their freedom of movement;
7. Convene an international summit to raise awareness at the global level about the worsening crisis in Myanmar.

We appeal to foreign governments, international governmental and non-governmental organisations and communities, including media, international advocacy groups, and development partner agencies, to:

1. Engage in inclusive partnerships with community-based organisations, independent news media, non-governmental organisations, and people's governance structures at all levels;
2. Work with both state and non-state actors to ensure their responsibilities under international law to protect civilians are met;

3. Provide safehouses for human rights defenders;
4. Call for the release of political prisoners;
5. Foster genuine, open, and inclusive dialogue among all parties to the armed conflict, ensuring the inclusion of all ethnic groups;
6. Encourage the participation of local and international actors, especially women and youth, in peace processes to ensure the attainment of a just and durable peace;
7. Support on-the-ground efforts to restore democratic institutions;
8. Provide the necessary resources to meet the needs of affected populations;
9. Provide psycho-social support to civilian groups, including safe-space methodology and initiatives such as arts and storytelling;
10. Organise inter-ethnic dialogues and educational programmes to promote inter-ethnic understanding and cooperation;
11. Call for the return of legitimate power to civilians;
12. Support bottom-up state-building efforts for self-governance;
13. Provide international support for accessible education of children, including spaces for school building in refugee settings both within the country and abroad, and advocate for inclusive mediation, justice, and lasting peace for the people of Myanmar.

We appeal to faith-based organisations to:

1. Work together to promote the noble values of religion in relation to peace and justice;
2. Bring together religious and ethnic communities to work in unison to instil intercommunal harmony;
3. Act as vehicles for interreligious dialogue and inter-ethnic understanding;
4. Serve as key actors in early warning, peacekeeping, negotiation, and mediation with armed groups;
5. Proactively engage in protecting civilians from harm;
6. Support the development of communities' physical and mental resilience;

7. Furnish pastoral care and healing while working towards peace with justice;
8. Support local faith-based organisations to act as first responders to provide humanitarian relief;
9. Contribute to expanding international solidarity by offering recommendations for solutions that promote peace with justice, advance human dignity, and support the hopes of the Myanmar people through their influence and network;
10. Resist the unethical practice of proselytising in conflict-ridden areas.

We appeal to the member churches, national ecumenical councils of the Christian Conference of Asia, the World Council of Churches, and international ecumenical partners and communities to initiate a special programme of Ecumenical Accompaniment and Solidarity for Myanmar. We urge the use of this common ecumenical platform for coordinating and facilitating Myanmar advocacy and solidarity engagements by the international ecumenical family.

## **Conclusion**

The crisis in Myanmar poses significant challenges to democratisation, people's security, and peace with justice, threatening all forms of life, including biocentric or eco-centric systems in the region and in the world. Joint efforts are essential to prevent further deterioration of the crisis, uphold human dignity, and achieve sustainable peace. We reaffirm our commitment to cooperating and collaborating with all stakeholders to secure a just and inclusive resolution. The international community can make a difference by contributing in different ways to the development of an inclusive, peaceful, and just Myanmar.

25 November 2024  
Bangna, Thailand

## Thematic Address

### **Towards Democratisation, People's Security, and Peace with Justice in Myanmar**

*Dr Mathews George Chunakara*  
*General Secretary, CCA*

More than three years have passed since the Myanmar military overturned the democratically elected government and detained its leaders. Since the Army ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on 1 February 2021, militarisation in the country has intensified, suppressing widespread nonviolent protests that sought a return to democratic rule, leading to increasing violence and a humanitarian crisis. The expansion of armed conflict throughout the country has deprived communities of their basic needs and access to essential services. The worsening situation has increased the number of refugees and displaced people spilling over into mainland Southeast Asia.

#### **Myanmar's unending conflicts**

Myanmar's history has been marked by the notorious and brutal military rule and the longest-running civil war in the world. The military junta, which seized power in 1962, isolated and ruled the country until 2010. Although the Army generals handed over power to a quasi-civilian government, led by the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), in the 2015 elections, the USDP was ultimately defeated by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). Despite the civilian-led, democratically elected government, the 2008 military-drafted Constitution enabled the military to maintain significant control over every wing of the government and its administration. Moreover, the key ministries of Defence, Border Affairs, and Home Affairs were kept out of the civilian government's purview, and they reported to and were overseen by the military Commander-in-Chief. The military junta institutionalised Bamar hegemony in all facets of civil, political, and cultural life. Militarisation of

society and politics systematically wiped out the rights of ethnic minorities.

During the five decades of military rule, Myanmar's government and economic institutions were kept under the tight grip of the armed forces. Since 2010, moderate steps were taken towards a certain level of democratic reforms and a reduced level of control in the security and justice sectors in Myanmar. Yet all these areas remained mostly under the control of the military and continued to cater to its interests. During this reform period, the number of ministers in the cabinet included more civilians than any government in Myanmar since the self-imposed isolation introduced half a century earlier. There were also certain hopeful signs, for a while, in terms of lifting restrictions placed on civil society, media and universities, which had prevented them from criticising security and justice institutions. However, several factors such as the military's resistance, constraints in available capacity and resources, a lack of political will for reforms in state and society, and distrust among the leadership of the military and government, substantially hindered prospective improvements in civilian-military relations.

As the military has remained adamant under the pretext that giving up power would lead to chaos and instability, the army generals initiated their own roadmap towards 'disciplined democracy.' With this argument, in 2008, they established a constitution that, despite creating a 'multi-party democratic system', included provisions for the Defence Services to be able to play a part in the national political leadership of the state. It was in this context that provisions were made constitutionally to appoint 25 percent of the members of parliament (MPs) across all houses and vest effective powers in the armed forces to select and dismiss the ministers of defence, home affairs, and border affairs and their deputies, who must all be serving military personnel. Military MPs also elect one of two vice presidents, who can be either civilian or military personnel. Provisions were also made for constitutional amendments to require the approval of more than 75 percent of the legislatures, giving the military an effective veto. These provisions have allowed the military to maintain its position as 'guardian' over a steady process of democratisation, and to protect its core ideological and private interests.

Following the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Suu Kyi in February 2021, the Myanmar military has once again started tightening its grip. The military continues its policy of committing human rights violations, suppressing all opposition, abusing civilians, and engaging in gross and systematic human rights violations, including unlawful killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, and forced displacement of civilians. Attacks against villages with shelling and air strikes, killing and injuring civilians, and damaging homes, schools, hospitals, and religious buildings, as well as unlawfully detaining, torturing, and murdering people, burning villages, and looting the belongings of displaced families, have been systematically carried out in several parts of the country since the elected government was overthrown in 2021. At the same time, the military continues to obstruct the delivery of urgently needed humanitarian assistance. There is no indication that the country is moving towards any election process, despite the State Administration Council's promise to conduct multi-party elections in 2023. The military extended the state of emergency six times, each time by six months, further delaying the long-promised elections. It is widely perceived that this is a military strategy to buy time as they push back against a growing rebellion, which has led to the junta losing control of townships across many parts of the country. This has raised questions over how long the junta can retain power, especially as ethnic armed groups make gains in the north and the economy remains in turmoil. At the same time, the National Unity Government (NUG), established in 2021 by ousted representatives of the deposed National League for Democracy-led government, along with armed groups collectively known as the People's Defence Forces, continues their resistance against military rule.

In the past year, three powerful ethnic armed militias have gained territory, putting the government's ruling military increasingly on the back foot in fighting, which has forced hundreds of thousands of civilians to flee their homes. In the final quarter of 2023, Myanmar experienced a dramatic escalation in armed conflicts, notably with the Three Brotherhood Alliance (TBA) and allied People's Defence Forces (PDFs) capturing over 21 townships and

400 military bases in Shan State under ‘Operation 1027’. This operation expanded into northern Rakhine State and southern Chin State, overwhelming junta forces, who faced high desertion rates, mass surrenders, and recruitment crises, and resorted to releasing prisoners for frontline duty.

The Three Brotherhood Alliance—comprising the Arakan Army (AA), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)—launched Operation 1027 in 2023. This offensive targeted military bases, checkpoints, and border crossings in north-eastern Myanmar, including areas involved in cyber scams. The Three Brotherhood Alliance currently holds numerous locations and is aiming to capture Lashio, a strategic town in northern Myanmar. Throughout 2023, ethnic armed groups have achieved significant victories against the military across various regions. According to various sources, including the U.N., three million people are displaced across Myanmar, and some 18.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. The military junta’s weakened state, compounded by economic struggles and loss of public support, has rendered its continued combat efforts increasingly unviable. Consequently, it was reported that the junta has lost control over 43% of the country, marking a significant turning point in the Spring Revolution.

## **People’s security and peace with justice in Myanmar**

The U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Julie Bishop, told the U.N. General Assembly’s human rights committee on 30 October 2024, in her first report since being appointed, that Myanmar is in crisis, with conflict escalating, criminal networks “out of control”, and human suffering at unprecedented levels. The UN envoy pointed to rising civilian casualties and how the rule of law has been “so severely undermined that transnational crime emanating from Myanmar is proliferating. The sheer scale of arms production and trade, human trafficking, drug manufacture and trafficking, and scam centres means Myanmar now ranks highest among all member states for organised crime. The criminal networks are out of control.” Ms Bishop warned that “the Myanmar conflict

risks becoming a forgotten crisis. The regional implications of this crisis are evident, but the global impact can no longer be ignored.”

A policy brief shared by the School of Public Policy of Chiang Mai University on 11 July 2024, reported how “the international community neglected to act against the Myanmar military, which used an internet access blackout as a military tool”, highlighting historical patterns of neglect and repression.

Following the coup, the Spring Revolution became a watershed in Myanmar’s modern history. Unlike other Myanmar revolutions such as the 1988 Uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, this revolution has a concrete advantage—in the form of migration. When those past protests of military rule occurred, decades before the present, there were comparatively fewer migrants from Myanmar living overseas. The country had isolated itself. The country’s isolation itself was a political tool, ensuring that very few people had the chance to witness the progress and prosperity of other countries. Seeing those countries might be a wake-up call to political mobilisation inside Myanmar. There are, for example, an estimated 3 million Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, which hosts the greatest percentage of Myanmar migrants in any single country. *Myanmar Emergency Update* (Oct 2nd, 2023) states that since the coup, there have been 95,600 refugee outflows; at its peak, there were over 1 million refugees in June 2023, and over 1.6 million people have been internally displaced (IDPs).

This military council is considered the most brutal of any military dictator in Myanmar and the world by many scholars and political experts. A member of the media during the saffron revolution said, “Let us face it, they want to arrest me because I was involved in the saffron revolution. When they do not catch me, they do not do anything to my family. Today, that is not the case anymore, and if they do not catch me, they will take one of my family members or my family as hostages. The brutality of the terrorist military group led by Min Aung Hlaing is the kind of brutality that this group has never seen before, not only in Myanmar but in the

whole world.” They attack everything that comes their way, not just humans but also a lot of public buildings, including schools, churches, clinics, and hospitals; they do not even let go of cattle or show any humane feelings. To sustain their power, they simply do not care about cutting off internet access and oppressing or violating any kind of human rights. Since history cannot be altered, the international community must take more action against Myanmar’s military to protect its citizens (Myanmar people) from atrocities (Myanmar military) and to write a new history for them by permanently freeing them from dictatorship.

The reactivated People’s Military Service Law (2010) mandates conscription for males aged 18-35 and females aged 18-27. The military junta’s move to introduce compulsory military service has already sparked panic among hundreds of thousands of young people. Under the conscription law, young people must serve up to two years in the military, with the length of service extendable to five years during a state of emergency—a situation Myanmar has been in since the coup. The junta expects that at least 13 million people will be eligible for compulsory military service, aiming to recruit 60,000 soldiers annually for a military whose current total strength is estimated at between 200,000 and 300,000.

The crisis has further deteriorated as the junta enforces conscription to replenish its struggling army, causing many to flee. The conscription law is viewed as a strategy to address the military’s waning influence, fabricate external threats, reinforce authority, exploit the youth for self-protection, and aggravate ethnic tensions. It disproportionately affects the economically disadvantaged while allowing exemptions for the wealthy, increasing the risk of forced and illegal service. This move also suppresses support for the democratic revolution that seeks to advance the interests of all ethnic groups. The conscription plan has led to increased legal and illegal emigration among Myanmar’s youth, who face challenges such as passport and visa renewal issues, vulnerability to exploitation, and fear of military seizure. The youth are also caught in conflicts between the military and ethnic armed groups, leading to reduced opportunities since the 2021 coup.

Another major concern related to peace and security in Myanmar is drug addiction among young people. Following the military coup in February 2021, the conflict situation has triggered a boom in drug production. Reports indicate that young refugees from Myanmar, who end up in camps in remote forest locations in Thailand's western province of Tak, are among the thousands who have become addicted to methamphetamine and other synthetic drugs that have flooded camps housing those forced to flee their homes due to Myanmar's civil war.

Thailand has seen a surge in illegal drugs trafficked from neighbouring Myanmar and a sharp increase in methamphetamines and heroin seizures as the civil war fuels the regional drug trade. A senior official of the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB) in Thailand recently reported that the northern region remains the main trafficking route into Thailand, with dealers using the mountains or the Mekong River to transport methamphetamine tablets and crystal meth, also known as ice. Thai authorities say that organised crime networks have allied with militias and rebel groups to set up "super labs" in Myanmar's Shan and Kachin States. It was also reported that "because of the armed conflict, the drug trade is one of the factors used to fund weapon purchases or drive the fighting forces." The seizure of meth tablets in the first eight and a half months of this year in Thailand's northern provinces of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and Mae Hong Son increased by 172 per cent from the amount seized in all of 2023, rising to 346 million pills, ONCB data showed. The political unrest in Myanmar has led to a surge in synthetic drug production and trafficking as well as a resurgence in opium cultivation, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

The combined impact of the military coup, COVID-19, and climate change has hindered Myanmar's recovery, particularly affecting financial and health conditions. More than three million people in Myanmar are internally displaced due to the conflict and instability. From October 2023, Thailand's government began forcing thousands of Myanmar refugees back across the border into Karenni State, despite the ongoing conflict and danger. Since

the mid-1980s, Thailand has hosted nearly one million Myanmar refugees in nine camps on the Thai-Myanmar border. According to the Royal Thai Government (RTG), 48,408 refugees have crossed into Thailand to flee fighting and seek protection since February 2021, including two major waves of arrivals in 2023. Thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) near the Thai-Myanmar border remain at high risk of harm and, along with others newly displaced, may seek to cross into Thailand to escape persecution and generalised violence.

### **Political future and struggle for democratisation**

As the struggle for democratisation continues, the question arises: Can democracy prevail or will militarisation continue to be a pervasive phenomenon in Myanmar? The year 2023 marked a shift in the ongoing civil war, with the unexpected unity of armed resistance groups leading to significant defeats for the State Administration Council's forces, drawing greater global attention to what comes next. The National Unity Government and its allies are pushing for a democratic federal state without military involvement, though questions remain about how power and resources will be equitably shared if the conflict ends.

The various rebel forces fighting against the military junta are made up of ethnic groups that were essentially forced into a shared state under Myanmar's current borders. Myanmar, one of the world's most ethnically diverse countries, has ethnic minority groups making up 40% of the population. These groups face ongoing marginalisation, denial of basic human rights, and are forced to live in inhuman conditions where peace and security are constantly under threat. Historically, the Myanmar military has fuelled turmoil by instigating inter-ethnic conflicts and continues to provoke tensions among ethnic armed groups. However, these ethnic groups have a long history of being individual political entities, and they have fought for independence or, in some cases, greater legal rights. Others have sought complete separation from Myanmar. Since the coup in February 2021, additional groups—largely composed of farmers, students, and young people from various ethnic majority groups—have

emerged, striving to steer the country back towards democracy. The development of federalism and democracy in Myanmar will undoubtedly require the participation of the National Unity Government and the National Unity Consultative Council. However, without the participation of other stakeholders, a democratic, federal Myanmar cannot be sustainable.

### **Towards political consensus beyond military might**

Victory on the battlefield against the junta is significant, but partial victories at certain stages of the fight cannot sustain the confidence and morale of Myanmar's pro-democratic revolution. The actors involved in the leadership and the broader pro-democracy movement need a comprehensive political strategy that goes beyond armed resistance to create a platform where diverse groups can engage in open, constructive political dialogue. Although revolutionary forces have gained control over certain areas, they face governance challenges, including a lack of political consensus among pro-democracy resistance groups, which has led to conflicts over power, resources, and territory. This raises questions about how to establish a politically accountable system capable of managing disputes.

The rise of local administrative bodies in areas such as Sagaing, Chin, Shan, and Karenni following the collapse of previous administrations has presented complex challenges. These administrative bodies, each grappling with complex local problems, often lack the capability and experience needed for governance and administration. Strengthening various components essential for establishing credible and effective service mechanisms at the local level is essential for overcoming these challenges.

### **Ethno-nationalism in Myanmar politics**

Ethno-nationalism has always been a central issue in Myanmar in terms of citizenship, basic rights, politics, and ongoing armed conflicts in many parts of the country. Myanmar's highly diverse and complex ethnic fabric is often cited as complicating the political situation. There are 135 recognised ethnicities within

its borders. However, some groups like the Rohingya are not recognised. Efforts to classify and enumerate the ethnic identities of people with diverse ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds have been undertaken since the first modern census in 1891 during the British colonial period, with the last attempt being the 2014 census. The central question of why ethnicity matters in Myanmar leads to findings that placing ethnicity at the centre of public discourse has harmful consequences. Inter-ethnic relations have become dominated by concerns over ethnic divides, often leading to the proliferation of ethnically labelled armed groups and insurgencies.

Ethnicity and conflict are inextricably linked in Myanmar, creating a vicious cycle of violence that continues to escalate. The state's inability to address ethnic minority grievances or provide adequate security to communities has created an arms race among minority groups. As a result, the country now has scores of powerful non-state armed groups around its periphery. Since gaining independence in 1948, Myanmar has struggled to forge a national identity that reflects its ethnic diversity and to fulfil the aspirations of the many peoples within its borders. The political system introduced through the 2008 constitution, which came into force in 2011, includes features that acknowledge Myanmar's ethnic diversity, such as ethnic affairs ministers and self-administered areas. However, these measures are set against a backdrop of longstanding essentialist ideas about ethnic identity, with larger minorities being accorded greater rights than smaller ones. Ethno-nationalism remains central to all ethnic groups, often placing them at odds with their neighbours. Although challenging, Myanmar's leaders have the opportunity to reframe how ethnicity is understood. The aim should not be to suppress social and cultural expressions of identity, but rather to remove ethnicity as a central determinant of citizenship, rights, and legal protections.

## **New political future?**

The 2021 overthrow of Myanmar's democratically elected government and the ensuing civil conflict have unlocked new ways of imagining its political future. While Myanmar is currently

embroiled in a bloody civil war, the country potentially stands at the threshold of a new democratic awakening. Despite the immense suffering experienced by its population in recent years, the recent successes of revolutionary forces, combined with the military's control, present a generational opportunity to envision an inclusive democratic state free from previous power-sharing agreements between military and civilian leaders. For years, Aung San Suu Kyi was considered a beacon of hope for democracy in Myanmar. However, as Myanmar author Ma Thida notes, many Myanmar people did not view the pre-2021 period under Aung San Suu Kyi's government as truly democratic, nor did they see a clear road toward democracy. Instead, the country remained confined within a "maze" created by the military, which retained control over critical aspects of military, economic, and political power. Indeed, liberal democracy has long held a talismanic quality in Myanmar's political transition, often interpreted narrowly through the lens of democratisation, rather than broader frameworks like nationalism, self-determination, or resource control. Consequently, contemporary Myanmar is often portrayed as a battleground between liberal democratic revolutionary forces and an authoritarian military regime. However, the reality is more complex. The forces opposing the military are diverse. Some, including human rights groups and political parties, advocate for democratic ideals. Others are driven primarily by ethnic nationalism or are striving for their own authoritarian control.

The attempted coup and subsequent intensification of conflict have, in some ways, unlocked new ideas about Myanmar's democratic future. The restrictive 2008 constitution, introduced by the military as part of its strategy to partially transfer power to civilian leadership, has been a major obstacle to meaningful reform. With provisions such as military quotas in parliament, centralised decision-making systems, and immense powers granted to the military's commander-in-chief, the 2008 constitution has cast a shadow over any discussion of democratisation. While the current cabinet has more civilians than any government in over 50 years, the military remains deeply entrenched and resistant to reforms that could threaten its ideological or economic interests. At the

same time, the broader governance apparatus is dominated by former military officers whose institutional conditioning fosters distrust of civilian leaders and society, coupled with a fixation on hierarchical order.

## **Role of the international community**

In April 2024, two senior UN officials reported to the UN Security Council that the escalation of fighting across Myanmar has deprived communities of basic needs and essential services, severely impacting human rights. This issue was highlighted during the first Council briefing on Myanmar since the military coup on 1 February 2021, despite a resolution on the crisis being adopted in December 2022. The UN Secretary-General has consistently called for the release of President Win Myint, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, and other detainees. The Secretary-General continues to advocate for a unified international response, urging Member States, especially neighbouring countries, to use their influence to open humanitarian channels, end violence, and work towards a comprehensive political solution for a peaceful future in Myanmar.

There is a growing sense among the international community that, as the situation in Myanmar worsens in 2024, ASEAN must assume greater responsibility for regional security. ASEAN, the regional bloc, has struggled to mediate effectively since the conflict began over three years ago, following Myanmar's military coup. ASEAN's success depends heavily on Myanmar's adherence to the Five-Point Consensus, a peace plan agreed upon by all leaders of the bloc. This consensus includes commitments to an immediate cessation of violence, constructive dialogue, and the provision of humanitarian aid. However, the consensus has so far failed, with the junta refusing to fulfil its obligations.

ASEAN should have leveraged platforms like ASEAN Plus Three, the ASEAN Regional Forum, and the East Asia Summit to conduct high-level diplomacy and coordinate efforts with key regional and global stakeholders, including China, India, the EU, Japan, and the US. These parties could contribute economic, political, and humanitarian aid to help ease the conflict and encourage

a cessation of hostilities. With Thailand aligning more closely with ASEAN's position, the bloc's original five members are now finding common ground on Myanmar policies. Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra underscored ASEAN's role in resolving the crisis, stating at a Bangkok event that "ASEAN must play an important role in bringing peace back to Myanmar as soon as possible." She assured that Thailand would collaborate with Malaysia, the next ASEAN chair, to pursue diplomatic means for conflict resolution. Furthermore, her country's offer to mediate talks serves as a morale boost for other ASEAN members seeking to restore stability in Myanmar.

Being the strongest ally of Myanmar, China could play a crucial role in mediating the ongoing conflicts. Beijing has strong relations and influences with the junta, different ethnic armies, the civilian National Unity Government, and Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party. China's leaders also maintain strong relations with the Lao PDR and its Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, who was chair of ASEAN until mid-October 2024. All these connections and influences could put China in an advantageous position to mediate peace in Myanmar. For China, a stable Laos is an essential ally to protect its economic interests in the country. China shares a vast border with Myanmar, and its neighbouring provinces are almost de facto Chinese provinces. Economic interests are not the only factor for China's involvement in the peace negotiations; its broader strategic interests are also a key consideration.

Myanmar's military leadership, especially the junta-appointed ministers, has regularly visited China on official trips. It is well known that China seems to favour Myanmar's military leaders. Since the military coup that ousted Aung San Suu Kyi and her democratically elected government, Beijing has adopted a calculated policy of inviting junta-appointed ministers to attend multilateral forums, rather than engaging in purely bilateral meetings. This would explain why junta-appointed ministers have visited China mainly for forums, conferences, and events involving other countries' participation. It was reported that in late 2023, especially two months after the Three Brotherhood

Alliance's Operation 1027 military offensive, which led to the seizure of territories from the junta, Beijing began intensifying its engagements with Myanmar.

Any acceptable end to the crisis in Myanmar will require isolating the military diplomatically and politically to force it to the negotiating table. However, in doing so, the international community will need to find ways to set up humanitarian corridors and safe zones. It must also signal to the National Unity Government—the shadow government that includes some lawmakers elected in 2020—and to Myanmar's ethnic groups that national reconciliation is critical for their struggle for democracy to succeed.

### **Need for international mediation and global advocacy**

Myanmar is currently divided into two main areas: those under military control and those controlled by ethnic armed groups. It remains to be seen if these ethnic armed groups can successfully oust the military. The international community must explore ways to assist in this situation. The National Unity Government (NUG) plays a crucial role in uniting these ethnic armed groups against the military. Meanwhile, the ongoing civil war highlights the need to ensure the safety of civilians and provide essential humanitarian aid, particularly for those displaced from their homes. International humanitarian assistance is necessary to mitigate the suffering of displaced communities.

Myanmar will require strengthened global support to achieve a stable and sustainable democracy where peace and justice prevail. It is essential to communicate globally that Myanmar is in the midst of a democratic revolution with widespread support from its people. The situation in Myanmar mirrors the divisions seen in other countries facing severe conflicts. The revolution shows no signs of stopping and is evolving in various forms. As the people endure immense hardships, including daily survival challenges, the international community is urged to provide assistance and support for a swift resolution to the conflict. Any solution to the current crisis requires conditions that permit the people of Myanmar to exercise their human rights freely

and peacefully, including an end to the military's campaign of violence and political repression. A reimagining of a federal democracy in Myanmar has clearly been catalysed by the coup and the intensification of conflict. In practical terms, the loss of territory controlled by the military government and the collapse of effective government services in areas they do control have also left spaces for a plurality of new arrangements of local governance.

### **Objectives of CCA's international conference on Myanmar**

This international conference aims to address Myanmar's urgent issues of human rights, democratisation, and people's security. It is expected that this conference will be able to analyse the emerging trend in the geopolitical and geo-strategic arena in Myanmar as well as in the region. Concerns related to peace with justice in Myanmar will be examined, along with ways to support initiatives promoting dialogue, understanding, and collaboration among various stakeholders at the international level. It is expected that the international ecumenical community will initiate a process of accompaniment with the people and communities to achieve the goal of sustainable peace and stability in Myanmar. It is also envisaged that the analyses and experiences shared here will help participants and their respective ecumenical organisations consider their roles in joining the international community in an appropriate advocacy initiative before waiting too long.

# Myanmar's Conundrum: Failed Nation-Building, Civil War, and Other Political Consequences

*Dr Michal Lubina*

Few countries in the world are as complex as Myanmar (Burma). This fascinating yet deeply troubling multiethnic nation has long posed challenges for foreign experts and analysts attempting to understand it. Its wide array of complexities often makes researching Myanmar either a lifelong commitment or a source of considerable frustration. This article aims to explore key aspects of Myanmar's intricacies, focusing on three interrelated themes: its plural society, the failure of nation-building, and the ongoing civil war.

## The Background

Myanmar represents a quintessential plural society and is also the birthplace of this term. It was in relation to colonial Burma that the term was coined by one of the founders of Burma studies, John S. Furnivall (Furnivall, 1954: 303–312). Since then, the complexity of Burma/Myanmar has not changed, if not increased.

The country is officially inhabited by 135 ethnic groups divided into eight major ethnic groups (The Nationalities of Myanmar, 2013), but this number is clearly artificial. It is “an odd mixture” of ethnic groups, languages, clans, village and town names, factual errors, and deliberate exclusion (ICG, 2020; Gamanii, 2012; Ferguson, 2015; Cheesman, 2017). Academically, the list is rejected, though there is no agreement about the real number of ethnic groups in the country, with estimations ranging from around 30 to 40, 60 to around 100 (Gamanii, 2012; Cheesman, 2017; IWGIA, 2021). Officially, in 2014, Myanmar's population was 51 million (Myanmar Census, 2014); before the coup, it was estimated to be more than 55 million (Worldometer, 2022). Now it is probably lower, over 50 million. The size of the country is significant: 676 km<sup>2</sup>.

The Bamar (Burmans) is the dominant ethnic group, consisting of 65–68% of Myanmar’s population, followed by Karen (Kayin), 9–14%; Shan, 8–10%; Rakhine (Arakanese), 3–5%; Mon, 2–8%; Chin, 2–6%; Kachin, 1.5–3%; Kayah (Karenni), 1%; and approximately 3% of Indians, 2% of Chinese, and 2% of the Rohingya, the latter officially unrecognised (Minority Rights Group International, 2020; Selway, 2015: 236–237; Smith, 1999: 29–30).

Myanmar experienced four major waves of immigration: Australoasiatic (e.g., Mon, Wa), Tibeto-Burman (e.g., Burman, Kachin, Karen), Kra-Dai (e.g., Shan), and Indo-European people. They merged, intermarried, and fought with one another; this, coupled with internal migration, trade, proselytisation and waves of conquests, produced an unprecedented ethnic/religious/cultural complexity (ICG, 2020). Geography also played a role, as it connected or separated some of these peoples: the Bamar have historically dominated the central, fertile, nucleus “dry zone” (Burmese: A Nyar), as well as the lowlands along the Irrawaddy River and the Tanintharyi peninsula. Other ethnic people inhabited the territories surrounding the central part of the country, making the traditional informal division of Myanmar between the Burmese lowland centre and ethnic peripheries. Despite domestic migration that complicated this simplistic division, the Bamar centre versus ethnic peripheries remains analytically helpful in this super-complex country.

## The Precolonial Beginnings

In the precolonial times, Bamar kingdoms consisted of various entities based on complex, hierarchical, and personalised patron-client relations (Thant Myint-U, 2001: 24–85). Its power emanated in concentric circles radiating from the capital (Steinberg, 2000: 37) and it weakened as the distance from the centre grew; on the margins it met and overlapped with other waves of concentric power emanating from similar centres of power, “creating a patchwork of often overlapping mandalas (circles)” (Walters, 1982: 27). Theoretically, the power of the Bamar king was absolute (Lieberman, 1984: 67–68; Aung-Thwin, 1983: 54–55), in practice

it was limited by objective factors, the main one being geography (Thant Myint-U, 2001: 24). Consequently, the everyday power was in the hands of local rulers: tributary chiefs, princesses, and other lesser players (Thant Myint-U, 2001: 34–36; Taylor, 2009: 23; Maung Maung Gyi, 1983: 18–19). This concerns both Bamar and non-Bamar places. In the case of the latter, most of the non-Bamar lands were conquered by the Konbaung dynasty (18th–19th centuries). The fact of the conquest, coupled with the Bamar patronising and condescending attitude towards non-Bamar, particularly towards the (semi)nomadic ones (like Karens or Chins, often treated simply as slaves, San Po, 1928), led to the perception of Bamar among non-Bamar as hostile invaders.

## **Two Burmas: The Colonial Divide and Rule**

The British conquered Burma in three Anglo-Burmese wars in the 19th century. Then they remodelled the country completely, abolishing Bamar political institutions at the central (monarchy, court, and army) and at the local levels (village chiefs), replacing them with modern bureaucracy, copied from India; they also introduced the European legal system, changed the capital from Mandalay to Rangoon, and annexed Burma to British India (Ni Ni Myint, 1983: 42–57; Crosthwaite, 1968: 15–29; Furnivall, 1956: 132–136; Thant Myint-U, 2001: 207–244; Maung Htin Aung, 1968: 266–278). The British constructed modern Burma: they built roads, railways, steamships, telegraph lines, modern administration, banks, and secular schools; by doing so, they made impressive economic development possible (Furnivall, 1939; Furnivall, 1956: 62–114; Adas, 2011: 41–154; Cheng Siok Hwa, 1965: 67–80). However, this first modern state was alien to the Bamar (Furnivall, 1939; Furnivall, 1956: 129–180; Thant Myint-U, 2007: 182–194; Aung-Thwin and Aung-Thwin, 2012: 199–208), it was an “order without meaning” (Aung-Thwin, 1985: 245). The British, too, fixed Burma’s international borders while domestically, they divided Burma administratively into two parts: 1) “Burma proper” (the Dry Zone; the Irrawaddy delta; Arakan; Tenasserim), controlled directly by colonial bureaucracy; and 2) “frontier areas” (or excluded areas), mountainous lands populated mostly by ethnic minorities, comprising around 40%

of the territory and 15% of the population of Burma (Silverstein, 1980: 30–32), governed indirectly at “the lowest possible cost” (Smith, 1999: 42–43). By doing so, the British gave birth to “two Burmas”.

For the population of the “frontier areas”, mostly ethnic minorities, the “light” colonial rule was acceptable, or tolerable; certainly much better than precolonial Bamar rule (Yawnghwe, 1989: 86–87). Elites of some ethnic minorities, such as Karen, Kachin, or Chin, Christianised, which helped to form their people’s modern national/ethnic self-awareness and distanced them further from Bamar. The British, in their divide-and-rule policy, favoured the ethnic minorities, especially in the colonial army, but also in the state administration (Callahan, 2003: 35–36; Silverstein, 1980: 30–40; Smith, 1999: 44; ICG, 2020). This is how the seeds of ethnic distrust were planted (Thant Myint-U, 2007: 221). Given the fact that the British established colonial Burma with the help of Indians (Indian immigration was one of the most important social consequences of the colonial period) and ethnic minorities, in the newly established colonial “plural society”, the Bamar found themselves at the very bottom of the “racial pyramid” in their own (nominally) country (Furnivall, 1956: 118–122, 303–312). This led to the birth of Bamar anticolonial nationalism.

## **We and Them**

Since the 1930s, the Bamar anticolonial movement took a clearly nationalist character, best illustrated by the Dobama (We Bamar) Association; it had called for Burma for Bamar, and crossed out the ethnic minorities as “thudo Bama” or “them/their Burmese” (Kei Nemoto, 2008: 2–16; Khin Yi, 1988: 17–43; Kyaw Hoe, 2008: 54). From the ranks of Dobama, the nationalist thakin movement emerged which later secured Burma’s independence in 1948. Before that happened, WWII complicated ethnic relations further. The thakins initially sided with Japan while the ethnic minorities either remained neutral or supported the alliance with guerrilla warfare (Sai Aung Tun, 2009: 191–207; Smith, 1999: 63; Lintner, 1999: 71; Selth, 1986: 489–492; Cruickshank, 1983: 3). Sometimes

they faced one another in battle, or worse, in retaliatory actions, as in the case of Bamar and Karen 1942 clashes (Lintner, 1999: 71). During the Japanese occupation, the thakins managed to establish Japan-trained and Japanese militarism-inspired Tatmadaw (The National Army), funded on the do-Bama concept; Tatmadaw became the most important consequence of nation-building based on ethnic Bamar nationalism (Callahan, 2003: 46–67). In 1945, Tatmadaw switched sides, joining the returning British, while the thakin leader, Aung San, managed to manoeuvre both his leadership in postwar Burma and Britain's promise to grant Burma independence. Aung San achieved a partial and short-lived but nevertheless impressive Panglong agreement with the ethnic minorities in February 1947, but unfortunately, he was killed in July 1947, just months before Burma's independence on January 4th, 1948. From the very beginning, the country was seriously weakened by two centrifugal tendencies: communist rebellion and ethnic minorities' insurgencies.

## **The Postcolonial Era**

Between 1948 and 1962, postcolonial Burma enjoyed a period of chaotic but genuine democracy (Thant Myint-U, 2007), rated +8 on a scale from -10 to +10 on Polity Coding IV (Polity IV, 2013). Unfortunately, it did not last long. Three intertwined factors contributed to the failure of nation-building in Burma/Myanmar: insurgency, federalism, and the existence of multi-ethnic alliances (Selway, 2015: 230). Insurgency was the most important one.

Two major centrifugal tendencies haunted Burma: the communist rebellion and Karen insurgency, plus smaller ones, such as the Mujahid Rebellion in Arakan and some others. The CPB was close to taking over power in the late 1940s but lost the strategic initiative in the 1950s and was on the defensive until 1968. Then it regained it briefly thanks to cover from the People's Republic of China, but its offensive was halted at Salween in 1972. Since then until 1989, the CPC controlled sways of Burma's northeast, but did not pose a threat to central Burma. In 1989, it was annihilated by its own members, mostly from ethnic minorities, especially the Wa (Lintner, 1989). As for the ethnic

insurgencies, by the end of the democratic era in the early 1960s, the insurgencies had multiplied; the coup of 1962 enhanced this trend. Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Burma became a playground for a patchwork of hundreds of armed groups with virtually every ethnic group rebelling against the state and many of them fighting at the same time with one another and/or with other ethnic groups (Smith, 1999; Lintner, 1999; Lubina, 2023). Unsurprisingly, Burma's political situation was described by such phrases as "a nation went underground" or "insurgency as a way of life" (Smith, 1999: 89–97).

The statistics of that period are quite shocking. In the years 1962–1988, Burma had the biggest armed groups – over 150 at a point – fighting in a country; it is a world record (Rajah, 1998: 135). Strategically speaking, the Tatmadaw has taken the strategic initiative in the 1950s, while since the mid-1960s, the Tatmadaw has been able to regain control over the central part of the country due to its brutal counterinsurgency campaign of four cuts (*pyat leit pyat*). At the same time, the central government did not control much of the ethnic peripheries. They remained a constant battlefield between the Tatmadaw, CPB, Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs), and opium gangs; the never-ending civil war became a self-propelled mechanism legitimising the Tatmadaw's military rule in Burma and its Burmanisation policies (campaigns on the peripheries Smith, 1999: 34–36; Steinberg, 2000: 57; Lubina, 2023). It has been a vicious circle: the ethnic minorities turned to insurgency in order to defend themselves against the Tatmadaw; yet, their EAOs legitimised the Tatmadaw's rule. With the army too strong (and too unwilling) to share power and privileges, and yet too weak to crush the enemies (and reversely: the EAOs too strong to be beaten yet too weak to secure independence or autonomy), the prolonged civil war became the main reason for Burma's economic and political plight (Lubina, 2023).

Consequently, by 1987, Burma, once a rice bowl of Asia during the colonial period, degraded into the list of Least Developed Nations in the UN nomenclature.

## From 1988 to the 2021 Coup

The military's mismanagement of the country led to the outbreak of mass protests in 1988, culminating in what became known as the “8888” Revolution. This movement, alongside its political offshoot—the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of independence hero Aung San—posed a significant challenge to the Tatmadaw's dictatorship. Unfortunately, these efforts were unsuccessful. The 8888 Revolution was brutally suppressed, and the NLD's subsequent attempts to wrest power from the Tatmadaw through non-violent means between 1988 and 2011 failed. During this time, the Tatmadaw secured ceasefire agreements with numerous Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs) while continuing to wage war against others. Although Myanmar's civil war saw a decline in intensity during the 1990s and 2000s, it reignited in the late 2000s. A new wave of ceasefire agreements followed in the 2010s, including the partially successful National Ceasefire Agreement of 2015. However, by the end of the decade, the conflict's intensity had escalated once again.

The 2010s also witnessed an impressive yet short-lived political transformation. In 2011, the NLD, under Aung San Suu Kyi, initiated negotiations with the military, leading to Myanmar's opening to the Western world and significant domestic reforms. This transformation peaked in 2015, when the NLD achieved a landslide victory in the general elections, with the Tatmadaw surprisingly accepting its defeat. Suu Kyi secured partial power and, as State Counsellor, led the civilian government from 2016 to 2021. However, the military tolerated the NLD government for only one term. When the NLD won another overwhelming electoral victory in 2020, the Tatmadaw responded with its fourth coup d'état on 1 February 2021. The coup led to the arrest of Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders, plunging the country into chaos.

During her tenure (2016–2021), Suu Kyi adopted a cautious approach, maintaining what appeared to be manageable relations with the military (Thant Myint-U, 2019). However, the NLD's landslide victory in the 2020 elections seemingly alarmed the Tatmadaw generals. Unable to accept the results, they staged the

coup, abandoning their relatively comfortable position of partial power, economic influence, and socio-legal unaccountability; instead, they took on the far more precarious position of ruling directly, without domestic legitimacy (Lubina, 2022).

The reasons behind the Tatmadaw's decision to stage its fourth coup remain unclear. The military's official justification—allegations of electoral fraud in the 2020 elections—is widely regarded as baseless and not worth serious consideration. As a result, the real motives behind the coup remain a matter of speculation. By 2022, three dominant interpretations had emerged: institutional fallout between the Tatmadaw and the NLD; personal rivalries and factional struggles within the military (Gasztold, 2022; Moeller, 2022). These interpretations are not mutually exclusive, as political events are rarely the result of a single cause, but rather a confluence of factors.

Whatever the Tatmadaw's calculations may have been, the generals clearly miscalculated. Their violent response to the situation triggered widespread turmoil, leading to a political and economic catastrophe for Myanmar. The immediate aftermath of the coup—Suu Kyi's arrest, mass protests, and a bloody crackdown reminiscent of 1988—was just the beginning of the national tragedy unleashed by this ill-conceived power grab.

## **The Post-2021 Coup Political Situation**

The Tatmadaw's generals miscalculated primarily because they underestimated the societal forces arrayed against them—specifically, the deep-seated national disdain for military rule. Mass protests, collectively known as the Spring Revolution (*ngwe u towlanye*), erupted just days after the coup. On 22 February 2021, protests reached their zenith, with up to one million demonstrators taking to the streets across Myanmar. The movement united the otherwise deeply divided society, bringing together Myanmar's young and old, rich and poor, urbanites and villagers, Barmars, and ethnic minorities in a shared rejection of the return to military rule. This grassroots, bottom-up resistance became a national uprising against the privileged military class. As one veteran observer noted, “a diverse and traumatised country

finally said with one voice, ‘enough is enough,’ and began forging its own future without the military. Such coalescence of views and commitments occurs only rarely in a nation’s history” (TCSS seminar, 2021).

The Tatmadaw, however, responded in its characteristic manner—with escalating violence, including indiscriminate attacks. The head of the new junta, the State Administrative Council (SAC), Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing, emerged as a brutal dictator. By the spring of 2021, the Tatmadaw had violently suppressed the protests, killing innocent civilians in the streets. Within two months, the mass demonstrations were effectively crushed, at the cost of approximately 1,000 lives. However, this brutal crackdown did not end the resistance. Instead, it plunged the country into chaos (ICG, 2021).

In May 2021, a shadow government—the National Unity Government (NUG, *amyotha nyinyuye asoya*)—was formed. It was supported by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH, *pyidaungsu Hluttaw kosa pyu komiti*), a group comprising ousted elected lawmakers, opposition politicians, and members of ethnic minorities. Soon after, Bamar-led domestic armed guerrilla groups, collectively known as the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs, *pyithu kakweye tat pwe*), emerged across the country and began engaging the Tatmadaw. By September 2021, the NUG had declared an all-out defensive war against the junta (Myanmar Now, 2021). This marked the transition to a full-scale inter-Bamar civil war.

The 2021 coup did not occur in isolation. Myanmar’s civil war, which began in 1948, has never truly ended. It intensified during the 1960s, continued through the 1970s and 1980s, and briefly de-escalated in the 1990s and 2000s following ceasefire agreements. By the mid-2010s, however, these peace processes—including the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and Aung San Suu Kyi’s 21st Century Panglong initiative—were already in decline. The 2021 coup further exacerbated the situation, with the emergence of Bamar armed resistance (the PDFs) adding a new dimension to the conflict.

Myanmar's post-coup civil war is a complex patchwork of local conflicts, creating a landscape of shifting zones of relative stability, insecurity, and outright chaos. This situation resembles a Burmese version of Hobbes' "war of all against all." Analytically, the conflict can be divided into two overlapping theatres of war:

1) The Ethnic Civil War (1949–present):

This theatre involves the longstanding conflict between the Tatmadaw/central government and ethnic non-Bamar armed groups, known as Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs). Historically, the number of EAOs peaked at around 150 in the 1970s (Rajah, 1998). Today, estimates range between 15 and 22 EAOs. This war, often described as the world's longest-running civil conflict (Thant Myint-U, 2007), continues primarily in Myanmar's ethnic peripheries, particularly in the seven ethnic states, though with varying intensity. Following the coup, EAO responses have been diverse. Groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) oppose the junta and collaborate with PDFs, while others, such as the powerful United Wa State Army (UWSA), have adopted a wait-and-see approach.

2) The Post-2021 Coup Struggle:

The second one is the post-2021 struggle between the Tatmadaw's current junta (SAC) and the Bamar PDFs, or Bamar armed resistance to the coup. PDFs consist of loosely organised groups; their exact number is unknown, though probably more than 100 units. In terms of geographical location, the struggle has taken place in both the Bamar and ethnic regions of Myanmar. Sagaing and Magwe regions, as well as Kayah and Chin states, have seen the hardest battles so far, though the fighting has raged in the Mandalay region as well, and occasionally elsewhere (Ayerawaddy, Rakhine, Taninthayi, Bago).

The Tatmadaw has responded with a brutal counterinsurgency campaign, invoking the "Four Cuts" strategy (*pya lei pya*, from the 1960s). This tactic aims to sever guerrillas from food, funds, intelligence, and recruits, but often results in indiscriminate violence. Entire villages have been destroyed, and airstrikes by

Russian-made helicopters and jets have killed hundreds and displaced tens of thousands, mostly civilians (Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan, Vahpual, 2021; Davies, 2022).

Despite its superior resources, the Tatmadaw faces significant challenges. PDFs and some EAOs aim to overstretch the military, hoping to trigger divisions within the junta and provoke a counter coup. In this war of attrition, neither side appears willing to compromise. The Tatmadaw seeks to annihilate its enemies and restore control, while the resistance aims to break the military's hold on power.

## Conclusion

Myanmar tragically exemplifies a failed nation-building project. The country's postcolonial history, shaped by British colonialism, Japanese occupation during World War II, and a fraught path to independence, left a legacy of division and instability. As a plural, multiethnic society, Myanmar's dominant Bamar majority (roughly two-thirds of the population) has pursued a nation-building process that excludes or marginalises ethnic minorities, who comprise the remaining third. This has led to parallel, competing nation-building projects that have little in common with one another.

The country's hard power structures, dominated by the Tatmadaw, have perpetuated a cycle of conflict. The military remains too strong and unwilling to share power but too weak to decisively crush its opponents. Similarly, EAOs are too strong to be defeated but too weak to secure independence or autonomy. The result is a protracted civil war that underpins Myanmar's ongoing failure as a nation-state.

The post-2021 political situation reflects this deadlock. With no resolution in sight, Myanmar teeters on the brink of state failure. The consequences for its people are dire: escalating casualties, displacement, economic collapse, and a humanitarian crisis that threatens millions. The nation's future remains bleak, with entrenched violence and instability as the defining features of its political landscape.

## References

- Aung-Thwin, M. (1983). Divinity, Spirit and Human: Conceptions of Classical Burmese Kingship. In: L. Gesick, ed. *Centres, Symbols and Hierarchies: Essays on the Classical State of Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Aung-Thwin, M. (1985). British “Pacification” of Burma. Order Without Meaning. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 16 (2): 245–261.
- Aung-Thwin, M. and Aung-Thwin, M. (2012). *A History of Myanmar Since Ancient Times. Traditions and Transformations*. London: Reaktion 194–225.
- Blum, F. (2011). *Teaching Democracy. The Program and Practice of Aung San Suu Kyi’s Concept of People’s Education*. Berlin: Regiospectra.
- Border Guard Force Scheme (2021). Myanmar Peace Monitor, <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/background/border-guard-force> (accessed: 15.04.2022),
- Breen, M. (2018). *The Road to Federalism in Nepal, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Finding the middle ground*. London–New York: Routledge.
- Cady, J. F. (1959). *A History of Modern Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Callahan, M. (1998). Democracy in Burma: The Lessons of History. *NBR Analysis*, 9 (3): 5–26.
- Callahan, M. (2003). *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Callahan, M. (2007). *Political Authority in Burma’s Ethnic Minority States: Devolution, Occupation and Coexistence*. Washington DC: East-West Centre.
- Callahan, M. (2017a). Aung San Suu Kyi’s Quiet, Puritanical Vision for Myanmar. *Nikkei Asia Review*, 29.03.2017, <http://asia.nikkei.com/Features/The-lady-in-question/Aung-San-Suu-Kyi-s-quiet-puritanical-vision-for-Myanmar2> (accessed: 05.08.2022)
- Callahan, M. (2017b). Distorted, Dangerous Data? “Lumyo” in the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census. *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 32 (2): 452–478.

- Charney, M. (2009). *A History of Modern Burma*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press.
- Cheesman, N. (2017). How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 47 (3).
- Cheng Siok Hwa (1965). The Development of the Burmese Rice Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century. *Journal of South Asian History*, 6 (1): 67–80.
- Constitution of 1947 (1947). Myanmar Law Library. <http://www.myanmar-law-library.org/law-library/laws-and-regulations/constitutions/1947-constitution.html> (accessed 05.08.2022)
- Constitution of Union of Myanmar (2008). Ministry of Information, Government of Union of Myanmar, Naypyitaw
- Crossthwaite, Ch. (1968). *The Pacification of Burma*. London: Frank Cass.
- Cruikshank, Ch. (1983). *SOE in The Far East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies A. (2022, August 31). Myanmar's junta in a serious but not desperate fight. *Asia Times*. Retrieved on 11.10.2022, from <https://asiatimes.com/2022/08/myanmars-junta-in-a-serious-but-not-desperate-fight/>
- Duffield, M. (2001). *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. London: Zed Books.
- Eckstein, H. (1966). *Division and Cohesion in Democracy: A Study of Norway*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Egreteau, R. (2016) *Caretaking Democratisation. The Military and Political Change in Myanmar*. London: Hurst & Company.
- Ethnologue (2021). *Languages of the World*. Dallas: Sil International.
- Ferguson, J. (2015). Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging and the National Census in Burma/ Myanmar. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 171 (1).
- Furnivall, J. S. (1939). Fashioning of the Leviathan. *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, 19 (3): 1–138.
- Furnivall, J. S. (1956). *Colonial Policy and Practice. A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India*. New York: New York University Press.

- Gamanii (2012). 135: Counting Races in Burma. Shan Herald Agency for News. <http://panglongenglish.blogspot.com/2012/09/135-counting-races-in-burma.html> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Gasztold P. (2022). "Myanmar one year after the coup." *Security and Defence Quarterly*, vol. 38, issue 2, p. 86-93.
- Heine-Geldern, R. (1942). Conceptions of State and Kingship in Southeast Asia. *The Far Eastern Quarterly*, 2: 15–30.
- Houtman, G. (1999). *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics. Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy*. Tokyo: ILCAA.
- International Crisis Group (ICG) (2020), *Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar*, Report no. 312, Asia, 28.08.2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/312-identity-crisis-ethnicity-and-conflict-myanmar> (accessed: 08.05.2022).
- Irrawaddy (2018). *Aung San: A Legacy Unfulfilled*, The Irrawaddy, 13.02.2018, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/from-the-archive/aung-san-legacy-unfulfilled-3.html> (accessed: 28.11.2021).
- IWGIA (2021). *Indigenous People in Myanmar*. International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. <https://www.iwgia.org/en/myanmar.html>
- Kei Nemoto (2008). The Concepts of Dobama (Our Burma) and Thudo-Buma (Their Burma) in Burmese Nationalism 1930–1948. *Journal of Burma Studies*, 5: 2–16.
- Khin Yi (1988). *The Dobama Movement in Burma (1930–1938)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Khin Zaw Win (2007). A Burmese perspective on prospects for progress. In: M. Skidmore and T. Wilson (eds.). *Myanmar. The state, community and the environment*. Canberra: ANU Press.
- Kipgen, N. (2014). Addressing the Rohingya Problem. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 49 (2): 234–247.
- Kipgen, N. (2016). *Myanmar. A Political History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, T. (2009). *Neither War nor Peace: The Future of the Cease-fire Agreements in Burma*. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.

- Kramer, T. (2021). "Neither war nor peace": Failed ceasefires and dispossession in Myanmar's ethnic borderlands. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 48 (3): 476–496.
- Kyaw Hoe, Inception and Objective of the Nagani Association (transl. by Ye Nyunt). In: Hans-Bernd Zöllner (ed.). *Additional Material related to the Nagani Book Club*, Myanmar Literature Project, Working Paper No. 10:1.1. Passau: Universität Passau, 54.
- Kyaw Phone Kyaw (2016). NLD goes it alone, raising ethnic party ire. *Frontier Myanmar* 02.05.2016, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/nld-goes-it-alone-raising-ethnic-party-ire/> (accessed 05.08.2022).
- Lieberman, V. (1984). *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580-1760*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lieberman, V. (2003). *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context c. 800-1830*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lintner, B. (1989). *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)*. Cornell University Press.
- Lintner, B. (1999). *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Lintner, B. (2013). A well-laid war in Myanmar. *Asia Times*, 02.02.2013,
- Lubina M. (2020), *A Hybrid Politician. A Political Biography of Aung San Suu Kyi*, London-New York: Routledge
- Lubina M. (2022). The Role of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's Transition (2011–2021), in: *Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis*, ed. Ch. Yamahata, B. Anderson, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2022, p. 25-43
- Lubina, M. (2018), *The Moral Democracy. A Political Thought of Aung San Suu Kyi*, Warsaw: Scholar
- Lubina, M. (2023), "Disunity in diversity. The failed attempts at power sharing in Myanmar," in: Adam Jelonek (eds). *Power-sharing in the Divided Asian Societies*, V&R Unipress: Göttingen
- Lubina, M. (forthcoming), "Waiting for the Dust to Settle. The Creeping Anarchy in Myanmar and the Reactions of the International Community," in: Chosein Yamahata eds., *Social*

- Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand vol. III, Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore
- Maung Htin Aung (1968). *A History of Burma*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Maung Maung (1961). *Burma's Constitution*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- Maung Maung Gyi (1983). *Burmese Political Values. The Socio-Political Roots of Authoritarianism*. New York: Praeger.
- McGarry, J. and O'Leary, B. (2009a). *Argument: Power Shared After the Deaths of Thousands*. In: R. Taylor (ed.). *Consociational Theory: McGarry and O'Leary and the Northern Ireland Conflict*. Abingdon: Routledge, 15–84
- Mersan, A. de (2019). *How Muslims in Arakan became Arakan's foreigners*. In: G. Winterberger and E. Tenberg (eds.). *Current Myanmar Studies. Aung San Suu Kyi, Muslims in Arakan, and Economic Insecurity*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Michaels, S. (2013). *We Have to Be Careful with the Language of Federalism*. The Irrawaddy. <http://www.irrawaddy.org/visas/we-have-to-be-careful-with-the-language-of-federalism.html>
- Minority Rights Group International (2020). *Myanmar. World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples*. <https://minorityrights.org/country/myanmarburma/> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Moeller A. (2022, February 10). "Peering under the hood: Coup narratives and Tatmadaw Factionalism," Tea Circle, retrieved on 10.10.2022, from: [https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/peering-under-the-hood-coup-narratives-and-tatmadaw-factionalism/?fbclid=IwAR3jW5-p8bYc70KcKCBY\\_qncwEzN4BBA-kGk1ht2Gk8G3gYNSUHW5yZxmHU](https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/peering-under-the-hood-coup-narratives-and-tatmadaw-factionalism/?fbclid=IwAR3jW5-p8bYc70KcKCBY_qncwEzN4BBA-kGk1ht2Gk8G3gYNSUHW5yZxmHU)
- MPC (2017). *Ceasefire and Peace Agreements*. Myanmar Peace Centre. <https://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/1499/ceasefire-and-peace-agreements/>
- MPM (2021). *Government Peace Plan*. Myanmar Peace Monitor, <http://www.mmpeacemonitor.org/peace-process/government-peace-plan> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Mya Maung (1998). *The Burma Road to Capitalism: Economic Growth versus Democracy*, Westport: Praeger.

- Myanmar Census (2014). The Union Report. Census Report Volume 2. Department of Population, Ministry of Immigration and Population, the Government of Republic of Union of Myanmar.
- NDF(B) (2010). NDF Report on Ceasefire Groups Resisting SPDC's Pressure and Instability. National Democratic Front (Burma). 7.03.2010, Mae Sot, <http://www.burmapartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/NDF-on-CFG-Eng-March-2010.pdf> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Ni Ni Myint (1983). *Burma's Struggle Against British Imperialism, 1885–189*. Rangoon: University Press.
- NLM (2012). All must try to see national race youths who brandished guns using laptops. New Light of Myanmar 02.03.2012, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs13/PYIDH-NLM2012-03-02-day17-STspeech.pdf> (accessed: 05.08.2022).
- Polity IV (2013). Individual Country Regime Trends, 1946–2013. Polity IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/mya2.htm>
- Preecharush, D. (2017). Book Review: Conflict in Myanmar: War, Politics and Religion. The Irrawaddy 06.07.2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/culture/books/book-review-conflict-myanmar-war-politics-religion.html> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Rajah, A. (1998) Ethnicity and Civil War in Burma. Where Is the Rationality? In: R. I. Rotberg (ed.). *Burma. Prospects for a Democratic Future*. Washington DC: Brookings.
- Rajah, A. (1998). Ethnicity and Civil War in Burma. Where is the Rationality? In R. I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma. Prospects for a Democratic Future* (p. 135). Brookings.
- Reid, A. (2010). *Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reilly, B. (2017). Inclusion and Power-Sharing in Pacific Asia: From Consociationalism to Centripetalism. *Acta Asiatica Varsoviensia*, 30 (1): 66–89.
- Reilly, B. (2019). Ethnic Representation in Pacific Asia. A Report for the Southeast Asia Rules-Based Order Project, <https://researchimpact.uwa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ethnic-representation-Report.docx.pdf>

- Reilly, B. (2021). Profile. Professor Benjamin Reilly. The University of Western Australia. <https://www.uwa.edu.au/profile/able/benjamin-reilly> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- San C. Po (1928), *Burma and the Karens*, London: Elliot Stock
- Sai Aung Tun (2009). *A History of Shan State. From Its Origins to 1962*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
- Saw Yan Naing (2013). *The Struggle to Control the Peace Process. The Irrawaddy*, 19.09.2013, <http://www.irrawaddy.org/burma/magazine-border/struggle-control-peace-process.html>
- Selth, A. (1986). Race and Resistance in Burma, 1942-1945. *Modern Asian Studies*, 20 (3): 489–492.
- Selth, A. (1999). *The Burmese Armed Forces Next Century: Continuity or Change?* Working Paper no. 338. Canberra: ANU.
- Selway, J. (2015). Ethnic Accommodation and Electoral Rules in Ethno-Geographically Segregated Societies: PR Outcomes Under FPTP in Myanmar Elections. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 15: 321–360.
- Sengupta N. (2015), *The Female Voice of Myanmar*. Khin Myo Chit to Aung San Suu Kyi, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sherman, J. (2003). Burma: Lessons from the Cease-Fires. In: K. Ballantine and J. Sherman, eds. *The Political Economy of Armed Conflicts: Beyond Greed and Grievance*. Boulder–London: Lynne Rienner.
- Silverstein, J. (1959). The Federal Dilemma in Burma. *Far Eastern Survey*, 28 (7): 97–105.
- Silverstein, J. (1980). *Burmese Politics: The Dilemma of National Unity*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Silverstein, J. (ed.) (1993). *The Political Legacy of Aung San*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Smith C.M.S. (2003), *Adapting Consociationalism: Viable Democratic Structures in Burma*, Technical Advisory Network of Burma Working Paper, <https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs4/TAN-WP03-adapting-C.Smith.pdf> (accessed: 05.08.2022).
- Smith, M. (1999). *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books.

- Smith, M. (2007). *State of Strife: The Dynamics of Ethnic Conflict in Burma*. Washington DC: East-West Centre.
- Steinberg D. (2022, September 15). On Leadership and Power in Myanmar. *The Irrawaddy*. Retrieved on 11.10.2022, from <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/on-leadership-and-power-in-myanmar.html>
- Steinberg, D. I. (2000). *Burma: The State in Myanmar*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Steinberg, D. I. (2010). *Burma/Myanmar: What Everyone Needs to Know*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Steinberg, D. I. (2017). The magic in Myanmar's numbers. *Nikkei Asian Review*, 9 March 2017.
- Storey, I. (2009). Emerging Fault Lines in Sino-Burmese Relations: The Kokang Incident. *China Brief*, 9 (18). <https://jamestown.org/program/emerging-fault-lines-in-sino-burmese-relations-the-kokang-incident/> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Tambiah, S. J. (1976). *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, R. (2013). Myanmar's 'Pivot' Toward the Shibboleth of 'Democracy'. *Asian Affairs*, 44 (3): 392–400.
- Taylor, Robert H. (2009). *State in Myanmar*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- TCSS (2021, April 15). *Surviving and Thriving. Myanmar's Coup and Security Instability in Asia*. Taiwan Centre for Security Studies (TCSS) seminar, Taipei, Taiwan, 15.04.2021.
- Thant Myint-U (2001). *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thant Myint-U (2007). *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Thant Myint-U (2007). *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*. New York: FSG.
- Thant Myint-U (2011). *Where China Meets India. Burma and the New Crossroads of Asia*. New York: FSG
- Thant Myint-U (2019). *The Hidden History of Burma. Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21th Century*, New York, Norton.

- The Burma Constitution (1948). *Australian Outlook*, 2 (2): 98–101.
- The Nationalities of Myanmar (2013). Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, The Government of Republic of Union of Myanmar
- Tinker, H. (1967). *The Union of Burma. A Study of the First Years of Independence*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Trager, F. (1966). *Burma: From Kingdom to Republic*. London: Pall Mall.
- Wai Moe (2009). Border Guard Force Plan Leads to End of Ceasefire. *The Irrawaddy*. 31.09.2009, [http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=16691](http://www2.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=16691) (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Walters, O. (1982). *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Walton, M. J. (2008). Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong. *Asian Survey*, 48 (6): 889–910.
- Walton, M. J. (2012). *Politics in the Moral Universe: Burmese Buddhist Political Thought*. Seattle: University of Washington (unpublished PhD thesis).
- Worldometer (2022). Myanmar Population. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/myanmar-population/> (accessed: 05.08.2022).
- WPD (1989). လုပ်သားပဏ္ဍိတနေ့စဉ် [Working People's Daily]. September 26th 1989. <http://www.networkmyanmar.org/ESW/Files/WPDf-rev.jpg> (accessed: 15.04.2022).
- Yalcinkaya, N. S., Estrada-Villalta, S. and Adam, G. (2017). The (Biological or Cultural) Essence of Essentialism: Implications for Policy Support among Dominant and Subordinated Groups. *Frontiers of Psychology*, 8: 900.
- Yawnghwe, Chao-Tsang (1989). The Burman military: Holding the country together? In: J. Silverstein (ed.). *Independent Burma at Forty Years: Six Assessments*. Ithaca: New York, 86–87.
- Ye Htut (2019). *Myanmar's Political Transition and Lost Opportunities (2010–2016)*. Singapore: ISEAS.

# People's Security in Myanmar: Challenges Within and Beyond Borders

*Dr Hayso Thako*

## Introduction

The complex socio-political landscape of Burma, also known as Myanmar, has been shaped by decades of conflict and ethnic tensions, particularly in regions like Karen State. This area, characterised by its rich cultural diversity and a history of resistance against central government control, has witnessed significant displacement of its population due to ongoing violence and human rights abuses. As a result, many individuals and families have sought refuge in makeshift camps along the Thai-Burma border, where they face numerous challenges related to their precarious living conditions and uncertain futures.

In response to the humanitarian crisis, international intervention has emerged as a critical component in addressing the needs of displaced populations. Various organisations and governments have mobilised resources and support, yet the effectiveness of these efforts remains hindered by ongoing challenges, including political instability, limited access to aid, and the complex dynamics of local and international stakeholders.

This paper explores the multifaceted issue of displacement in Karen State and the conditions within refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border, examining and highlighting the persistent challenges faced by displaced communities. The concluding observations will reflect on the necessity for sustained engagement and comprehensive solutions to address the root causes of displacement and foster long-term stability in the region.

## Burma/Myanmar in Context

Burma is characterised by its rich tapestry of over 100 ethno-linguistic groups (South & Lall, 2016). This diversity signifies that

the country is home to various ethnic communities, each with distinct languages and identities. This plurality contributes to the complex socio-cultural landscape of Myanmar, influencing everything from local customs and traditions to political dynamics.

The population of Myanmar is estimated to be between 50 to 60 million people, with minority groups accounting for about one-third of its population (Thako & Waters, 2023; Lenkova, 2015; South, 2008). Within this population, minority ethnic groups make up about one-third. This demographic detail highlights the significance of minority populations in the country, which can impact national policies, social relations, and cultural practices. Understanding the population distribution is crucial for addressing issues related to representation, rights, and social justice for these minority groups.

Each ethnic group in Myanmar has its own unique language, culture, and history (Smith, 1994; South, 2007 & 2011; Oh, 2013; Alwyn, 2021). This assertion underscores the importance of cultural heritage and identity among the various groups. The distinct languages spoken reflect not only communication preferences but also cultural narratives, traditions, and worldviews. Recognising these unique aspects is vital for fostering mutual respect and understanding among different communities.

From 1948 to 1962, Myanmar practised a democratic governance system characterised by a parliamentary democracy. The country was organised into a unitary system with 14 administrative divisions, including seven states and seven divisions (Smith, 1994; Lwin, 2000). This point provides insight into Myanmar's political history, indicating a period of democratic governance that was relatively short-lived. The structure of governance during this time aimed to provide representation and manage the diverse needs of various ethnic groups, which is particularly important in a country with such rich diversity.

## **Burma/Myanmar Now**

The chapter outlines the significant changes in Burma's political system and broader societal policies following the military coup in 1962, led by General Ne Win. The establishment of the

Revolutionary Council marked a shift towards a centralised, state-controlled system that aimed to promote a particular vision of socialism, referred to as “The Burmese Way to Socialism.” As stated by Thako and Waters (2023):

“The new Revolutionary Council formed in 1962 after a military coup led by General Ne Win proclaimed a political programme entitled ‘The Burmese Way to Socialism’. This policy led to the nationalisation of all schooling under the authority of the Ministry of Education in Rangoon. This became known as a programme of ‘Burmanisation’ as power was concentrated into the hands of the centralised military authorities in Rangoon. This laid the foundation for the centralised ‘socialist’ education system and the nationalisation policies of society focused on ethnic Burmese culture and Buddhism”.

The military regime nationalised all educational institutions, placing them under the control of the Ministry of Education. This move allowed the government to dictate the curriculum and educational policies, aligning them with its political ideology. This policy sought to consolidate power within the hands of the military and promote a singular national identity, often at the expense of the country’s diverse ethnic groups. The state’s policies actively marginalised ethnic minority languages, promoting the use of Burmese as the dominant language. This approach was part of a broader assimilation strategy that sought to erase cultural distinctions and promote a homogenous national identity.

The state openly devalued ethnic minority languages and implemented a silent assimilation policy affecting ethnicity, culture, and religion (Smith, 1994). The silent assimilation policy not only affected language but also had profound implications for the cultural and religious practices of ethnic minorities. By prioritising Burmese culture and Buddhism, the state undermined the identities and traditions of various ethnic groups, leading to social tensions and conflict.

## **Displacement in Karen State/SE Burma**

The Karen National Association (KNA) was established in 1981 as the first organised political entity representing the interests

of the Karen people in Burma (Myanmar). The KNA aimed to promote Karen identity, culture, and political representation, laying the groundwork for future nationalist movements. The Karen National Union (KNU) was formed in 1947, shortly after Burma gained independence from British colonial rule. The KNU began an armed struggle in 1949 to seek greater autonomy and rights for the Karen people, who felt marginalised by the central government. This conflict has led to prolonged violence and instability in the region.

By 1970, armed conflict intensified in Karen State, leading to significant displacement of the Karen population. Many civilians were forced to flee their homes due to military operations, violence, and human rights abuses perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, resulting in a humanitarian crisis. In response to the growing humanitarian needs of displaced Karen people, the Karen Christian Relief Committee was established in 1975. The KCRC aimed to provide assistance, support, and relief to communities affected by the conflict, particularly focusing on those who were displaced or in need of basic resources.

In 1985, the Karen Christian Relief Committee was renamed the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) to better reflect its focus on assisting refugees. The KRC continued to provide support, including food, healthcare, and shelter, for Karen refugees who had fled to Thailand and other areas due to ongoing conflict in Karen State. The organisation plays a crucial role in advocating for the rights and well-being of the refugees affected by civil war.

## **Refugee Camps in Thai-Burma Border**

First group of refugees crossed to Thailand, approx. 2,000 people. This marks the beginning of a significant influx of refugees fleeing conflict and persecution in Burma (now Myanmar). The first group of around 2,000 individuals sought safety in Thailand, initiating a long history of refugee resettlement in the region. During this period (1985–1995), the number of designated refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border increased significantly, totalling 53 camps. These camps were established to provide shelter

and basic services to the growing number of refugees escaping violence and human rights abuses in Burma.

By 2005, the refugee population in Thailand had reached approximately 150,000 individuals. This number reflects the ongoing crisis in Burma and the continued need for protection and humanitarian assistance for those fleeing conflict. Between 2004 and 2015, a total of 152,027 refugees were resettled from Thailand to third countries. This resettlement process provided refugees with the opportunity for a new life outside of the camps, addressing their long-term needs for safety and stability. The current population is 109,636 (TBC, 2024). This figure represents the projected number of refugees remaining in Thailand. It reflects the ongoing challenges faced by refugees, as well as the complexities of resettlement and repatriation efforts.

There are five main programmes implemented in the refugee camps by the Karen Refugee Committee to support the well-being and self-sufficiency of the refugee population.

- Education: Provides access to learning opportunities for children and adults, helping them gain skills and knowledge for the future.
- Health: Ensures access to basic healthcare services, including preventive care and treatment for illnesses, which is crucial in maintaining the health of the refugee population.
- Livelihood: Focuses on providing refugees with skills and resources to earn a living, promoting self-reliance and economic stability.
- Camp Management: Involves the coordination and administration of camp facilities and services, ensuring that the needs of refugees are met and that the camps operate effectively.

## Ongoing Challenges

- The conflict between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the State Administration Council (SAC) has intensified (Bhatta et al., 2023), resulting in over 200

reported incidents of fighting (KNU, 2024). This ongoing violence destabilises the region, leading to increased insecurity and hardship for local populations, particularly in Karen State, which has a history of ethnic tensions and armed conflict.

- Humanitarian aid in Karen State and surrounding areas is severely lacking, with only 140 million in assistance reported (FCDO, 2023). This shortfall hampers efforts to meet the basic needs of the affected populations, including food, shelter, healthcare, and education, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.
- There is a growing influx of refugees from Myanmar into Thailand due to the ongoing conflict and instability. However, support for these refugees is inadequate, with a projected funding gap of over 40 million for the year 2025 (TBC, 2024). This gap threatens the ability of humanitarian organisations to provide essential services like food, shelter, and medical care to the displaced populations.
- The number of internally displaced persons in Myanmar is rising, with an urgent requirement for 36 million USD to address their needs (TBC, 2024). This funding is critical for providing food, shelter, medicines, educational support, and specialised assistance for vulnerable groups, particularly women and children, who are disproportionately affected by displacement and conflict.

## Concluding Observations

- **Prioritise border-based assistance for IDPs:** This point emphasises the need to focus on providing immediate support and resources to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who are situated near borders, particularly in regions where they have fled due to conflict or crisis.
- **Provide direct funding, via INGOs if necessary, to local Community Based Organisations and EROs' existing structures/departments:** This suggestion advocates for channelling financial resources directly to local organisations that are already working within communities, as opposed to relying solely on larger international

NGOs (INGOs). By empowering local Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and existing structures within Ethnic Revolutionary Organisations (EROs), the assistance can be more tailored to the specific needs of the communities and can facilitate greater trust and cooperation among local populations.

- **Refugees to stay on Thai soil until the situation in their homeland improves and they feel safe to return:** This point underscores the importance of allowing refugees to remain in Thailand as long as their home countries are unstable or unsafe. It recognises the need for a humane approach to refugee management, providing them with a safe haven until conditions allow for a voluntary and dignified return to their homeland.
- **Humanitarian agencies to access the small number of displaced persons who have crossed over into Thailand and are staying in temporary camps:** This statement calls for facilitating access for humanitarian organisations to provide aid such as food, healthcare, and psychological assistance to displaced individuals who have crossed into Thailand and are in temporary shelters.
- **Suspend all political and financial support to the military regime:** This point advocates for the cessation of any forms of support—both political and financial—to the military regime in power. The rationale behind this is to apply pressure on the regime to change its behaviour or policies, particularly in relation to human rights abuses and the treatment of displaced populations.

## References:

- Alwyn, S. (2021). The Historiography of Saw Aung Hla and Its Influence on the Modern Karen History Curriculum. *Journal of Burma Studies*.
- Bhatta, S. D., Katwal, S., Sinha Roy, S., Van der Weide, R., Sharma, U., Kyaw, A. P., & Thwin, M. M. (2023). *Education in Myanmar: Where are we now?* Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. (2023) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67055997080bdf716392f012/>

- Statistics\_on\_International\_Development\_Final\_UK\_ODA\_Spend\_2023.pdf Karen National Union (2024). <https://knuhq.org/en/news/261>
- Lenkova, P. (2015): Conflict Sensitivity in Education Provision in Karen State. Thabyay Education Foundation.
- Lwin, T. (2000). Education in Burma – 1945- 2000. Education Research Institute.
- Oh, Su-An (2013). Competing form of sovereignty in Karen State of Myanmar. ISEAS Working Paper, No. 1, [www.iseas.edu.sg](http://www.iseas.edu.sg)
- Smith, M. (1994). Ethnic groups in Burma: Development, democracy and human rights. London: Anti-Slavery International. AIS's Human Rights Series, No. 8.
- South, A. (2007). Karen Nationalist Communities: The “Problem” of Diversity. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, 29(1), pp. 55-76.
- South, A. (2008). Ethnic politics in Burma: State of conflict. *Contemporary Southeast Asia Series*, NY: Routledge.
- South, A. (2011). *Burma's Longest Running War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict*. Transnational Institute.
- South, A., & Lall, M. (2016a). Language, Education, Peace Process in Myanmar. *Contemporary Southeast Asia: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute*, 38(1).
- Thako, H., & Waters, T. (2023). Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood: Karen Mother-Tongue-Based Education in the Thai–Burmese Border Region. *Social Sciences* 12: 163.
- The Border Consortium. (2024) TBC's Annual General Meeting. Bangkok.

# Education in Politically Contested Territories of Myanmar: A Rigorous Review of Evidence and an Agenda for Educational Research

*Gray Rinehart*

## Political economy of education

Two key developments during Myanmar's colonial period (1824-1948) continue to shape contemporary socio-political relations, including those in the realm of education. First, the British colonial administration introduced the concept of the nation-state, demarcated by fixed national borders, which contrasted with the fluid relations between centres of power in pre-colonial Myanmar. This reconfiguration imposed rigid governance structures on a historically diverse and decentralised region. Second, the colonial administration conducted censuses that categorised 'indigeneity' largely along linguistic lines, disregarding the fluidity of language and self-identification practices (Ferguson, 2015; McCormick, 2016). This discretised and reified ethnic categories within the political realm and established formal divisions that continue to shape ethnic group identity and belonging.

Education under colonial rule became more centralised, stratified, and anglicised. This affected inequalities in access and opportunity, and contributed to the formation of Burmese nationalist movements in the early 20th century, driven by monks and students who sought to reclaim cultural pride and autonomy (Silverstein, 1968; Than Htut, 2005). In Myanmar, education has been a longstanding tool for control and a means of liberation.

During the parliamentary democracy period (1948-61), formal education was increasingly seen as a cornerstone of nation-building efforts. Despite some efforts to develop an inclusive 'Union' identity, Buddhism—and the majority Bamar ethnic identity—became a central component of public schooling (Nash, 1963; Smith, 1965). This marked the beginning of Burmanisation through education. Concurrently, ethnic minority resistance movements emerged, through which major ethnic

groups asserted territorial claims and exerted substantial power in political opposition.

The era of military dominance in politics (1962-2010) saw the nationalisation of schools and an intensification of Burmanisation efforts. In response, some ethnic minority communities developed parallel education systems, often in non-state areas administered by armed ethnic actors. These systems, frequently rooted in local languages and cultures, represented a rejection of the centralised state and an assertion of alternative visions for education and governance.

By 2019, it was estimated that around 300,000 students were enrolled in schools managed by ethnic education providers (Lall, 2019). Recent estimates suggest this number has grown to as many as one million students across more than 8,000 schools (South et al., 2024). The emergence and expansion of present-day ethnic education provisions—of varying sizes, capacities and histories—reflect the enduring role of such systems in contesting the homogenising tendencies of state-led education.

### **Rigorous review of the evidence** (Rinehart et al., 2024a)

Historical grievances among ethnic minority communities, stemming from exclusionary and hegemonic government education policies, have contributed to the formation of diverse ethnic educational provisions as a form of resistance. These systems are deeply embedded in ethnolinguistic identities and offer an alternative vision of nation-building, in opposition to the monolithic, Burman-dominated national identity. However, ethnic education systems are marked by resource scarcity, which inevitably affects the quality of education. Fragmented actors, conflicting goals, and misaligned incentives within the political economy of education have hindered coordination and convergence between state and parallel education systems.

The absence of ethnic education voices in education reform and peace processes during the 2010s reflected a disregard for education as a historical grievance and a failure to recognise education's potential to contribute to peace with justice. The

elite capture of the education system operations has overlooked community realities and undermined community needs and aspirations in educational planning and reconciliation efforts.

Since the coup, the complexities of evidence generation in politically contested territories of Myanmar have increased significantly. As a consequence, there is limited public documentation of how ongoing conflict and crisis have impacted the coherence of ethnic education systems' operations and children's access to, quality of, and continuity through education. It remains unclear how academic learning, social and emotional learning, and wellbeing outcomes have been affected or to what extent disparities in these dimensions exist between different systems. Moreover, there is limited understanding of the alignment of education goals across political and educational authorities, and whether these goals contribute to peace and reconciliation.

### **Reflections on understanding education in politically contested territories**

Education in conflict-affected settings, such as Myanmar, occupies a complex position within the education-conflict-peace nexus (Pherali, 2022). It operates, at times simultaneously, as a victim of violence, a perpetrator of structural inequalities, a liberator of suppressed identities, and a peacebuilder capable of fostering reconciliation.

Over the past three years, Myanmar's fragmented education sector has been targeted in violent attacks, with more than 445 reported incidents involving schools and education personnel (GCPEA, 2024). More than a quarter of government schools have closed (RFA, 2024), highlighting education's vulnerability to political instability and conflict. Due to the heavy politicisation of education, civilians have been forced to navigate the 'relational equilibrium' (Pherali, 2023) of coexisting between the conflicting demands and pressures from actors in conflict.

Historically, education in Myanmar has also functioned as a perpetrator of violence. Global studies show that structural

violence through horizontal inequalities in education—in access, quality, and continuity—worsens socio-economic divisions and inter-group grievances (Langer and Kuppens, 2019). Education can also ‘other’ particular groups and promote chauvinism through biased narratives and textbook content (Bush and Saltarelli, 2000). Within Myanmar’s educational structures, horizontal inequalities and marginalisation are phenomena entrenched in the longstanding processes of Burmanisation.

Yet, education holds significant potential as a liberator and peacebuilder. It plays a central role in shaping political subjectivities, influencing relations between different groups, and constructing inclusive or exclusive national identities. Redistributive policies, recognition of diverse identities, representation in decision-making, and reconciliation-oriented initiatives can transform education into a force for peacebuilding (Novelli et al., 2017 and 2019). Examples from other contexts include educational programmes that build trust and social cohesion (Affolter and Azaryeva Valente, 2020), multiple-perspective history teaching (Burde et al., 2015), and the equitable distribution of educational resources and academic achievement (IEP and GPE, 2024).

Emerging perspectives also suggest that education in politically contested territories of Myanmar could be analysed through a lens of prefigurative politics. This refers to the future-oriented construction of political alternatives, goals, or values in social movement processes (Yates, 2020). Activist-led parallel educational initiatives may serve as microcosms of broader societal aspirations—such as federal democracy or ethnic inclusion—thereby contesting injustices while (re)imagining systems (Fians, 2022). In this context, ethnic education systems and other grassroots movements may offer valuable insights into how education can embody transformative political ideas and serve as a space to rehearse a future political settlement.

### **Agenda for educational research** (Rinehart et al., 2024b)

Moving forward, research is needed to examine whether and how an inclusive national education system for Myanmar is being envisioned, particularly considering education’s dual potential

as a peacebuilder and liberator. This includes investigating how education systems might overcome historical grievances and foster reconciliation while addressing disparities in access and quality. This necessitates formative research into how such a project may be conceptualised by different stakeholders, addressing questions such as:

- What are the aspirations and expectations of different stakeholders – including parents, educators, and students – regarding the outcomes of education in Myanmar?
- What are the possibilities for systems coherence within the current situation of education fragmentation?
- What is the status of governance structures and educational policies in parallel education systems with regard to the wider educational context of Myanmar?

Design research is also required to explore feasible and desirable pathways for an inclusive national education system, considering how such a proposition might address the challenges around inter-group and political reconciliation in Myanmar.

## **Conclusion**

Education in Myanmar represents a paradox: It has been a tool of oppression and a means towards self-determination; a vehicle for systemic violence and a pathway to peace with justice. The journey towards establishing a free, democratic and potentially federal political settlement in Myanmar must recognise this education-peace-conflict nexus. Acknowledging education's role as both a victim and perpetrator of violence is crucial for harnessing its potential as a peacebuilder and liberator.

Future efforts may address the deep-rooted historical grievances embedded within Myanmar's education sector and foster inclusivity and reconciliation. They may involve a reimagining of education as a space for collaboration across divides, where multiple narratives and perspectives coexist. If the gaps between educational systems can be bridged, Myanmar may begin to envision a national education sector that not only addresses inequalities but also contributes to border aspirations for democracy and peace with justice.

Ultimately, the question remains: Can education lead the political imagination of Myanmar's conflict-affected society? The answer lies in the ability of stakeholders to transform the sector into a model of equity, inclusivity and prefiguration, rehearsing the script for a just, pluralist nation-state.

## References

- Affolter, F.W. and A. Azaryeva Valente (2020) 'Learning for Peace: Lessons Learned from UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education, and Advocacy in Conflict-Affected Context Programme' in N. Balvin and D.J. Christie (eds) *Children and Peace*. Cham: Springer, pp. 219-239. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22176-8\\_14](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22176-8_14)
- Burde, D., Guven, O., Kelcey, J., Lahmann, H. and K. Al-Abbadi (2015) *What Works to Promote Children's Educational Access, Quality of Learning, and Wellbeing in Crisis-Affected Contexts*. Prepared for DfID and INEE. New York: NYU. <https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/Education-emergencies-rigorous-review-2015-10.pdf>
- Bush, K.D. and D. Saltarelli (eds) (2000) *The Two Faces of Education in Ethnic Conflict: Towards a Peacebuilding Education for Children*. Siena, Italy: UNICEF Innocenti Insight.
- Ferguson, J. (2015) 'Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar' in *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 171(1): 1-28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43819166>
- Fians, G. (2022) 'Prefigurative politics' in F. Stein (ed) *The Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. <http://doi.org/10.29164/22prefigpolitics>
- Global Coalition to Protect Education from Attack (GCPEA) (2024). *Education Under Attack 2024: Country Profiles: Myanmar*. Prepared for GCPEA. New York: GCPEA.
- Institute for Economics & Peace [IEP] and the Global Partnership for Education [GPE] (2024) *Key Findings from Analyses on the Relationship between Education and Peace*. GPE Background Research. Washington D.C.: GPE. <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2024-04-iep-gpe-key-findings-education-and-peace-rev1.pdf>
- Lall, M. (2020). *Myanmar's Education Reforms: A pathway to social justice?* London: UCL Press. <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787353695>

- Langer, A. and L. Kuppens (2019) 'Horizontal inequalities and conflict: Education as a separate dimension of horizontal inequalities' in *Education and Conflict Review*, 2: 38-43.
- McCormick, P. (ed) (2016) 'Does language equal ethnicity in Burma?' in *The Newsletter*. Leiden: International Institute for Asian Studies. [https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/127180/1/IIAS\\_NL75\\_FULL.pdf](https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/127180/1/IIAS_NL75_FULL.pdf)
- Nash, M. (1963) 'Buddhism in Everyday Life' in *American Anthropologist*, 65(2): 285-295. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1963.65.2.02a00050>
- Novelli, M., Lopes Cardozo, M. and A. Smith (2017) 'The 4RS Framework: Analysing Education's Contribution to Sustainable Peacebuilding with Social Justice in Conflict-Affected Contexts' in *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, 3(1): 14-43. <https://doi.org/10.17609/N8S94K>
- Novelli, M., Lopes Cardozo, M. and A. Smith (2019) 'The '4 Rs' as a tool for critical policy analysis of the education sector in conflict affected states' in *Education and Conflict Review*, 2: 70-75. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10081589>
- Pherali, T. (2016) 'School Leadership during Violent Conflict: Rethinking Education for Peace in Nepal and Beyond' in *Comparative Education*, 52(4): 473-491. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2016.1219538>
- Pherali, T. (2022) *Conflict, Education and Peace in Nepal: Rebuilding Education for Peace and Development*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350028784>
- Radio Free Asia [RFA] (2024) 'Some 13,700 schools in Myanmar are closed due to civil war.' 8 July. <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/schools-closed-airstrikes-07082024171114.html>
- Rinehart, G., Pherali, T., Chase, E., Zaw, H.T. and T. Naing (2024a) *Diversity and Fragmentation of Myanmar Education: Schooling Shaped by Protracted Conflict and Crisis*. ERICC Working Paper. New York: IRC. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.27105559.v3>
- Rinehart, G., Naing, T., Pherali, T., Chase, E. and H.T. Zaw (2024b) *Education Research Agenda in Conflict-Affected Contexts of Myanmar 2024*. ERICC Working Paper. New York: ERICC. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.28058162.v2>
- Silverstein, J. (1968). 'Burmese Student Politics in a Changing Society' in *Daedalus*, 97(1): 274-292. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i20023793>
- Smith, D.E. (1965). *Religion and Politics in Burma*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- South, A., Stenning, E. and T. Schroeder (2024) 'Education Reform in Post-Coup Myanmar: Federalizing or Federating?' in *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 46(2): 318-341. [https://www.ashleysouth.co.uk/files/CS46\\_2\\_006.pdf](https://www.ashleysouth.co.uk/files/CS46_2_006.pdf)
- Than Htut (2005). *Selected Writings of U Than Htut (Taik Soe)*. Yangon: Myanmar Historical Commission.
- Yates, L. (2020) 'Prefigurative Politics and Social Movement Strategy: The Roles of Prefiguration in the Reproduction, Mobilisation and Coordination of Movements' in *Political Studies*, 69(4): 1033-1052. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321720936046>

# **Myanmar's Foreign Policy and the Post-2021 Coup: Reactions of the International Community**

*Dr Michal Lubina*

Myanmar/Burma's foreign policy, though often puzzling to foreign observers, has remained relatively consistent and consequential. Since its entry into the modern capitalist world in the 19th century, Burmese political elites have consistently prioritised sovereignty, striving for a foreign policy aimed at warding off external threats. In the postcolonial era, this focus translated into a non-aligned foreign policy, which endured throughout the Cold War. After the Cold War, Myanmar adopted a policy of partial isolationism, punctuated by periods of opening—most notably in the 2010s. However, the ill-conceived 2021 coup plunged Myanmar into deeper isolation, reinforcing the entrenched political instincts of the Burmese military elites.

The first part of this article explores these developments in Myanmar's foreign policy. The second part examines the international community's reactions to the 2021 coup, which can largely be characterised by a “wait-and-see” approach.

## **The Background**

Myanmar remains a puzzle for foreign policy scholars and analysts. The country has traditionally formulated its foreign policy on the sovereignty principle. Despite changes of elites and political regimes, this tendency remained quite consistent.

In the case of countries such as Burma/Myanmar, cognitive variables that affect the decision-making process are equally important as objective factors. Such aspects as (mis)perceptions, (mis)trust, and an (in)ability to see other states' intentions are fundamentally important (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016). It is so because politics, including foreign policy, is done by political elites, concrete individuals with their own ideas, preconceptions, and prejudices (Rose 1998). In Myanmar, just like in other

authoritarian countries such as Russia or China, the culture of confidentiality dominates, the input is limited to the selected few, one can rarely be sure who initiated or influenced the decision-making process, and clarity emerges only with time, if ever (Lo, 2015). For example, it is doubtful whether we will ever know what was discussed and what was agreed on during a series of behind-the-scenes negotiations between Aung San Suu Kyi and the generals in December 2015 that paved the way for the opposition leader's ascension to power.

Historically speaking, the major threats to Myanmar/Burma elites were both internal and external. The latter overshadowed the incursion of Burma into the modern capitalist world – colonial Britain conquered Burma in three wars in the 19th century. As for the former (internal threats), they became more problematic after Burma's independence in 1948. Burma was besieged by internal conflicts, including centrifugal tendencies (two major and a couple of minor), threatening the very existence of the state. Nevertheless, it survived and, despite changed circumstances, continues to conduct a coherent, consequential foreign policy.

### **Prehistory: The Mindonian Tradition**

Burma entered the Western-dominated international world order in the nineteenth century with the position of a regional power. This attitude made Burmese royal elites overlook the mortal threat: the British in India. The result was the stage-by-stage annexation of the kingdom to the British Indian Empire. In the interlude between the Second and Third Anglo-Burmese Wars, it seemed for a while that the independence of the core of the Kingdom of Burma could have been preserved. A new, dynamic king, Mindon (1852-1878), set off for a series of grand reforms. Aside from ambitious domestic modernisation, he wanted to adopt Burma into the modern world and establish a tradition of balancing foreign policy. Mindon's overriding aim was to preserve the kingdom's independence through the cultivation of good relations with Britain on one hand and the establishment of diplomatic and commercial relations with rival European powers on the other – he hoped to “enmesh Burma in

a web of international contacts which would make further British expansion as diplomatically costly as possible" (Thant Myint-U 2001, 128). Unfortunately, given the real balance of power, this was an incorrect assumption: "the advent of European rivals in the later nineteenth century gave Burma a temptation, not an opportunity" (Tarling 1999, p. 37). When Mindon's son and successor, Thibaw (who did not share his father's prudence), rejected the offer of an Anglo-Burmese treaty between him and Queen Victoria, and "adding rashness to unwisdom," started secret negotiations with France (Tarling 1999, s. 35), the British attacked again, conquered, and colonised Burma for good. Burma lost its independence for more than 60 years.

Although Mindon's foreign policy in the end didn't achieve its primary goal: to prevent colonial take-over, nevertheless, the glass may be considered half full as well. It was during Mindon's reign that the foreign policy imperatives and goals were for the first time conceptualised, a tradition of foreign policy that can perhaps be called Mindonian.

## **The Postcolonial Period**

Just after achieving independence, Burma faced the danger of the Cold War, potentially spilling over into its territory. Understanding the perils of taking sides led to choosing a neutral foreign policy (Taylor 2009, 265). Domestic power struggles and the perception of threats among the elites influenced this decision.

The ruling Pasapala (Anti-Fascist People's League) represented local anti-colonialists and socialists who fought with two major enemies, the communists from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB, divided into two "flags") and the ethnic insurgents (initially mostly the Karen, later much more). The reality of the civil war forced the anti-colonial Pasapala leaders to mend fences with former colonialists: thanks to British (and Indian) military assistance, the communists were beaten (though not completely), and the Karens could not take over Rangoon. Thus, accommodation with former colonialists helped the Pasapala's government to survive the Burmese "years of living dangerously" (1948-1949). Later, by 1950, when the position of the government

became more stable due to victories over communists and Karen, Pasapala distanced itself from Western powers. Unfortunately, just as Pasapala fended off the communist and Karen threats, a new menace emerged: Kuomintang forces that escaped China after losing their civil war to the CCP's People's Liberation Army entered Burma from the north. Not only did a foreign army (backed by the CIA) start stationing in Burma, but their presence also invited the PLA's intervention, producing a mortal threat to Burma's independence (Trager 1956, 99; Callahan 2003, 172-202). In order to survive, the Pasapala government must have accommodated the People's Republic of China, and it did. Burma was the first Asian country to recognise the PRC; Prime Minister U Nu praised Mao Zedong in person in Beijing and hosted Zhou Enlai in Rangoon (Myoe 2011, 43). Peking-Rangoon relations improved to such an extent that China and Burma signed a border agreement in 1960 and fought against the remnants of the KMT forces in 1961 (Smith 1999, 189). Coming closer to the PRC also meant the necessity to distance Burma from the USA (Taylor 2009, 266). Rangoon did it by both fighting the (CIA-backed) KMT forces and discounting the American aid programme (Selth 2002, 46). This policy made much sense, as it crossed out the KMT threat and fended off the possibility of Peking's support for the CPB and/or ethnic insurgents. Thus, domestic calculations led to Rangoon's distancing from the West and embracing China. Economically, it was disadvantageous, but in terms of the security of both the state and the ruling elites, it was a correct choice.

In 1962, the Tatmadaw (Burma's military) took over power in its second coup d'état. The coup and its consequences had a devastating effect on Burma, impoverishing the country. Yet in foreign policy, the Tatmadaw's rule has not brought about many changes (unless one counts the decreasing international reputation of Burma); it represented continuity rather than change. Under the rule of General Ne Win, Rangoon retreated from the international community, shunning most international contacts (Selth 2002, 46) and finding solace in isolationism, autarchy, and xenophobia (Egreteau, Jagan 2013, 55). Domestic, autarchic policy distanced Burma further from the West (Taylor 2009, 356), yet Ne Win was careful to keep a balance

and maintained good relations with the USA (Thant Myint-U 2006, 302). The same can be said about ties with the USSR. His neutrality helped him to escape the fate of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, which were thrown into the Vietnam War (Second Indochina War).

The major problem Ne Win faced was China. Peking radicalised itself after the Cultural Revolution and started a covert operation against Burma in 1968, massively supporting the pro-Chinese CPB. The threat to Burma was real, but Chinese-backed CPB forces, despite seizing huge sway over Burma's northeastern territories, were stopped by the Tatmadaw at the Salween River in 1973, which proved to be the turning point (Smith 1999, 250-262). Once Mao Zedong died and his widow lost the power struggle in Peking, Ne Win mended fences with the PRC by calling pro-Chinese Pol Pot in Cambodia, inviting Deng Xiaoping to Burma, and withdrawing from (now Soviet-dominated) the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979. It was worth it: Beijing significantly lowered its support for the CPB and did not save the party from dissolution in 1989.

### **Isolation after 1988**

The change of the international order from the Cold War to the “unipolar moment” was bad news for the Burmese ruling elites. In the changed realities, they formulated their foreign policy on the basis of regime security.

In 1988, mass protests led to Ne Win's resignation, yet his colleagues brutally pacified the protests in September 1988, establishing another military junta, the SLORC. Aung San Suu Kyi, Aung San's daughter, and her party, the NLD, emerged as their new major opponent. In order to anticipate an alliance between the NLD and the EAOs, the regime offered the EAOs an olive branch: a series of ceasefire agreements. As many of the EAOs signed these ceasefires, Tatmadaw was able to focus on neutralising the NLD. The generals remained at the helm by repressing the NLD and other opposition forces, and by locking Suu Kyi in house arrest. The regime won the first round of the post-1988 political

struggle in Myanmar, though Suu Kyi remained in the ring thanks to Western support.

Aung San Suu Kyi based her strategy on popular support and foreign, Western backing. Her calls for sanctions and boycotts found a receptive audience in the West. During the era of “unipolar moment” (Krauthammer, 1991), that is, the 1990s and 2000s, the priorities of the victorious power in the Cold War, the USA, altered. Washington no longer had to compete for influence in such countries as Myanmar; now it believed it could concentrate on such aspects as human rights. The Burmese generals underestimated this change and were surprised to be now criticised on human rights grounds. Plus, Suu Kyi unexpectedly became hugely popular in the West, achieving an iconic status (Zöllner 2012, 277-359) and becoming the reference point for Western foreign policies towards Myanmar (Lubina, 2021). She used her position to call for Western sanctions/boycotts in order to pressure the generals; consequently, the SLORC/SPDC regime has not received either major Western foreign investment or humanitarian assistance. Unluckily for the regime, this took place during the transformation of Yangon’s economic policy, from socialist autarchy to crony capitalism. Thus, the regime faced a dire policy choice: either accommodate Suu Kyi in order to appease the West or continue to rule without legitimacy, under Western sanctions. Given the fact that the junta misperceived the Western intentions, believing that Washington and other Western capitals wanted to overthrow the junta (which was not the case) (Lubina & Fyderek, forthcoming), the regime chose the latter. Rangoon/Naypyidaw embarked on “isolationism without isolation”: it withdrew from engagement with the international community and maintained ties with only a couple of the most important countries, such as China, Thailand, Singapore, India, and Japan (Egretteau and Jagan, 2008). This was economically unprofitable for Myanmar, yet it guaranteed regime survival. Thanks to leaning on China, and to a lesser extent on other Asian neighbours, the military regime survived. This was not in Myanmar’s state’s best interest, but certainly it was in the regime’s best interest.

## The Transformation Era

Starting in 2010 (or 2011, as marking the beginning point remains problematic), the regime carried out its transformation process. Under the former general, now civilian, Thein Sein, the regime decided to reform the country in order to stay in power. Thein Sein's advisors understood the need to accommodate Suu Kyi in order to appease the West (Ye Htut 2019, 50-53). Unexpectedly, a rapprochement came into being, with Suu Kyi agreeing to enter the Tatmadaw political system with the hope of changing it from inside (Thant Myint-U 2019, 148). Internationally, Thein Sein used Obama's pivot/rebalancing to Asia and managed to restore balance in Naypyidaw's foreign policy. This is how the Burmese transformation came into being, marked by impressive economic reforms and the NLD's electoral victory in 2015. The US and other Western countries suspended sanctions and reengaged with Myanmar, flooding it with grants, assistance, and loans.

After the NLD's victorious 2015 elections, Suu Kyi (not without hurdles) formed the opposition government and started ruling as the State Counsellor in 2016. In her foreign policy, there was again more continuity than change. Partially, it was because the NLD had to function within the military-orchestrated political system, which granted the army significant official and unofficial power, restricting Suu Kyi's moves. More importantly, from the very beginning, she understood that the Tatmadaw remained the most important threat to her rule, as it could overthrow her anyway. That's why the NLD did not touch the privileges of the Tatmadaw, maintained good relations with army-associated crony capitalists, and did not try to influence the army's policy towards the EAOs. The NLD government, in many ways, continued Thein Sein's policy. All in order to appease the Tatmadaw.

In foreign policy, the most visible example of it came in 2017 when Suu Kyi did not condemn the Tatmadaw over the Rohingya expulsion. Given the popular dislike towards the Rohingya, Suu Kyi could not have risked popular support or provoking the army to stage a coup; sacrificing foreign backing (support from the West) was less politically costly for her. Instead, Suu Kyi has found

new international friends, not only at Zhongnanhai, but also in Japan, South Korea, and India. Unfortunately, this proved to be a temporary achievement, as she was toppled by the army in 2021.

## **The post-2021 coup realities**

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's Armed Forces, staged its fourth coup in history, ending the Burmese political transition (2011–2021) that had produced a relatively positive decade in the 2010s. The coup terminated this progress. Civilian leaders, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint, were arrested and later jailed, peaceful protests were violently crushed, and the military state, in place in Myanmar since 1962, was restored. The coup, probably conceived as a conservative course correction, proved devastating for Myanmar in all aspects: economic, political, social, and international. Long-term ethnic insurgencies against the Tatmadaw were joined by Bamar-led domestic armed guerrillas, known as the People's Defence Forces (PDFs). Since 2021, over 100 PDFs have been fighting the Tatmadaw nationwide, producing anarchy, economic collapse, and state failure. The current stage of civil war has created a political stalemate and creeping anarchy, with dire consequences for Myanmar. In the meantime, the external world mostly watches from the sidelines, limiting itself to ineffective diplomatic activities (ASEAN neighbours), moral condemnation (the West), reluctant acceptance of the new junta (China), and political support for the junta (Russia). Despite their differing political agendas, most foreign countries are waiting for someone to win the civil war or at least restore governability before they consider serious reengagement with this war-torn country.

The description of international reactions to the coup should begin with the People's Republic of China. Although the Myanmar-China relationship is hardly a *pauk phaw* (Burmese: 'siblings'), the PRC remains the country with the largest influence in Myanmar, though not unlimited influence. Beijing was the international patron of Than Shwe's junta. Later, it had a more complicated relationship with Thein Sein and a relatively positive one with Aung San Suu Kyi. The State Counsellor considered China to be

much more of a chance for (dependent) development than a threat to Myanmar, so she embraced Kyaukphyu SEZ, regional connectivity, transportation, and many other Chinese initiatives later labelled under the Belt and Road umbrella. A visible sign of good personal-cum-political relations between Suu Kyi and Xi Jinping was Xi's visit to Myanmar in 2019, his last trip before the COVID-19 pandemic. Beijing, thus, was not happy about the coup; apparently, it even tried to prevent it. Once the putsch occurred anyway, the PRC remained cautious: on the one hand, *Xinhua* called the coup 'a cabinet reshuffle' (Xinhua, 2021), winning the global competition for the best euphemism for a coup d'état. On the other hand, Zhongnanhai did not support the generals either, holding informal talks with the resistance movement and even occasionally allowing Chinese outlets to report on Burmese protests. Although the Burmese protestors themselves happily accused Beijing of supporting the junta, boycotted Chinese products, and even set fire to Chinese factories and threatened to blow up the Arakan-China pipeline, the real Chinese approach was much more complex. Beijing did not support the junta or the demonstrators (Kironska & Dija Jiang, 2022). China was practising what is called *zuo shan guan hu dou*, 'sitting on a hill watching the tigers fight'. As time passed and the 'tiger' of Tatmadaw appeared stronger, China grew closer to recognising the military regime (calling Min Aung Hlaing 'the leader of Myanmar' by mid-2021), approving funds for infrastructure projects, and providing COVID-19 vaccines (Kironska & Dija Jiang, 2022). In July 2022, Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Myanmar, becoming the highest-ranking Chinese official to do so after the 2021 coup. Beijing's tilt towards Tatmadaw arose from a reluctant acceptance of the coup as 'a fait accompli' and a hope to restore a sort of normality that would advance China's economic and strategic interests in Myanmar (Strangio, 2022). Given these priorities, 'appearing neutral' would have become more costly for China's strategic interests (Kironska & Dija Jiang, 2022), so Beijing reluctantly moved away from its initial reserve. In 2024, responding to the junta's series of military defeats, China increased its support for the junta. The most visible sign of this was Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Shanghai in November 2024.

ASEAN represents another major foreign actor in Myanmar—or rather, it should represent one. Internal divisions within the Association prevent ASEAN from playing a constructive role in the crisis. Historically, within ASEAN, the ‘insular’ states (Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Brunei—although Bandar Seri Begawan is generally disinterested in Burmese affairs) had a more assertive approach toward Burmese generals, whereas the ‘continental’ countries (Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia) were more critical of atrocities committed by the Tatmadaw. This is likely due to the domestic political systems within ASEAN countries (dictatorships or quasi-democracies tend to be more sympathetic toward the Burmese junta) and the intensity (or lack thereof) of economic ties with Myanmar (Thailand and Vietnam have significant economic relations with Naypyidaw; in Thailand’s case, Myanmar also represents a security challenge too as its instability affects the Kingdom of Thailand).

This time, in the aftermath of the 2021 coup, the pattern repeated itself almost identically. Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia expressed concerns, while Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines described the putsch as an ‘internal affair’. The Philippines’ position slightly differed; alongside Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, it called for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, so it was not as neutral (meaning pro-junta) as Thailand and Cambodia. Regarding ASEAN as an organisation, it issued a lightly worded statement (calling for “dialogue” and “a return to normalcy”, ASEAN Chairman’s Statement, 2021) and held talks with the Burmese junta on 2 March (Timeline, 2021). This was because ASEAN is seriously constrained by its *ASEAN Way*, built on Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence (which include non-interference) and historically resentful of other actors (read: the West) meddling in the domestic affairs of its members. As the pacification in Myanmar continued, with the death toll rising and global criticism growing, ASEAN slightly diverted from its non-interference stance by holding an extraordinary meeting with junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in Jakarta on 24 April 2021. The Burmese dictator apparently agreed to the ‘Five-Point Consensus’, which included: an immediate end to violence in the country;

dialogue between all parties; the appointment of a special envoy; humanitarian assistance by ASEAN; and the special envoy's visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties (Five-Point Consensus, 2021). The Five-Point Consensus was globally hailed at the time as the way to resolve the crisis (other actors were happy to outsource the Myanmar issue to ASEAN). However, it proved bogus. Upon returning to Myanmar, Min Aung Hlaing almost instantly defied its most important parts (end of violence, dialogue) and paid only lip service to the other points (HRW, 2022b).

It took ASEAN four months to appoint a special envoy. Naypyidaw wanted a Thai politician, whereas Indonesia and Malaysia pushed for a more assertive candidate; ultimately, a compromise Bruneian diplomat, Yusof Erywan, was chosen. His task was difficult from the outset, as Burmese generals did everything to undermine his mission, including blocking his plan to meet Aung San Suu Kyi. Frustrated, Erywan publicly accused Myanmar of 'inaction' and 'backtracking' (Reuters, 2021) before cancelling his visit to Myanmar. ASEAN—or Brunei, to be precise—irritated by this treatment of their envoy, resorted to a serious diplomatic gesture: it did not invite a political representative from Myanmar to the ASEAN annual summit in 2021. This unprecedented action showed ASEAN's dislike for Myanmar's behaviour but predictably did not lead to any breakthrough.

If the 'stick' didn't work, then Cambodia, which took over the Association's chairmanship in 2022, decided that a 'carrot' might. Diplomatic visits between Phnom Penh and Naypyidaw commenced, including those by Cambodia's Prak Sokhonn (who replaced Erywan as ASEAN's special envoy to Myanmar) and Hun Sen (Cambodia's Prime Minister, effectively a dictator) to Naypyidaw on 7 January 2022. Hun Sen was the first global leader to meet Min Aung Hlaing (Russia's Vladimir Putin came second in September 2022). By meeting him, Cambodia, to use the Chinese expression, 'granted him face' (*gei mianzi*). But this did not help either; Burmese generals continued pacifying the resistance, showing almost total disregard for the Five-Point Consensus, which is effectively politically dead. Frustrated, ASEAN countries resolved to 'indifference', as Malaysian Foreign

Minister Saifuddin Abdullah called it (Malaysia Now, 2021). For now, ASEAN waits for the political situation in Myanmar to clarify before reengaging with Naypyidaw.

Two other important players in Myanmar, Japan and India, have also remained cautious. Tokyo indirectly criticised the coup, calling for support of democracy, against the reversal of the process, and for the release of Suu Kyi (Motegi, 2021). In a highly publicised move, Japan's beverage giant Kirin withdrew from Myanmar in the aftermath of the coup (HRW, 2022a). However, Tokyo was careful not to burn bridges with the Tatmadaw. It stopped new economic assistance (DW, 2021) but not the ongoing aid; it also continued the training programme for Burmese officers, despite public criticism in Japan. Eventually, Tokyo conceded and terminated the programme in September 2022 after another public outcry following the Tatmadaw's executions of political prisoners (The Diplomat, 2022).

Since the coup, Japan's Burmese policy has been stuck between a rock and a hard place. Japanese society supports the democracy movement in Myanmar and calls for sanctions and boycotts. At the same time, Japanese business and diplomatic circles are more prone to believe (or pretend to believe) in the Tatmadaw's version of events that led to the coup (Takeda, 2022). This stance stems from a "damage control" strategy. Historically, and particularly in the 2010s, Japan invested significantly in Myanmar, both politically and economically (loans, grants, investments, SEEs, etc.). Tokyo does not want to lose all of this investment or surrender its influence in Myanmar (again) to China. Therefore, the Japanese government appeases the domestic public with oral criticism of the Tatmadaw's atrocities and low-level political decisions that lightly punish Naypyidaw, while hoping to wait out the crisis and see the situation in Myanmar stabilise in one way or another.

India also waits, but New Delhi is more sympathetic towards the Tatmadaw than Tokyo. New Delhi referred to the 2021 coup as "the development," thus challenging China's Xinhua agency for the most euphemistic name for a putsch but noted it "with deep

concern” (MEA, 2021). Since then, India has condemned violence and expressed deep concern over the executions of political prisoners, while an Indian company withdrew from a project to build a new port in Yangon (DW, 2022). However, New Delhi has not affirmed the result of the 2020 elections, nullified by the coup, sent its representation to Myanmar Army Day in 2021, continued to sell arms to Naypyidaw even after the coup, cooperated in agriculture, and gave a diplomatic boost to the junta by engaging with their electoral commission. India also allowed its new Ambassador, Vinay Kumar, to present his credentials to Min Aung Hlaing—a gesture avoided by many countries that downgraded their diplomatic presence in Myanmar (The Irrawaddy, 2022; East Asia Forum, 2022).

This policy stems from strategic (competition with China), cross-border (joint counterinsurgency operations with the Tatmadaw), and economic (Kaladan project in Rakhine, as well as other initiatives in western Myanmar) considerations. Therefore, New Delhi’s cautious policy of official neutrality in Myanmar’s domestic conflict is, in reality, geared towards the Tatmadaw. India waits for anyone to win the civil war in Myanmar and bets that it will be the Tatmadaw, but, just in case, it has yet to firmly dot the “i”.

The country that most strongly counts on the Tatmadaw’s victory is Russia, a relatively new major player in Myanmar. Historically, Russia has been a secondary player in Myanmar, despite being a socialist fellow traveller during the Cold War. Until the 2021 coup, Russia cooperated with the Tatmadaw, trained Burmese officers, supported Naypyidaw diplomatically (e.g., through its 2007 UNSC veto), held talks about nuclear cooperation, and, most importantly, sold arms to Myanmar, becoming one of the most important military equipment providers to the Tatmadaw (Lutz-Auras, 2015). The 2010s decade saw Russia fade into the background as other foreign countries became more significant players, yet Moscow continued cultivating ties with the Tatmadaw all along.

The main reason was commercial—Myanmar has been a very good client for Moscow, purchasing a significant amount of arms.

The Russian Federation's Defence Minister, Sergei Shoigu, visited Naypyidaw in January 2021, just eleven days before the coup. Despite various conspiracy theories about "Russia's hand" in the coup, the timing of this visit was most likely a coincidence. Nonetheless, such rumours helped Moscow improve its profile at little cost by pretending to be more influential than it was in reality.

After the coup, Russia openly supported the Tatmadaw. Moscow sent its highest-ranking official, Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin, to attend the 27th March Myanmar Armed Forces Day, hosted by Min Aung Hlaing three times in 2021 and 2022, and, after a year and a half and two earlier visits, eventually allowed the Burmese dictator to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2022 in Vladivostok. Crucially, Moscow also continued arms sales to the Tatmadaw, which are critical for its survival.

Russia is the ideal arms supplier for the Tatmadaw, far superior to China in this regard. Russian equipment, such as small aircraft and helicopters, is more suitable for the Tatmadaw's needs, and Moscow exclusively sells these arms to the Tatmadaw, while China supplies weapons to both the Burmese army and the EAOs (Mendelson, 2022). For this reason, Russian military equipment plays a critical role in the Tatmadaw's strategy of wiping out the resistance by leveraging superior firepower. Additionally, Russia is an ideal partner for the Tatmadaw because, unlike China, it is geographically distant, politically relatively weak, and therefore neither strategically nor economically threatening.

These factors have led the Burmese generals to enthusiastically embrace Russia since the coup, while Moscow, despite its support, has remained more reserved. However, following the Kremlin's disastrous second invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Russia's subsequent global isolation, Moscow has enhanced its cooperation with Naypyidaw, symbolised by the Putin–Min Aung Hlaing meeting in September 2022. Although Russia is still not as politically significant in Myanmar as China, ASEAN, Japan, or India, if the Tatmadaw wins the civil war, Moscow would be the biggest political winner among foreign countries.

Last but not least, the West. Although the analytical category of “the West” is debatable, as Western countries are quite diverse and their policies vary significantly (for example, historically, Germany has had more understanding of Burmese juntas than, say, Canada), for simplicity’s sake, Western reactions to the 2021 coup and its aftermath will be summarised collectively. Western capitals unequivocally condemned the coup and the continuing violence. On the diplomatic level, Western nations did not recognise the SAC junta and downgraded their diplomatic missions, which at times provoked incidents, such as the Burmese expulsion of UK chargé d’affaires Pete Vowles in July 2022. Vowles was nominated but did not present his credentials to the SAC, leading to his expulsion by the military. However, Western capitals also did not recognise the National Unity Government (NUG), although several Western politicians engaged with NUG representatives. The most prominent meetings included NUG representatives’ discussions with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in October 2021 and with US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman in May 2022. Symbolically, the French Senate and the European Parliament passed resolutions supporting the recognition of the NUG, though these actions were only symbolic.

Diplomatically more significant was Western support for Kyaw Moe Tun, the Burmese Permanent Representative to the UN, who was nominated by the Suu Kyi government before the coup. Following the coup, he famously renounced the military takeover during a UN General Assembly session, using the three-fingered salute adopted as a symbol of the anti-junta resistance (UN News, 2021). Since then, the Tatmadaw generals have unsuccessfully attempted to both replace and assassinate him (CNN, 2021), but he has survived both politically and physically. Refusing to vacate his seat, he aligned with the NUG by accepting their nomination. To this day, his continued presence at the UN remains one of the NUG’s biggest diplomatic assets. This would not have been possible without Western support—most notably, recognition from the USA. Similarly, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, supported Kyaw Moe Tun’s position, despite the junta’s repeated and desperate attempts to replace

him with their nominee. The SAC proved to be helpless in this regard; even China declined to assist the Tatmadaw. Instead, Beijing reached a compromise with the US in September 2021 to maintain the status quo—allowing Kyaw Moe Tun to retain his position but requiring him to keep a low profile (Foreign Policy, 2021). This arrangement has persisted, benefiting the NUG while disadvantaging the SAC. Unfortunately, this represents one of the NUG’s very few political victories.

Western support has proven even more critical in the economic dimension. Western countries reintroduced sanctions on Myanmar, starting with the UK and Canada in February 2021, followed by the US that same month and the EU in March 2021. Initially, these sanctions were largely symbolic (particularly those from the EU, which targeted only individuals), but they became more serious when the UK sanctioned MEHL (Myanmar Economic Holding Public Company) and MEC (Myanmar Economic Corporation) in late March/early April 2021. Another wave of sanctions followed in June 2021 (from the USA, UK, and EU) and on the first anniversary of the coup (from the US, UK, and Canada). The latter US sanctions targeted the 66th Light Infantry Division as well as several entities, including Myanmar Chemical & Machinery Company Limited (MC&M), International Gateways Group of Company Limited (IGG), Htoo Group of Companies (Htoo Group), and the Asian Green Development Bank (AGDB). In October 2022, the US finally sanctioned individuals and an entity involved in arms deals (Burma sanctions, 2022; Sanctions Targeting Myanmar, 2022).

Perhaps the most impactful of these sanctions was the EU’s February 2022 decision to sanction Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which occurred a month after Total and Chevron decided to terminate their lucrative cooperation with MOGE. This was a strong political move, as MOGE accounted for around 50% of Myanmar’s foreign currency revenue from gas exports. Sanctioning MOGE aimed to cut off one of the military’s major revenue streams (Al Jazeera, 2022a). This must have dealt a significant blow to the Tatmadaw. In short, the 2021–2022 Western sanctions have been unprecedented in scale, far harsher than those imposed in the 1990s and 2000s.

Yet, as of now, the Tatmadaw has managed to survive these measures. Although the Western sanctions are stronger than before, they remain insufficient to topple the junta. The situation echoes the past: the West's economic influence in Myanmar is too limited to effect regime change through sanctions alone. Such an outcome would require the cooperation of Myanmar's Asian neighbours, who, as in the 1990s and 2000s, are unwilling to act. The situation appears to have come full circle.

Given these circumstances, the only way the West could truly make a difference would be to support the PDFs militarily to help overthrow the junta. However, this approach is fraught with risks, particularly given the stances of China and India. Moreover, the broader Asian perspective is important: East, South, and Southeast Asian countries have historically been wary of Western-backed regime changes, and this wariness is not without reason. Myanmar is globally too insignificant to justify provoking a crisis with Beijing or New Delhi, and the West is already preoccupied with the Russo-Ukrainian war. Thus, military support for the PDFs remains a political fantasy. Western capitals continue to rely on the "minimum necessary" actions—sanctions, symbolic UN representation, and vocal moral condemnation of the junta—to appease their domestic audiences. Any more serious measures, such as officially recognising the NUG or re-engaging with Myanmar economically, remain contingent on the situation becoming clearer. For now, the West, like others, is waiting for the situation to clarify.

## References:

- Adekele, A. (2003–2004). The strings of neutralism: Burma and the Colombo Plan. *Pacific Affairs*. 76, 4, pp. 593–610.
- Al-Jazeera* (2021, October 21). 'Timeline: ASEAN tries to tackle Myanmar's worsening crisis'. Retrieved on 23.10.2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/26/asean-myanmar-timeline>
- Al-Jazeera* (2022a, February 22). "New EU sanctions target Myanmar military's lucrative gas firm." Retrieved on 24.10.2022, from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/22/new-eu-sanctions-target-myanmar-militarys-lucrative-gas-firm>

- Al-Jazeera* (2022b, June 23). UN expert calls for Myanmar action as death toll tops 2,000. retrieved on 11.10.2022, from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/6/23/un-expert-calls-for-myanmar-action-as-death-toll-tops-2000>
- ASEAN Chairman's Statement on The Developments in The Republic of The Union of Myanmar (2021, February 1). ASEAN, org. Retrieved on 23.10.2022, from: <https://asean.org/asean-chairmans-statement-on-the-developments-in-the-republic-of-the-union-of-myanmar-2/>
- Aung Zaw. 2012. *The Face of Resistance. Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's Fight for Freedom*, Bangkok: Mekong Press.
- Barrington, J. (1958). "The Concept of Neutralism. What lies behind Burma's foreign policy." "Burma. A Special Supplement". *The Atlantic*. February 1958. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/09/burma-a-special-supplement/306820/>
- Bünthe, M. (2014). "Burma's transition to quasi-military rule: From rulers to guardians?" *Armed Forces & Society* vol. 40, no. 4, pp. 757–8.
- Callahan, M.P. (2003). *Making Enemies. War and State Building in Burma*. Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press
- Clements, A. (2007). *The Voice of Hope. Conversation with Alan Clements*. London: Penguin.
- Clymer, K. (2015). *A Delicate Relationship. The United States and Burma/ Myanmar Since 1945*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press
- CNN (2021, August 7). "Two men arrested in US over alleged plot to kill Myanmar's UN ambassador", retrieved on 24.10.2022, from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/07/asia/myanmar-kyaw-moe-tun-plot-intl-hnk/index.html>
- David, S. R. (1991). Explaining Third World Alignment, *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Jan), pp. 233-256.
- Davies A. (2022, August 31). Myanmar's junta in a serious but not desperate fight. *Asia Times*. Retrieved on 11.10.2022, from <https://asiatimes.com/2022/08/myanmars-junta-in-a-serious-but-not-desperate-fight/>
- Deutsche Welle* (DW) (2021, April 1), "Why is Japan not taking a firm stand against Myanmar junta?" Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-japan-not-taking-a-firm-stand-against-myanmar-junta/a-57075373>
- Deutsche Welle* (DW) (2022, August 2), "What is India's relationship to Myanmar's military junta?" Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.dw.com/en/india-walks-diplomatic-tightrope-on-myanmars-military-junta/a-62685316>

- East Asia Forum* (2022, March 22). "India's cautious approach to the military coup in Myanmar", retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/03/22/indias-cautious-approach-to-the-military-coup-in-myanmar/>
- Egreteau R., Jagan L. (2013). *Soldiers and Diplomacy in Burma. Understanding the Foreign Relations of the Burmese Praetorian State*, Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Egreteau, R. (2016). *Caretaking Democratisation. The Military and Political Change in Myanmar*. London: Hurst
- Egreteau, R., Jagan L. (2008). Back to the Old Habits: Isolationism or the self-preservation of Burma's military regime. *IRASEC Occasional Paper* n°7.
- Fishbein E., Nu Nu Lusan, Vahpual (2021, July 5). What is the Myanmar military's 'four cuts' strategy? *Al-Jazeera*. Retrieved on 11.10.2022, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/5/what-is-the-myanmar-militarys-four-cuts-strategy>
- Five-Point Consensus. Chairman's Statement on the ASEAN Leaders' Meeting* (2021, April 24), ASEAN.org. Retrieved on 23.10.2022, from: <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/Chairmans-Statement-on-ALM-Five-Point-Consensus-24-April-2021-FINAL-a-1.pdf>
- Foreign Policy* (2021, September 13). "U.S. and China Reach Deal to Block Myanmar's Junta From U.N.", retrieved on 24.10.2022, from: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/13/myanmar-united-nations-china-biden-general-assembly/>
- Ganesan N. (2013). Interpreting recent developments in Myanmar as an attempt to establish political legitimacy. *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding*, 1, 2, p. 254.
- Haacke, J. (2004). *Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Domestic Influences and international implication*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Haacke, J. (2011). The nature and management of Myanmar's alignment with China:
- Human Rights Watch* (2022a, February 17). Japan Beverage Giant to Withdraw from Myanmar. Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/17/japan-beverage-giant-withdraw-myanmar>
- Human Rights' Watch* (2022b, April 22). "Myanmar: ASEAN's Failed '5-Point Consensus' a Year-On." Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>
- International Crisis Group (ICJ) (2021, October 20). The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar, Briefing no. 170, retrieved on 10.10.2022,

- from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b170-deadly-stalemate-post-coup-myanmar>
- Jones, L. (2013). "Explaining Myanmar's regime transition: the periphery is central," *Democratisation*, vol. 21, no. 5, pp. 780-802.
- Kironska, K., Jiang, Diya (2022). "China-Myanmar Relations After the 1 February Military Coup." In *Myanmar's Political and Humanitarian Crises: Implications & Responses*, edited by Anthony Ware and Monique Skidmore. Canberra: ANU Press, 2022.
- Lall, M. (2016). *Understanding Reform in Myanmar. People and Society in the Wake of Military Rule*, London: Hurst.
- Lintner, B. (1999). *Burma in Revolt. Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books
- Lubina M. (2022). *The Role of Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar's Transition (2011–2021)*, in: *Demystifying Myanmar's Transition and Political Crisis*, ed. Ch. Yamahata, B. Anderson, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore 2022, p. 25-43
- Lubina, M. (forthcoming), "Waiting for the Dust to Settle. The Creeping Anarchy in Myanmar and the Reactions of the International Community," in: Chosein Yamahata eds., *Social Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand* vol. III, Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore
- Lubina, M., Fyderek Ł. (forthcoming), "Patterns of Myanmar's Foreign Policy: The Case of Omnibalancing in Changing Environment" in: Chosein Yamahata eds., *Social Transformations in India, Myanmar, and Thailand* vol. IV, Palgrave Macmillan: Singapore
- Lutz-Auras, Ludmila (2015). Russia and Myanmar – Friends in Need? *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 34(2), 165–198.
- Malaysia Now (2021, October 21). "Saifuddin calls for rethink of Asean's non-interference policy amid Myanmar crisis", retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.malaysianow.com/news/2021/10/21/saifuddin-calls-for-rethink-of-aseans-non-interference-policy-amid-myanmar-crisis>
- Malik, M. (1994) "Sino—Indian Rivalry in Myanmar: Implications for Regional Security." *Contemporary Southeast Asia*. Vol. 16, No. 2 (September), pp. 137-156.
- Maung Aung Myoe (2011). *In the Name of Pauk-Phaw, Myanmar China's Policy Since 1948*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Maung Aung Myoe (2016). Myanmar's Foreign Policy under the USDP Government: Continuities and Changes. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 35, 1, pp. 123–150
- Maung Aung Myoe (2017). The NLD and Myanmar's Foreign Policy: Not new, but different. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 36, 1, pp. 89–121.

- Mendelson Allegra (2022, March 27). 'Stronger together': Myanmar, Russia parade military relationship, *Al-Jazeera*. Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/27/holdstronger-together-myanmar-russia-parade-military-relationship>
- Moe Thuzar (2016). Myanmar and ASEAN: New Beginnings, New Directions?
- Myanmar ISIS, September 2016 [https://media.wix.com/ugd/df6fb8\\_24cdf40493134aa7a1c52f98614d6206.pdf](https://media.wix.com/ugd/df6fb8_24cdf40493134aa7a1c52f98614d6206.pdf)
- Moeller A. (2022, February 10). "Peering under the hood: Coup narratives and Tatmadaw Factionalism," *Tea Circle*, retrieved on 10.10.2022, from: [https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/peering-under-the-hood-coup-narratives-and-tatmadaw-factionalism/?fbclid=IwAR3jW5-p8bYc70KcKCBY\\_qncwEzN4BBA-kGk1ht2Gk8G3gYNSUHWsyzxmHU](https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/peering-under-the-hood-coup-narratives-and-tatmadaw-factionalism/?fbclid=IwAR3jW5-p8bYc70KcKCBY_qncwEzN4BBA-kGk1ht2Gk8G3gYNSUHWsyzxmHU)
- Mya Than (2005). *Myanmar in ASEAN, Regional Cooperation Experience*. Singapore-Cambridge: ISEAS/Cambridge University Press
- Myanmar Now (2021, September 7). Myanmar's shadow government declares 'resistance war' against military junta. Retrieved on 24.10.2022, from: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmars-shadow-government-declares-resistance-war-against-military-junta>
- Passeri A. (2020). 'A tender gourd among the cactus'. Making sense of Myanmar's alignment policies through the lens of strategic culture. *The Pacific Review*, 33, 6, pp. 931-957.
- Pollak, O. B. (1979). *Empires in Collision: Anglo-Burmese Relations in the Mid-nineteenth century*. Westport-London: Greenwood Press
- Press Statement on Developments in Myanmar (2021, February 1). Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), retrieved on: 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl%2F33434%2FPress+Statement+on+developments+in+Myanmar>
- Rajah, A. (1998). Ethnicity and Civil War in Burma. Where is the Rationality? In R. I. Rotberg (ed.), *Burma. Prospects for a Democratic Future* (p. 135). Brookings.
- Reuters (2021, October 6). "ASEAN discusses excluding Myanmar junta chief from summit –envoy", retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/asean-ministers-weigh-not-inviting-myanmar-junta-boss-summit-envoy-2021-10-06/>
- Ripsman N. M., Taliaferro J. W. Lobell S. E. (2016). *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rosato, S., Schuessler, J. (2011). A Realist Foreign Policy for the United States. *Perspectives on Politics*. Vol. 9, No. 4 (December), pp. 803-819.
- Rose, G. (1998). Review: Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy. *World Politics*. Vol. 51, No. 1 (October), pp. 144-172.

- Sanctions Targeting Myanmar (2022). Baker, McKenzie, retrieved on 24.10.2022, from: <https://sanctionsnews.bakermckenzie.com/category/sanctioned-targets/sanctions-targeting-myanmar/>
- Scott, J. G. (1900). *Gazetteer Of Upper Burma and The Shan States*. Rangoon: Government Printing.
- Selth, A. (2002). Burma And Superpower Rivalries In The Asia-Pacific. *US Naval War College Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Spring), pp. 43+.
- Selth, A. (2017). *Be Careful What You Wish For: The National League For Democracy And Government in Myanmar*. Griffith Institute Report.
- Sen, M. S. (2016). India-Myanmar Contemporary Relations and India-China Dynamics. In Lipi Gosh, ed., *India-Myanmar Relations. Historical Links to Contemporary Convergences*. New Delhi: Paragon.
- Smith, M. (1999). *Burma. Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. London, Dhaka, Bangkok: Zed Books.
- Soe Thane (2017). *Myanmar's Transformation & U Thein Sein. An Insider's Account*. Yangon: Tun
- Steinberg D. I. (2006). Burma-Myanmar: The U.S.-Burmese Relationship and Its Vicissitudes. In. N. Birdsall, M. Vaishnav and R. L. Ayres (ed.), *Short of the Goal, U.S. policy and poorly performing states*. Washington D.C.: Brookings
- Steinberg, D. I. (2001). *Burma: The State of Myanmar*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Steinberg, D., Hongwei Fan (2012). *Modern China-Myanmar Relations. Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Strang, D. (1996). Contested sovereignty: the social construction of colonial imperialism (pp. 22-49). In: Th. Biersteker, C. Weber (ed.) *State sovereignty as social constructs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Strangio S. (2022, July 5). Chinese FM Pledges 'Closer' Ties with Myanmar's Military Government, *The Diplomat*. Retrieved on 10.10.2022, from: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/chinese-fm-pledges-closer-ties-with-myanmars-military-government/>
- Tarling, N. (1999). The Establishment of Colonial Regimes. In N. Tarling (ed.), *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, R. H. (2009). *The State in Myanmar*. Singapore: National University of Singapore.
- Taylor, R. H. (2015). *General Ne Win. A Political Biography*. Singapore: ISEAS.
- Taylor, R.H. (2012). Bilateral relations: then and now. In: *Sanctions to Success*, Myanmar Times Special Report 19 November, <https://www.mmtimes.com/special-features/153-sanctions-to-succes/3184-bilateral-relations-then-and-now.html>

- Thant Myint-U (2001). *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Thant Myint-U (2007). *The River of Lost Footsteps. A Personal History of Burma*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Thant Myint-U (2019). *The Hidden History of Burma. Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. New York: Norton, 2020.
- The Diplomat* (2022, September 21). Japan to Abandon Controversial Training Program for Myanmar Cadets. Retrieved on 22.10.2022, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/09/japan-to-abandon-controversial-training-program-for-myanmar-cadets/>
- The internal situation in Myanmar (Statement by Foreign Minister Motegi Toshimitsu)* (2021, February 1). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, retrieved on 22.10.2022, from: [https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e\\_000161.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press3e_000161.html)
- The Irrawaddy* (2022, September 28). “India: The Myanmar Junta’s ‘Off-the-Radar’ Friend”, retrieved on: 22.10.2022, from: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/india-the-myanmar-juntas-off-the-radar-friend.html>
- The SLORC/SPDC years. *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 30, 2, pp. 105–140.
- Trager, F. N. (1956). Burma’s Foreign Policy 1948-1956: Neutralism, Third Force, and Rice. *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 89-102.
- U Nu (1976). *Saturday’s Son: Memoirs of the Former Prime Minister of Burma*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan
- Walton, M. J. (2015). *The Disciplining Discourse of Unity in Burmese Politics*, “Journal of Burma Studies” vol. 19, no. 1., pp. 1-26.
- Woods, K.. (2011). Ceasefire capitalism: military–private partnerships, resource concessions and military–state building in the Burma–China borderlands. *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4, pp. 747-770.
- Xinhua* (2021, February 1). Major cabinet reshuffle announced in Myanmar. *Xinhua*. Retrieved on 11.10.2022, from: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/02/c\\_139713877.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-02/02/c_139713877.htm)
- Ye Htut (2019). *Myanmar’s Political Transition and Lost Opportunities (2010-2016)*, Singapore: ISEAS.
- Zöllner, H.-B. (2012). *The Beast and the Beauty. The History of the Conflict between the Military and Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar, 1988-2011, Set in a Global Context*. Berlin: Regio Spectra.

## **Collective Struggles: Education Reform Movements and Youth Displacements**

*Haymarn Soe Nyunt*

Myanmar has a rich history of student activism, beginning with the national independence movement under British colonial rule and continuing to the current Myanmar Spring Revolution.

You will find various historical timelines, starting with the 1920 student demonstration for the Education Act by the Colonial government, the military troops' violent crackdown on the students in 1962, the crackdown by the USDP Thein Sein government on the 2015 Democracy Education Movement, and the student strikes and protests under the NLD government. In the last one, you can capture the photo that was evidence of taking the students to court under the NLD government, who demonstrated for an Internet Blackout in Arakan State, where the Rohingya genocide happened.

Myanmar's education reform movement traces back to 1920 during colonial rule when students staged a boycott to protest the 1920 Education Act. In 1962, students gathered to advocate for education reform and to oppose unjust hostel regulations imposed by the "REVOLUTIONARY COUNCIL" led by General Ne Win, resulting in the tragic deaths of over a hundred students. In March 2014, the National Education Law was drafted, which was criticised for neglecting minority education and restricting the private education sector. After its passage, over a hundred students marched 404 miles from Mandalay to Yangon in January 2015, resulting in arrests. Student movements under the NLD government before the coup fell into four categories: political protests (e.g., against the Rohingya genocide), ethnic affairs (e.g., internet blackouts in Arakan State), Academic Freedom, and student rights/campus corruption (e.g., University of Mandalay rector corruption, student hostel regulations, sexual harassment at the University Campus). The main challenges included negative public opinion and government oppression.

In Myanmar's Spring Revolution, the youth movement known as "Gen Z" significantly influenced the resistance against the coup by highlighting diverse civil society and minority perspectives. The 2021 coup, amid the COVID-19 crisis, like many other sectors, led to the Civil Disobedience Movement- CDM, with faculty members and students from higher and basic education levels boycotting junta-controlled schools and universities. Students protested "military slave education." The junta responded with detentions and sentences, tragically killing over twenty-four teachers and detaining more than two hundred educators within 18 months.

By joining the CDM movement and refusing to work under the junta regime, CDM educators and staff were in danger. They faced safety threats from the military forces, forcing them into internal and external displacements. Various groups, including the National Unity Government, CDM educators, student unions, non-profits, and others, have established a new parallel educational system from the ground up. The military coup in Myanmar in 2021 had a significant impact on the country's education system. However, many see this as an opportunity to modernise and improve outdated educational models. This experience recalls the 1920 Education Reform Movement under colonial rule, where they established national schools and universities instead of studying under colonial rule. While these two Myanmar Education Reform Movements share some similarities, there are significant differences in the authorities' responses.

During the coup in Myanmar, students from Generation Z took a stand and organised anti-coup movements. They initially participated in the Civil Disobedience Education Movement, which continued for almost four years after the coup. In interviews, CDM students shared their experiences engaging in anti-military regime activities, such as organising student strikes and participating in urban flash mob demonstrations despite the military's crackdowns. Some students chose to resist by joining armed groups with their peers and joining military training in regions controlled by ethnic forces opposed to the Myanmar military. We also found that CDM students fled to the jungles,

received training, and fought back against the military as the People's Defence Force (PDF). For many, the journey to school became a battlefield, and the "school uniform" was replaced by the "soldier uniform." As you know, the youth population in Myanmar has experienced repeated displacement due to military actions and arrests; initially being forced out of urban areas by the Myanmar military, and later facing further displacement when military troops attacked ethnic armed groups that provided refuge or support to the youth resistance movements.

Students and educators from CDM were forced to leave their homes due to their activism and safety concerns. Those from rural areas moved to cities to avoid arrest, while some people in the cities fled to rural areas to escape military operations. The junta government used both legal and informal means to identify and apprehend activists, making travel risky and challenging due to strict checks at checkpoints. Consequently, pro-democracy activists had to undertake dangerous informal migrations to evade arrest and end up in undocumented positions. The list of documents, such as passport, citizenship ID, and work permit, required for migrant workers shows that we need to verify many paper documents to ensure our safety in Thailand. On the other hand, displaced dissidents from Myanmar need to politicise migrant worker status to ensure their safety in Thailand.

The students who moved to bordertowns faced several challenges upon their arrival, including legal issues, financial instability, unemployment, social isolation, employment difficulties, finding safe housing, language barriers, and mental health concerns. The process for undocumented immigrants to obtain legal documents is complex and delayed, with many struggling to afford the costs and falling victim to scams by brokers.

Although students couldn't access formal education, they learned from educators who were also displaced. They usually relied on online learning and took subjects necessary for their current situations, even if they weren't interested in those fields. For example, some students took online GED classes to meet Thai universities' entrance criteria, while others studied vocational

fields to aid their survival. However, due to the unstructured nature of their studies and the pressures of living and financial limitations, they had to prioritise survival over education, leading to mental insecurities. One student expressed, “There was a lot of destruction in my education journey due to the coup. Now, I’m not going in the direction I want, but I’m continuing my education based on the opportunities I get.”

Having encountered hardships as newly arrived migrants in Thailand, the students realised that education offered the only possible long-term solution for their survival. To enrol in Thai education, students need legal paperwork and academic records or endorsements from their previous education levels. However, it was only possible to bring some necessary documents due to displacement and threats. Students must first legalise their undocumented status and obtain their previous certificates and academic transcripts to enrol in Thai universities. Students need their previous official academic records to enrol in Thai universities or to receive scholarship support. As CDM students who refused to study under the junta government, they couldn’t obtain proper documents. The critical question is where these students can get academic endorsements. Can Thai academic institutions admit students without proper document endorsements from the Myanmar junta government? The bureaucratic mechanisms create additional challenges for students pursuing their education. This lack of paperwork blocks everything and hinders their progress. Surviving day-to-day is their top priority.

A recent incident was reported on 22nd November, the first day of our conference. A media outlet linked to the SAC announced that security forces arrested individuals from a notary service as they were notarising degree transcripts endorsed by the interim university council affiliated with NUG. Two medical students who had participated in the CDM and did not return to their university under the junta’s control completed their degrees through alternative pathways established by revolutionary groups. This incident occurred while these students were applying to Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, during which the university

authorities sought to verify the legitimacy of their degrees from their home university in Myanmar, now under junta oversight. The SAC obtained information about these two students and a list of individuals from the notary service who translated the transcripts from Burmese to English. The military-affiliated media reported that two students were not granted admission to Chulalongkorn University. However, the following day, the Ministry of Education of the (NUG) contended that, according to independent sources, these two students had indeed secured enrolment and are currently pursuing their studies at the institution.

Following the events of the 2021 Coup, various alternative education initiatives have emerged, ranging from online federal schools and on-site basic education facilities to pathways for university students to continue their studies either online or in person. Additionally, vocational training programmes have been implemented to accommodate students facing challenges in securing their environment. However, these alternative opportunities may not be accessible to students from working-class and marginalised backgrounds, as well as those who have been involved in armed resistance in remote areas. As scholars are also at risk and have limited resources for academic literature, there are constraints on the number of students that can be accommodated. These factors may discourage students from pursuing education, especially after enduring nearly five years since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020.

An effective alternative education system will impart practical skills and academic knowledge and create a supportive and inclusive environment for learning. Currently, efforts are being made to establish accessible pathways for students to pursue their education and complete their studies. It is crucial to develop alternative education systems that are relevant to the challenges faced by students on the ground. By creating accessible methods for students to learn from their daily experiences and struggles and converting these into formal accreditation, we can transform education into a place-based approach that reflects their real-world survival.

As mentioned, all education reform movements have been hindered by government threats. However, the current CDM education movement and grassroots alternative educational initiatives could be examples and starting points for rebuilding Myanmar's education system. On the other hand, there are significant limitations and challenges in developing education programmes during the ongoing crisis. Yet, this situation also presents an opportunity to create new educational narratives. With the absence of a centralised government like before the coup—or with people increasingly resistant to government control—there is more space for ground-level educational approaches.

# **The Plights of Myanmar's Youth Since the Coup in 2021: Reflections of a Young Burmese**

*Mary*

It has been four years since the military coup in Myanmar. As I write this from somewhere in Thailand, I reflect on the immense challenges that so many young people in my country continue to endure. Due to the dire situation haunting the country and its millions of people, especially countless young people, the dream of a stable life to build up their future seems increasingly shattered. Repression, economic hardship, and uncertainty at every level continue to persist.

## **A Personal Reflection on Forced Separation**

After receiving the heartbreaking news of my father's sudden demise in April last year, I returned to Yangon from Thailand, where I was undergoing an internship in an organisation. I am not sure at this stage to assess whether I would be able to visit my country again unless the country's political situation improves. During my visit, I was fortunate to have a work permit, allowing me to leave Yangon Airport without much trouble after my father's funeral. My younger brother, however, was not as lucky as I was. As he was not travelling with a work permit from his workplace in Thailand, he was unable to depart from the airport in Yangon and instead he had to take a gruelling alternative route through Myawaddy to Mae Sot, on the Thai-Burma border; which turned out to be an ordeal lasting over a month instead of a less than one-hour journey by air from Yangon to Bangkok.

Yet, as difficult as the experiences my brother and I were facing and trying to escape from the hard realities awaiting us back home, I recognise that many other young people in my country have suffered much worse situations. For Myanmar's youth, living far from home is not merely a challenge—it is an agonising reality. Many young people are unable to return to their country to visit their dear ones—ageing and sick parents or siblings as they are unsure whether they would be allowed to leave the

country or forced to stay back in the country, eventually forced to join the military to fight on the battlefield. Parents, who once welcomed their children home with open arms, now advise them to leave the country and stay away, knowing Myanmar is no longer a safe place for their children to live peacefully and build up their future.

## **The Harsh Realities Faced by Myanmar's Youth**

The coup has stolen years of stability, growth, and hope from an entire generation. Many young people, especially those from low-income backgrounds, do not have the means to flee. Instead, they face forced conscription, displacement, and an uncertain future. Others have chosen to resist, escaping to liberated areas to fight back—many now bearing the scars of war, having lost limbs or loved ones.

Beyond the immediate dangers of military oppression, Myanmar's youth suffer from severe disruptions to education, limited job opportunities, deteriorating mental health, and restricted access to healthcare. These issues compound an already dire situation, forcing many into difficult and often dangerous choices.

## **Forced Conscription: A Threat to Security and Freedom**

The military junta regime activated the national conscription law on 10 February 2024, making military service mandatory for young adults. All men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 are now required to serve in the military for two to five years. Since its activation, there have been nine rounds of conscription, with approximately 45,000 young people being forcibly recruited for military service.

This has led to widespread fear and displacement. Over 40,000 migrant workers who were visiting families have been trapped in Myanmar since February 2024 due to new travel restrictions barring conscripts from leaving the country. The regime has also stopped issuing overseas worker identity cards (OWICs), further limiting opportunities for young people seeking safety and employment abroad. Meanwhile, some workers are being sent to Russia under government agreements, raising fears that they may be coerced into military service in foreign conflicts.

## **Economic Hardship and a Shrinking Future**

The economic situation in Myanmar has deteriorated rapidly since the coup. The cost of food, living expenses, and essential goods has skyrocketed, forcing many young people to leave the country through illegal means. Once abroad, they face exploitation due to their undocumented status, losing access to education and legal employment opportunities.

Electricity shortages further compound these struggles. Even in major cities like Yangon, power is only available for a few hours a day, making online education and remote work nearly impossible. Students are under immense pressure to complete tasks within limited electricity windows, while those in conflict zones or imprisoned by the military are entirely deprived of educational opportunities. The lack of education has fuelled an increase in crime, including scams, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

## **A Collapsing Healthcare System**

Myanmar's healthcare sector has suffered significantly under military rule. Inflation and unstable currency exchange rates have led to severe shortages of medicines, making basic healthcare unaffordable for many. In conflict areas, the military actively blocks medical aid, preventing supplies from reaching refugees and pro-democracy groups. As a result, countless lives are lost due to preventable conditions.

## **The Mental Health Crisis Among Myanmar's Youth**

Since the coup began on 1 February 2021, the mental health of young people in Myanmar has sharply declined. Many have struggled to find stability, constantly adapting to the changing and dangerous environment. The fear of arrest, financial insecurity, and lack of opportunities have driven many young people into depression and anxiety.

Yet, despite these immense struggles, Myanmar's many youth remain resilient. They continue to resist, determined to build a future free from military oppression. They aspire for the rule of law to prevail in their country where they can live with dignity, freedom, and security.

## The Voices of Myanmar's Youth

To gain insight into the feelings and aspirations of young people currently residing in Myanmar, I conducted a self-initiated survey by reaching out to several friends still living in the country. Their responses offered a candid reflection of both deep despair and unwavering determination regarding their hopes and expectations for the future.

- “I want this situation to end as soon as possible. I want all young people to be free from oppression so that those who work hard can enjoy the fruits of their labour.”
- “I want to live in a country where the rule of law is respected, where freedom is secure, and where justice prevails.”
- “I want to study freely and contribute to public service. I hope for a future where everyone has access to good job opportunities and a stable social life.”
- “I hope that all those suffering from mental trauma can heal and live a life free from oppression.”

## A Call for Global Support

Any revolution that is expected to take place in Myanmar is not merely meant to remove only the current military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, but it should be aimed at ultimately dismantling the entire system that enables the military to wield unchecked political power, oppress its own people, and sustain its rule through violence. Myanmar's youth are fighting for a federal democracy, a future where military control is replaced by a civilian democratic government that truly represents the people's will. The struggle of Myanmar people will continue, but the resilience of Myanmar's people remains unshaken. Now, more than ever, international support is vital. The world cannot afford to be mere spectators. The future of an entire generation hinges on global solidarity, advocacy, and meaningful action to empower Myanmar's youth in rebuilding their lives and reclaiming their nation.

This report incorporates information and testimonies gathered from a range of credible sources, including UNHCR, ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Myanmar Now, BBC Burmese, EarthRights International, and Amnesty International.



Participants of the International Conference on  
'Towards a Global Advocacy for Democratisation, People's Security,  
and Peace with Justice in Myanmar'