

## Article

# Myanmar's Coup d'état and the Struggle for Federal Democracy and Inclusive Government

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**Abstract:** This article reviews the first twelve months of the civil disobedience movement in Myanmar following the 1 February 2021 coup d'état and its many dynamics and manifestations. Myanmar's 'Spring Revolution' generated a shared sense of national unity—overcoming gender, ethnic, religious and class boundaries, but raising questions about the long-term sustainability of nonviolent civil resistance in a state where the military has for decades wielded political and economic power. Since the coup, Myanmar has been in turmoil, paralysed by instability which escalated after the military's deadly crackdown on pro-democracy activists. The article charts the growth of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), its multiple methods of strategic resistance and non-cooperation, and the radicalisation of the resistance agenda. It analyses the formation of the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the creation of the interim National Unity Government (NUG), the founding of the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) and the inauguration of the People's Defence Force (PDF). It examines the implications for Myanmar when the crisis reached a more complex phase after the military's open use of force and terror on the broader civilian population prompted the NUG to declare war on the junta, and to urge ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and newly formed anti-junta civilian militias (PDF) to attack the State Administration Council (SAC) as a terrorist organisation. The NUG now opposes the military junta by strategic and peaceful non-cooperation, armed resistance, and international diplomacy. This paper considers whether the predominantly nonviolent civil resistance movement's struggle for federal democracy and inclusive governance is laying the foundations for eventual transition to a fully democratic future or whether the cycles of violence will continue as the military continues to control power by using intimidation and fear. It notes that the coup has destroyed the economy and expanded Myanmar's human rights and humanitarian crises but has also provided the opportunity for Myanmar's people to explore diverse visions of a free, federal, democratic and accountable Myanmar. It finally examines the possibilities for future peaceful nation building, reconciliation, and the healing of the trauma of civil war.

**Keywords:** coup d'état; Myanmar; nonviolent civil resistance; civil disobedience movement; federal democracy; democratisation; civil war; National Unity Government (NUG); Tatmadaw; Ethnic Armed Organisations (EAOs); People's Defence Force (PDF)



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## 1. The Scholarly Literature: Nonviolent Civil Resistance

For Gandhi and those who followed him, the only way to secure a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding, and nonviolence was through the absolute renunciation of violence as a means of social change or conflict transformation. Nonviolence became more than an ethical or religious principle; it became a self-conscious method of social action with its own logic and strategy (Kosek 2005). In 1993, political scientist Gene Sharp sought to support the resistance movement in Burma by writing an essay on the generic problem of how to destroy a dictatorship and prevent the rise of a new one. *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (1994) originated in his work with the Burmese opposition and ethnic groups in the early 1990s and was intended as a blueprint for the liberation of the country from

military rule.<sup>1</sup> Sharp's emphasis on strategic nonviolent struggle arose out of his realisation that every dictatorship leaves a legacy of death and destruction in its wake, and his belief that human beings should not be dominated or destroyed by such regimes. He points out that the literature on military coups largely ignores the role of civil society, nonviolent mobilisation, and civil resistance. Drawing on the ideas of Thoreau and Gandhi, he argues that peaceful campaigns against established oppressive forces are more likely to succeed than those that involve violence (Sharp 1990; Sharp [1994] 2012; Sharp and Jenkins 2003). Sharp listed nearly two hundred methods of nonviolent resistance, which he further divides into methods of social non-cooperation, persuasion, and intervention. The generic character of Sharp's text resulted in the booklet making its way to numerous other countries, and Sharp emerged as one of the world's most influential promoters of nonviolent resistance to repressive regimes. His theories have been widely adopted and adapted and incorporated into popular training manuals for nonviolent activism. *From Dictatorship to Democracy* has been circulated worldwide and cited repeatedly as influencing movements such as the Arab Spring of 2010–2012. Michael Beer et al. (2021) has recently revised, expanded, and recategorised Sharp's list of civil resistance methods.

Political theorists have followed Sharp in arguing on pragmatic rather than ethical grounds that strategic nonviolence is more likely to achieve regime change, lead to peace settlements and foster democracy than violence. During the last two decades, a growing scholarly literature has developed the theory that nonviolent movements are more effective and less detrimental to the long-term peaceful transformation of a country plagued by civil war. Many political scientists now argue for the power of strategic nonviolent civil resistance, a method which Chenoweth (2021) describes as a method of conflict through which unarmed civilians use a variety of coordinated methods (strikes, protests, demonstrations, boycotts, barricades, and many other tactics) to prosecute a conflict without directly harming or threatening to harm an opponent. Stephen Zunes (2017) writes that, 'Nations are not helpless if the military decides to stage a coup. On dozens of occasions in recent decades, even in the face of intimidated political leaders and international indifference, civil society has risen up to challenge putschists through large-scale nonviolent direct action and noncooperation'. Recent publications in this tradition of cross-over scholarly activism include Celestino and Gleditsch (2013), Bayer et al. (2016), Chenoweth and Stephan (2008, 2011), Chenoweth (2021), Dudouet (2011, 2013, 2017), Pinckney (2016, 2018, 2021), Abbs (2021) and Wanis-St. John and Rosen's (2017) USIP report.

Gene Sharp and other seminal thinkers have been instrumental in changing attitudes about violence, in clarifying the power and value of nonviolence, and in helping us to understand how humans can build a global culture of peace. Peace is the condition for human flourishing and what is good for human beings as a species, and whole disciplines are now dedicated to peace studies, to dialogue and reconciliation. This paper seeks to contribute to the emerging literature on civil resistance movements, particularly to coup d'états, by reviewing current scholarly arguments for successfully counteracting the seizure and overthrow of a government and its powers in relation to events in Myanmar, where the military takeover of 1 February 2021 gave rise to a country-wide civil disobedience movement. Originally nonviolent, it was nominated for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize in March 2021. The nomination recognised the CDM's role 'in forging a positive agenda for substantive democracy and peace'. One of the nominators declared that the CDM members 'are risking arrests, torture and death, yet have chosen to fight for their freedom through labour strikes, peaceful assembly and non-violent resistance'.<sup>2</sup> This paper explores the circumstances in which large-scale civil resistance can have impact on a military coup and regime change, and examines the relationship between popular nonviolent mobilisation, democratisation, social politicisation and the defence of human rights and freedoms. However, it also analyses the escalation of Myanmar's civil conflict when the national unity government (NUG) declared war on the military; civilians began to form civilian defence forces (CDFs), while some of the EAOs (ethnic armed organisations) supported the pro-democracy movement by launching offensives against military and other security

bases. Mathieson (2021a) warns us against prescriptive or generalised models, ‘While contemporary scholarship pushes the idea of a neat resistance complex, Myanmar is a country with a kaleidoscope of ethnicities, religious communities and different political views’. ‘By definition, it’s going to be incredibly complicated, messy, and dysfunctional because that’s just the reality of the situation’. Other critics also note that what have been called the moral–humanitarian approaches to Myanmar’s conflicts can ‘dehistoricise’ and ‘deculturise’ the conditions in which events take place, and that the fluidity of power relations in Myanmar, their inherent contradictions and the mix of cultural and political legitimacy that sustains these power relations may evaporate in description and analysis. This paper therefore seeks to understand the circumstances that have enabled Myanmar’s armed forces to crush peaceful resistance, and which have led to civil war and the widespread and rapid erosion of order and security. It examines the reasons that have led many pro-democracy activists to believe that justice and other virtues may require them to fight or even to sacrifice their own lives and considers wider questions of our own responsibility as citizens of one interdependent world to protect the security and peace of others. (See Appendix A, Figure A1.)

## 2. The Military Coup d’état of 1 February 2021, and Its Immediate Consequences

On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw<sup>3</sup> staged a coup in the name of democracy, detaining State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President U Win Myint and other government ministers. It took control of the government and instituted a one-year state of emergency, with the Commander-in-chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, Min Aung Hlaing, serving as the Chairman of the State Administrative Council (SAC) and the country’s de facto leader.<sup>4</sup> In August 2018, the UN Human Rights Council stated that: ‘Myanmar’s top military generals, including Commander-in-Chief Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, must be investigated and prosecuted for genocide in the north of Rakhine State, as well as for crimes against humanity and war crimes in Rakhine, Kachin and Shan States’. In 2021, Min Aung Hlaing assumed all state power in his capacity as commander-in-chief and brought back full military rule following years of quasi-democracy.

The Tatmadaw had dominated Myanmar for six decades and in February 2021 was a well-equipped force commanding some 300,000 to 350,000 troops, relatively modern foreign military equipment, and a range of allied small militias and Border Guard Forces. Its troops are indoctrinated to regard themselves as the guardians of the unity, stability and sovereignty (the three ‘national causes’) of the nation, and Myanmar’s many ethnic minorities, who make up roughly a third of Myanmar’s population, have faced decades of military repression. Although the military shared power with democratically elected representatives during the five years preceding the coup, it continued to enjoy many privileges and retain its vast business interests and conglomerates, particularly Myanma Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and their vast stakes across the economy. The internal workings of the Tatmadaw are opaque, but researchers increasingly recognise that the latest generation of men and women in the security forces have grown up in a different cultural environment than their predecessors and have a range of opinions. It is known for example that some men and women and their families in the services supported the NLD in the November 2020 elections. Moeller (2022) suggests that the coup d’état can best be explained in terms of factional power struggles within the military and argues that mainstream commentaries tend to forego deeper engagement with Myanmar’s complex and heterogeneous history, often reinforcing uncomplicated narratives about the monolithic nature of the Tatmadaw in particular.

Myanmar emerged from decades of military dictatorship in the early twenty-first century and in 2011 began a gradual transition to democracy and towards a market economy. The 2008 Constitution created an uneasy balance between military and civilian authority which guarantees the army’s control of three powerful ministries (home affairs, defence, and border affairs), a quarter of the seats in parliament and a veto over constitutional change. In 2010, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), then closely aligned

with the head of the Myanmar military government, General Tan Shwe, won the national election. Although the main pro-democracy party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), boycotted the poll and other opposition groups alleged widespread fraud, the election represented a degree of liberalisation. Aung San Suu Kyi's victory in the 2015 general election raised hopes for constitutional reform and Myanmar's successful transition to full democracy. On 8 November 2020, Myanmar held its third general election since 2010. The electorate voted overwhelmingly for the NLD and brought to a crisis the unresolved power struggle between the government's civil and military wings.<sup>5</sup> The NLD won by a landslide in the Upper and Lower Houses of the Union Parliament and in Regional and State legislatures. General Min Aung Hlaing, who has throughout the post-coup period claimed legitimacy by presenting the Tatmadaw as the guardian of the peace and stability of Myanmar, justified the military takeover by allegations of vote-rigging.<sup>6</sup> The Union Election Commission (UEC) denied these claims, and international observers, such as the Carter Centre and the Asian Network for Free Elections, found no evidence of significant fraud. The generals allege that the Myanmar 2008 Constitution provides them with the legal channel to impose military rule under certain conditions and allows them to take power to prevent any situation that may threaten national solidarity or sovereignty (Regan 2021). However, the Constitution provides that only the President can effectively end civilian rule and transfer the legislative, executive, and judicial powers of the Union to the Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Services.

Immediately after the coup, General Min Aung Hlaing pledged to schedule free and fair elections after a year and to practise 'a genuine, discipline-flourishing multiparty democracy'. Aung San Suu Kyi was charged with an array of politically motivated offences which came to include multiple charges of corruption, violations of a state secrets act and a telecoms law.<sup>7</sup> Soldiers were stationed in government offices, airports were closed, and, in the cities, the internet was shut down. About four hundred newly elected MPs were placed under house arrest, and the armed forces rounded up chief ministers from all the country's fourteen states in addition to democracy activists, writers, a filmmaker, and several Buddhist monks who had led the 2007 Saffron Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

The coup came at a time when Myanmar's leaders were still grappling with the consequences of British colonial rule and six decades of civil war and military dictatorship. Myanmar has inherited an administrative framework in which ethnicity is central to citizenship, basic rights, politics, and armed conflict, evidenced most powerfully in the violence inflicted since 2017 on the Rohingya minority in Rakhine State which led to 700,000 people fleeing into neighbouring Bangladesh. Military campaigns against other ethnic nationalities along Myanmar's borders have also created humanitarian crises that continue to be largely ignored by the international community. Recently, there had been armed clashes between Myanmar's security forces and the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine, while years of conflict in Kachin had resulted in widespread food insecurity, disruption of government services, economic stagnation, drug addiction and HIV infection, and protracted displacement. Armed clashes, human rights violations, and landmine contamination continued to pose a significant protection risk, especially in northern Shan. Myanmar therefore had many problems—widespread poverty, transnational criminal networks, illicit economies, rampant methamphetamine production, conflicts involving dozens of armed groups and entrenched humanitarian emergencies. The Burmese people have also been facing medical, economic, and social hardships during the global COVID-19 pandemic. A third wave of COVID-19 infections hit the country, and Myanmar was overwhelmed by the virus after the healthcare system collapsed, along with its COVID-19 testing and vaccination process. Myanmar's doctors have been under violent attack from the junta as the COVID-19 pandemic rages from a belief that medical staff are the principal exponents of the civil disobedience movement (Krishna and Howard 2021).

### 3. International Reactions to Myanmar's Military Coup

Peacebuilding has become a guiding principle of international intervention in the periphery since its inclusion in the United Nations (UN) Agenda for Peace in 1992, and among the many factors that influence the success or failure of nonviolent resistance, the ability to leverage global and regional diplomatic support is often regarded by activists as key. The Myanmar coup sparked immediate outrage from the international community, demands for a return to democracy, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other government ministers and targeted attempts to prevent aid reaching the generals. The response from the US, UK and EU was robust, with all three adopting measures designed to pressure the Tatmadaw to reverse course. The USA, followed by other Western democracies, imposed sanctions, and cut financial links with the military junta.<sup>9</sup> On February 1 António Guterres, the UN secretary-general, 'strongly condemned' the detention of Myanmar's civilian leaders. The 15-member United Nations Security Council held an emergency meeting on 2 February to discuss Myanmar's security but stopped short of condemning the military's actions, releasing instead a press statement on 4 February expressing 'deep concern'. China, Russia and Vietnam blocked stronger language, and in an interview with *The Washington Post Live* on 3 February, Guterres acknowledged the disunity in the Security Council. He vowed however to mobilise the international community to put enough pressure on Myanmar to ensure that the military coup failed.

China's unwillingness to take concrete measures against the military was in line with its long-standing policy of non-interference in what are deemed to be the 'internal affairs' of other sovereign states. On the day of the coup d'état, Chinese state media referred to what happened as a 'major cabinet reshuffle,' and China's reluctance to sign off on any criticism of Myanmar or the Tatmadaw led to accusations that China supported the military takeover, a claim which Beijing vehemently denied. Nevertheless, hundreds of protesters demonstrated at the Chinese embassy in Yangon on 11 February accusing Beijing of supporting the military junta ([Reuters 2021](#)). China, the country's largest trading partner and its closest diplomatic ally in recent years, has significant strategic and commercial interests in Myanmar and has funded infrastructure and energy projects throughout the country as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. It blocked UN efforts to address the crisis, instead pushing for the international response to be managed by ASEAN. It has since tried to hedge its bets on the coup regime by supporting efforts of the most powerful actors, including both the junta and the EAOs to safeguard its investments. However, it has traditionally been viewed with suspicion in Myanmar, and it has been argued that one of the factors that initially spurred the move toward civilian rule and quasi-democracy was the army's concern that the country was becoming isolated and dependent on China ([Abnett 2021](#)). Russia has served as a key security partner to the junta and has sold the military sophisticated weapons: jet fighters, helicopters, drones and heavy weapons that they are using against their own people. Regional countries such as India, Japan, Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam were slow to protest against the military takeover. India has followed a twin-track policy—carrying on diplomatic engagement with Myanmar's military and simultaneously pushing for the country's return to democracy. Its explicit goal is to ensure security in its northeastern provinces and implicit one is to counterbalance China's growing influence across South Asia.<sup>10</sup> As the fighting has escalated, the governments in Bangkok, Beijing and New Delhi are monitoring events closely. Their concerns relate to influxes of refugees, the spread of COVID-19, cross-border organised crime and increased traffic in drugs, guns, and people.

ASEAN countries, officially the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, at first adhered to the policy of non-interference into the domestic affairs of Member States, a cardinal principle of a regional norm known as the ASEAN Way ([Acharya 1998](#)). In recent years, ASEAN has carefully avoided commenting on Thailand's military coups in 2006 and 2014 and the jails housing political activists in Vietnam, Cambodia, and other member states, as well as on other regional crises. Growing pressure from the West on the junta and mounting violence against pro-democracy protesters prompted several ASEAN foreign ministers



to condemn the violence. On 24 April, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing joined heads of state at an ASEAN meeting. Critics feared that this would give him the appearance of legitimacy. However, the leaders in their five-point consensus statement called for (1) the immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar; (2) constructive dialogue among all parties concerned to seek a peaceful solution in the interests of the people; (3) mediation to be facilitated by an envoy of Asean's chair, with the assistance of the secretary-general; (4) humanitarian assistance provided by Asean's AHA Centre; and (5) a visit by the special envoy and delegation to Myanmar to meet all parties concerned. The call for a dialogue between all parties was interpreted by some as an attempt to negotiate talks between the junta and the NUG (Wongcha-um and Johnson 2021). The UN, Western countries, and China all backed the ASEAN effort, but the Myanmar military have disregarded the plan, promoting instead their own five-step plan towards a new election (*Global New Light of Myanmar* 2021).

Immediately after the coup, Myanmar's citizens repeatedly appealed to the international community to stand in solidarity with them in: (1) asserting their democratic rights, including through nonviolent civil disobedience; (2) upholding the rule of law; (3) protecting democratic process and results, including the 2020 elections; (4) ensuring the preservation of civic space and freedom of journalists and activists; (5) condemning the coup and military violence, and aligning themselves with carefully targeted sanctions against the military and its cronies—not against the people and (6) continuing their humanitarian funding and investment. The hopes and expectations of many Burmese of UN intervention and international protection were gravely disappointed. The international community has provided technical and other forms of nonmilitary support to the NUG and the CDM. offered humanitarian assistance through nongovernmental organisations and UN agencies, and sanctioned military leaders and businesses associated with the junta but has failed to recognise the legitimacy of Myanmar's pro-democracy leaders. International diplomatic efforts and media reports often focused on the plight of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government without comprehending the scale of human rights violations in Myanmar and the fact that a radical agenda charting a more inclusive future for the country had emerged under the CDM and NUG. The NUG has therefore walked a tightrope between domestic and foreign audiences. Its declaration of war against the junta was welcomed domestically, but democratic nations sympathetic to the anti-coup movement such as Britain and the United States expressed concern and called for peaceful efforts to restore democracy. As a result, many CDM activists concluded that the future of Myanmar lies with its people, unconsciously echoing Gene Sharp's words in 1973, that 'No outside force is coming to give oppressed people the freedom they so much want. People will have to learn how to take that freedom themselves' (Sharp 1973). The NUG's Foreign Minister Daw Zin Mar Aung declared in September 2021 that the international pressure and sanctions on the regime had proved to be ineffective. 'Therefore, we have to put some momentum into the resistance movement. This is not a shift from a non-violent movement to violence. It is just that we will use all possible means to restore democracy' (*The Irrawaddy* 2021b). Many Burmese pro-democracy activists felt that the world was happy to wash their hands of the Myanmar crisis and give ASEAN the responsibility to sort it out. Meanwhile, ASEAN frustration with the Myanmar military grew, and there were even suggestions that the Malaysian government might consider directly engaging with the civilian NUG on a bilateral basis if the five-point consensus remained stalled. In an unprecedented move, ASEAN agreed to exclude the Myanmar's junta leader from a Brunei summit in 26–28 October 2021, inviting instead a permanent secretary from the regime's foreign affairs ministry. In a statement the night before the summit, the ministry responded that it had 'full rights to participate' and would only accept representation by Min Aung Hlaing or a junta minister.<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Civilians as Agents of Change: Tactics of Popular Resistance

Myanmar has suffered decades of repressive military rule and poverty due to years of isolationist economic policies and civil war. It has a history of violent suppression of pro-

democracy movements, and its people have lived through three previous coups over the past six decades, in 1958, 1962 and 1988. In 2007, the so-called Saffron Revolution resulted in widespread anti-government protests. News of the 2021 coup therefore provoked a sense of *déjà vu* (Ducci and Lee 2021). Yet Myanmar was very different from what it had been under military dictatorship. It had undergone a rapid transformation, politically, socially, and economically, a process demonstrated most clearly in Yangon. The Myanmar kyat had become Asia's best-performing currency, and the World Bank was predicting economic growth in the country despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Although China remained Myanmar's largest trading partner, its biggest foreign investor in 2020 was Singapore. Japan, South Korea and Thailand had also poured money into the country. Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity in Myanmar was at an all-time high even though her international reputation was irreparably damaged when she decided to cooperate with the same generals who later ousted her and led the defence against charges of genocide of Rohingya Muslims at the International Court of Justice in The Hague.

The NLD, in Aung San Suu Kyi's name, called on Myanmar's public not to accept the military coup and 'to respond and wholeheartedly to protest against the coup by the military'. Many Burmese watched the events unfold in real time on Facebook, the country's primary source of information and news. Within days, however, hundreds of thousands of people from almost every ethnic group, including the Rohingya, gathered in the streets nationwide to denounce the coup and demand the restoration of the democratically elected government.<sup>12</sup> Their unity was symbolised by the three-finger salute, a gesture, originating in the *Hunger Games* film series, which has become a symbol of resistance and solidarity for democracy movements across southeast Asia. From 2 February, Yangon residents began to bang pots and pans every night and honk car horns, practices which became widespread throughout Myanmar. These forms of protest facilitated the broader participation of civilians during the ongoing pandemic and enabled women, young people, the elderly and disabled to make their voices heard. On the same day, organised resistance to the coup started with healthcare workers announcing their decision to boycott state-run hospitals, medical institutes and COVID-19 testing centres. They led the first street protests, calling it the 'white coat revolution'. This put doctors on a collision course with the junta and resulted in much of Myanmar's healthcare system going underground. They also established a national civil disobedience movement (CDM) designed to cripple the military's administrative mechanism.<sup>13</sup> This inspired a countrywide refusal of hundreds of thousands of people to work for the military. The CDM Facebook campaign group attracted 150,000 followers within 24 h of its launch (*The Irrawaddy* 2021c; *Frontier Myanmar* 2021b). By 3 February, healthcare workers in over 110 government hospitals and healthcare agencies had joined the movement with strikes spreading to other parts of the civil service. They also launched the red ribbon campaign. The colour red is associated with the NLD but also symbolises social disobedience in the face of a military dictatorship (*AFP News Agency* 2021). The coup threw the country's economy into crisis as millions abandoned their jobs in protest, including doctors, civil servants, teachers, university lecturers, engineers, bank staff, electricity workers and railway employees. The strikes by government medical personnel and teachers created huge gaps in healthcare and state education that striking colleagues working in private institutions struggled to fill. On 3 February, the 'Stop Buying Junta Business' campaign emerged, calling for the boycott of military-owned and military-linked businesses, products and services (Hein 2021).

By 7 February, thousands had taken to the streets to protest, with the largest demonstrations taking place in Yangon, Mandalay and Naypyidaw. Nonviolent tactics included mass protests, street performances, barricades, sit-downs, candlelit vigils, nationwide silent strikes, the use of women's sarongs (*htamein*) as flags, painted murals, banners, leaflets, and posters. Symbolic creativity and connectivity were demonstrated by slogans and memes of defiance, the sounding of horns and banging of pots, the three-fingered salute, the red ribbon campaign, and the singing of *Kabar Makyay Bu*, a song first popularised as the anthem of the 8888 Uprising or the People's Democracy Movement. Incidents of

extraordinary bravery also inspired protesters. On 28 February, photographs of Sister Ann Roza Nu Tawng, under the caption, ‘the Burmese Mother Theresa,’ showing her interposing herself bodily between armed police and nonviolent protesters went viral.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. The Military Response

Myanmar’s security apparatus is large, consisting of an army of about 350,000–400,000—most of whom are ethnic Bamar Buddhists, another 80,000 police (who have been relied on heavily to confront protesters), as well as state intelligence service members. The military regime was in the past feared for its readiness to crack down brutally on popular protests, but immediately after the 2021 coup, it exercised unusual restraint. This changed as widespread public protests and mass desertions of the civil service led to the collapse of the economy. Security forces, the police and military, responded at first with water cannons, rubber bullets, tear gas, catapults, beatings and batons. They clamped down on press freedom, arrested reporters, closed news outlets, and drove journalists underground or into exile. Despite intimidation, local and international media continued to find ways to report live events. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) gave daily briefings on the number of those killed, injured and arrested, while *Myanmar Now’s* LIVE Timeline: ‘Myanmar’s 2021 Democratic Uprising Against the Military Coup’ captured film and video footage of the use of live ammunition and lethal force, arbitrary detentions and intimidation, threat to the media, and instituting of regulations and laws that systematically stripped away rights and access to information and privacy (*UN News* 2021). Police and security forces targeted an ever-increasing number of activists and demonstrators, arresting political officials, civil society members, journalists, lawyers, and medical professionals. Stories of horrific abuse relayed by former detainees were later confirmed when the Associated Press published the results of their investigation into the systemic policy of torture across the country (Milko and Gelineau 2021; See also Teacircleoxford 2021). Methods of torture include beatings, mock executions with guns, burning with cigarettes, and rape and threatened rape.

On 8 February, SAC imposed a curfew on major towns and cities across the country and restrictions on public gatherings. By 9 February, there were reports of police shooting water cannon, rubber bullets and live rounds at unarmed crowds in Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN Human Rights) reported that the police and military confronted peaceful demonstrators using disproportionate force with deaths reported in Yangon and major cities. 20-year-old, Mya Thwe Khaing, was shot in the head when police tried to disperse anti-coup protesters in Naypyidaw’s Zabuthiri township. Two more people were killed when police used live ammunition to disperse protesters in Mandalay (*BBC News* 2021a). On 28 February, the UN reported that at least 18 people were killed after security forces used lethal violence against protesters.<sup>15</sup> On 3 March, a day of protests that was among the deadliest in Myanmar since the coup, it recorded the deaths of 38 people.<sup>16</sup> As anti-coup protests continued throughout Myanmar in defiance of military orders forbidding large gatherings, a new element entered the picture: pro-military groups seeking to provoke violence.

Protesters used Facebook to organise the civil disobedience campaign’s labour strikes and the boycott movement, to appeal to international communities and to share photo and video evidence of military brutality. On 4 February, telecom operators and internet providers across Myanmar were ordered to block Facebook until 7 February to ensure the ‘country’s stability’. MPT, a state-owned carrier, blocked Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp services, while Telenor Myanmar blocked Facebook.<sup>17</sup> Following the Facebook ban, Burmese users flocked to Twitter, popularising hashtags such as #RespectOurVotes, #HearTheVoiceofMyanmar, and #SaveMyanmar. On 5 February, the government extended the social media access ban to include Instagram and Twitter. On 6 February, the military authorities initiated an internet outage nationwide and repeated this on 14 February 2021 for 20 days. Meanwhile, a police cybersecurity team worked with state- and military-owned mobile operators to use surveillance drones, iPhone-cracking



devices and hacking software. The team also monitored phone users in real time to identify and track regime opponents online.

On 12 February, Union Day, a festival celebrating the unification of the country, the SAC granted amnesty to 23,314 Myanmar prisoners and 55 foreign prisoners. Among those released were supporters of the assassin who killed Ko Ni, the NLD's legal advisor. From 10 February, the SAC conducted late-night raids to arrest senior civilian politicians and election officials throughout the country. Public fear and insecurity intensified as the military were believed to be using ex-prisoners to carry out nightly acts of violence. Phil Robertson, the deputy director of HRW's Asia division, told the BBC that there were 'more and more night-time raids' taking place in Myanmar, in which people were dragged from their homes in the middle of the night. AAPP also voiced concern about overnight arrests. 'Family members are left with no knowledge of the charges, location, or condition of their loved ones. These are not isolated incidents, and night-time raids are targeting dissenting voices'.<sup>18</sup>

## 6. Myanmar's Generation Z: "We Want Democracy! Reject Military Coup! Justice for Myanmar!"

We are making our voices heard through our uprising. We hold hands firmly and are working together to end the dictatorship and fulfil our own destiny.

We create a battle symphony with the sound of pots and pans!

We raise our three-fingered salute!

We march!

We stage creative uprisings through various forms of collaborative performance!

We help each other and show global solidarity!

We support the Civil Disobedience Movement!

Driven by our strong determination, we remain resilient against the deadly attacks. (Khine and Peter 2021)

Driven by young Burmese who came of age with internet access and the comparative freedoms of the last decade, the civil disobedience movement was organised online, particularly on Facebook. Fear of the past, 'the dark old days,' drives young people who had experienced what is possible under a more democratic, liberalised, and globally integrated Myanmar, with many feeling that their parents and grandparents lived their lives feeling fear, not speaking out. Veteran activists from the 1988 uprising talk of the new educated generation (self-portrayed as Generation Z or Gen-Z) as leading a revolution using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter timelines. They developed a vibrant post-coup digital culture that challenged the SAC's repressive tactics and surveillance capacity (Loong 2021). Protesters posted live videos on Facebook, and tens of millions of people offered their support online, a stream of hearts and likes for each city's display of defiance (Nachemson and Mahtani 2021). *The Conversation* observed that, 'As a new generation of protesters take to the streets of the country's towns and cities in growing numbers, they are drawing on a range of internet memes, slogans, cartoons, and cultural symbols to make themselves heard and mobilise support within the country and across the region' (Dolan 2021). In the first weeks, the atmosphere was carnivalesque. *Euronews* reported on 10 February that, 'As they flood streets across the country in opposition to the military coup, a younger generation of Myanmar protesters have dressed up for the occasion in cosplay and Marvel heroes cracking jokes at the military's expense and winning fans on social media with their colourful and witty signage'. On February 11, news reports showed shamans, shirtless bodybuilders, and ukulele performers among demonstrators in Yangon.<sup>19</sup> Protesters also employed culturally gendered and generationally driven tactics. Videos and images were posted of women demonstrating in ballgowns and COVID masks.<sup>20</sup> Some carried posters that read: 'I don't want a dictatorship. I just want a boyfriend'. 'Ah shit, here we go again' and 'You fucked up with the wrong generation'. The use of humour, satire, and laughter

as a way of defying the generals became a general trope.<sup>21</sup> The demonstrations were also inspired by celebrities, actors, artists, journalists, film directors, musicians, performers, bloggers, influencers, digital rights activists and tech entrepreneurs, and the military began to target what the media called the ‘creatives’ (Ebbighausen 2021).

Young people in Myanmar and neighbouring Thailand began adopting the Milk Tea Alliance (MTA) in a show of solidarity, and Chia and Singer argue that this regional pro-democracy movement based on Twitter, and not ASEAN, offers a vision for a democratic and federalist Myanmar, and that it has been a central force in shaping the way Myanmar’s youth understand the current battle between pro-democracy protesters and their vastly better armed opponents, ‘a predicament faced by other youth in neighboring countries’ (Chia and Singer 2021). Across Asia, activists held rallies to support protesters, revealing the growing influence of cross-border youth movements pushing for democracy with the rallying cry ‘Milk Tea Alliance’. Pro-democracy campaigners in Taipei and in Bangkok, Melbourne and Hong Kong took to the streets waving #MilkTeaAlliance signs and flags. The hashtag, which originated as a protest against online attacks from nationalists in China, has been used millions of times. Its name originates from the shared passion for the milky drink in Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Activists in Indonesia and Malaysia held online protests and thousands more, from Southeast Asia and elsewhere, took part in a social media campaign, posting messages and artwork.<sup>22</sup> Young people from the Burmese diaspora also rallied in support. In the US, they staged demonstrations, lobbied the US government, and fund-raised. The Support the Democracy Movement in Burma donated money to striking civil servants who in many cases had lost their income or been evicted from government housing, to representatives of the civilian government and to those displaced by conflict (Nachemson 2021).

As the violence and arrests increased, the crowds on the streets disappeared. In Yangon, groups of mostly young people appeared briefly, shouting slogans and flashing the three-finger salute. Many were forced to return to their home states where resistance was more difficult. Some still found creative ways to inspire revolutionary change and carry on the fight through groups such as the Wired Youth Connecting Myanmar, Twitter Team for Revolution and Federal FM underground radio station. Chiu (2022) reports however that the coup both unites and divides Myanmar’s youth, and that although many young people continue to engage in more direct activities, such as armed resistance, flash protests, or cyber warfare, others have shifted to everyday resistance, such as non-compliance or boycotting military-related businesses. She also found that many young people in Myanmar feel ambivalent towards their disrupted futures and aspirations amid widespread political violence and that the concerns of those who have become more subtle in their resistance have also shifted from being targeted and threatened by the military to being mistakenly targeted and shamed for supporting the military, and from worrying about physical safety to concerns about a lack of progress in their lives. She observes that while the current coup has in one sense united people in the fight against the military, regardless of ethnicity or religion, it also divides them by reducing life decisions to a strict dichotomy between pro-military and pro-democracy.

The political crisis in Myanmar has also demonstrated how the digital world is now an integral part of civil conflict, and that whereas previously social media were places of discussion and debate, they are now linked to many cases of violence.

Whether in Syria, Hong Kong, Thailand, or the United States, online interactions are interwoven with real-world protest, resistance, and violence. Following the military coup of February 2021, protesters organised online and used social media to spread and amplify their voices. The military responded with network shutdowns, control over telecoms, online surveillance, and stop and search of mobile phones. Youth in Myanmar faced an existential crisis. The country’s brief experiment with democracy and an open media environment had seen social media emerge as a place of outspoken discussion and free expression—including the challenging rise of online hate speech and social punishment. Now, that

online environment is linked to many cases of arrest, torture, and even death. (Anonymous 2021)

## 7. Gender Diversity: Women and Girls on the Frontline

Political scientists have long noted that the more inclusive civic resistance is, the more pro-democratic movements are likely to succeed, and that women's civil rights and democracy go hand in hand. Chenoweth and Marks (2022) maintain that the former is a precondition for the latter. They argue that aspiring autocrats and patriarchal authoritarians have good reason to fear women's political participation: when women participate in mass movements, those movements are both more likely to succeed and more likely to lead to more egalitarian democracy. Women's large-scale participation helps movements achieve nonviolent discipline and resilience, and the likelihood of loyalty shifts within pro-government segments of the populations (Codur and King 2015; Principe 2017; Chenoweth 2019). It also promotes the empowerment of women that can be integrated into the peace process and lead to a more inclusive post-conflict society.

In Myanmar, from the beginning, women and girls have been at the heart of the CDM, defying the army's assault on women's rights and democracy. In the 2020 November elections, 20% of NLD candidates were women, and women's organisations were among the first to issue statements condemning the coup and reaching out to the UN and the international community for support. The military takeover threatened the advances made by women in every aspect of the economy, and many CDM protesters represented striking unions of teachers,<sup>23</sup> garment workers and medical workers<sup>24</sup>—industries all dominated by women. The NYT reported (3 March) that, 'Despite the risks, women have stood at the forefront of Myanmar's protest movement, sending a powerful rebuke to the generals who ousted a female civilian leader and reimposed a patriarchal order that has suppressed women for half a century' (*The New York Times* 2021b). Women have braved teargas and bullets, as equal partners with men. The youngest were often on the front lines. Three young women were among those killed on 3 March, 'the biggest one-day toll since the February 1 coup' (*The New York Times* 2021c). When Kyal Sin, aged eighteen, was shot in the head by the security forces, Ma Cho Nwe Oo, her close friend, declared, 'She is a hero for our country. By participating in the revolution, our generation of young women shows that we are no less brave than men' (*The New York Times* 2021d).

Many women have taken part in anti-junta movements since the coup. However, whereas the majority practise non-cooperation, others are playing an important role in the armed struggle. Myanmar's women have always been essential in maintaining the support mechanisms that are necessary in warfare, but the reactions of many women reveal that for them, fighting on the front line is a feminist issue. Activists in Myanmar's Sagaing region formed the country's first women-only anti-junta militia, a collection of students, teachers, farmers, and white-collar workers fighting to take back the country from well-armed government troops. Amera, a member of the Myaung Women Guerrilla Group (MWGG), told Radio Free Asia's Myanmar Service that the group was launched to empower women who might otherwise be preyed upon by raiding troops. She said that 'It is assumed that women's hands are meant for the rocking the cradle, but we want to show to the people that our hands are also capable of armed resistance to the military regime'. Another protest leader who organised daily actions against the military coup in Monywa told RFA that the formation of an all-women militia was a significant milestone in the resistance movement. 'The situation [since the coup] has led us to demonstrate that women can do the same jobs as men. I think these resistance movements bring more equality and may help to eliminate discrimination in the future' (Radio Free Asia 2021).

Women's determination is all the more extraordinary since they have been disproportionately impacted by the violence. They make up 54% of the 230,000 people internally displaced by internal conflict. Women have also been taken hostage, tortured, and killed in the targeted offensives, and their cases are another stark reminder of entrenched military impunity and longstanding violence against women and girls in Myanmar's conflict zones.

Sexual violence including rape has long been used as a weapon to terrorise victims and their families, and reports of violence against women have become almost normalised (Quadrini 2021).

### 8. Ethnic Nationalities: From ‘Other’ to Allies?

‘Ever since the Union of Burma was established in 1948, the supposed goal was to create a federation of semi-autonomous democratic states in accordance with the Panglong Agreement. The perceived failure of the Bamar majority and the Tatmadaw to abide by that goal led to the outbreak of Myanmar’s long-lasting civil war and the first military coup in 1962 (Martin 2021). Since independence, discrimination has been engrained in Myanmar’s laws and political system. For decades, the state has waged military campaigns against ethnic nationalities, notably the Rohingya, a mostly Muslim minority group indigenous to Rakhine State. The Rohingya crisis led to a broader spike in anti-Muslim sentiment, raising anew the spectre of communal violence that could endanger the country’s transition to democracy. After the coup, many ethnic minorities feared that military rule would bring even greater oppression.

Among the most positive signs of the growing resistance movement was the presence of Kachins, Karens, Chin, Shan and Rohingya in the early street protests. Myanmar’s ethnic groups hoped that by protesting side by side against the junta, it would be possible to build a more equitable and federal Myanmar. The coup, and the violent crackdowns on protesters that ensued, turned out to be something of a game-changer.<sup>25</sup> Many Bamar, Kachin, Chin, Shan, and Karen put aside their differences to focus on a common enemy, and as the army’s crackdowns on pro-democracy protesters reached into the Bamar-dominated central regions, many Bamar experienced the kind of oppression that ethnic and religious minorities had endured for decades. Bamar-majority communities became more conscious of the atrocities and injustices suffered by ethnic nationalities. This ‘awakening’ was welcomed by many young Bamar. Thi Zinh, for example, declared, ‘Today, everyone is living with Tatmadaw’s brutality. Bamars realise what other ethnic groups experienced daily during all these years’ (Cabot 2021). Although Myanmar’s resistance movement might have begun with the demand for the restoration of the democratically elected government, ethnic minorities renewed their call for a new constitution which would finally give them the rights they have been demanding for the past 70 years.<sup>26</sup>

On 31 March 2021, the government in exile, the CRPH, hoping to woo the country’s armed ethnic militias to ally themselves with the mass protest movement, announced that it considered the 2008 constitution void and that it was drafting a new charter, guaranteeing the creation of a federal state and handing more power to minorities. In June 2021, the NUG issued a new policy on the Rohingya promising to end human rights abuses against them and grant them citizenship. It declared its intention to repeal laws, including the 1982 Citizenship Law, which discriminate against the Rohingya and other ethnic groups deemed non-indigenous. It made a commitment to abolish the National Verification Card process. NUG policy now states that ‘This new Citizenship Act must base citizenship on birth in Myanmar or birth anywhere as a child of Myanmar citizens’. The NUG’s determination to extend citizenship rights has been welcomed by many NUG supporters but is proving divisive, particularly in Rakhine.<sup>27</sup>

Even though many ethnic groups were represented in the nonviolent protests, they have competing views of federalism and extremely diverse interests and motives. EAOs have chosen different political and military positions despite the widespread belief that the coup has unified different forces against a common enemy (Hmung 2021). EAOs who did not sign agreements with the government, particularly the nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) in 2015, feel that their ‘armed/violent’ approach towards the military has been vindicated. Ong points out that the EAOs have ‘vastly different worldviews, military capabilities, and working languages, some leaning politically towards China and others towards Western countries’ (Ong 2021). Mathieson observes that there was always the likelihood that some EAOs would resort to defensive violence while others would seek



accommodation with the Tatmadaw (Mathieson 2021b). Several of the major groups—including the Kachin in the north, the Karen in the east and the Rakhine Arakan Army in western Myanmar—publicly denounced the coup and stated that they would defend protesters in the territory they control (ABC News 2021b). This shift became even more significant at the end of March 2021 when a number of ethnic rebel groups announced that they were joining the pro-democracy fight against the junta, calling the country's youth to join them. Ten of the country's main rebel groups stated that they would 're-examine' the ceasefire deal they entered with the army in 2015.

Martin (2021) notes that a major role for the EAOs in the post-coup period is providing protection for thousands of activists and civilians fleeing the oppressive conduct of the military junta—including many of the members of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). An undisclosed number of the CRPH members reportedly have fled to KNU-controlled territory to avoid detention. Activists and civilians have also relocated into EAO-controlled areas of the States of Kayin, Mon, and Shan and some EAOs began to provide limited weapons, training, and tactics to the PDFs and CDM resisters. In an interview with the English-language newspaper *Frontier*, a young KIA recruit said that dozens of Kachins and non-Kachins had joined the group and that most new recruits were in their 20s, and between 20% and 30% were women (Fishbein et al. 2021). *The Irrawaddy* reported (October 2021) that the junta-controlled Burmese-language newspaper, *Myanma Alinn*, accused six EAOs of aiding and abetting so-called 'terrorist' attacks in Myanmar, and that the Karen National Union (KNU), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Chin National Front (CNF), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) were taking advantage of the political turmoil in the country and providing military training to the PDFs for their own advantage. Although some EAOs are providing military training to hundreds of young dissidents who have fled to areas under their control for sanctuary, these groups are not organised by the NUG and are not under its command, although they may share its objectives. The same is often true of the hundreds of militias which have popped up across the country, many identifying themselves as PDFs.<sup>28</sup> Mcpherson and Naing (2021) write that this is a fight that in a few months made guerrilla fighters of university lecturers, day laborers, I.T. workers, students and artists and forced countless young men and women into a life on the run. The Myanmar Study Group reports (2022) that several EAOs, such as the Arakan, Kachin, Karen, Shan, and Wa forces, have used the situation to expand their territorial control in defiance of military domination, gaining significantly greater autonomy over their own administration. PDF fighters have gained battle experience by joining EAOs in fighting the military. However, although all EAOs hold in common a bottom line that the military's actions have deeply damaged their security and economic prospects, they are far from having a shared vision of Myanmar's future.

## 9. Weakening the Enemy from Within: Defections and Desertions

Lacking any popular mandate, the generals rely entirely on the state's coercive apparatus to exercise power and maintain controls over the civil population (Selth 2021). One of the reasons often given for the success of strategic nonviolent civil resistance is that members of the army or police develop sympathy with unarmed civilians and refuse to fire on them. A key part of campaign success is to shift the loyalty of the military away from the dictator and toward the opposition. Political analysts argue for example that the military's decision to remain loyal to the regime or to side with civil resisters heavily shaped the outcomes of the Arab Spring uprisings. In Myanmar, Generation Z calls soldiers planning to defect 'watermelons'. The green skin of the fruit recalls the colour of the military uniform, while the red flesh is the colour of the NLD. Soldiers are often sequestered in military compounds without good internet access and acquire their information from military-dominated media. (On 25 February 2021, Facebook and Instagram banned the Myanmar military and its businesses from using its platforms because of the deadly violence.) However, a steady increase in defections and desertions since the coup amid plunging morale had some observers

questioning whether unity can be maintained within the Tatmadaw. Many defectors claim that the soldiers are tired and demoralised, and some count on a damaging split within the military high command, with one faction going over to the pro-democracy side. As the protests continued, defections from the Myanmar Police Force increased. On 5 March 2021, a group of eleven officers crossed the India–Myanmar land border to Mizoram state with their families because they refused orders to fire rubber bullets and tear gas shells at the protesters (*BBC News* 2021c). As a result, the Assam Rifles were ordered to tighten security along the India–Myanmar border. By 5 March 2021, more than 600 police officers had joined the anti-regime movement (*The Irrawaddy* 2021e). From 10 March, the border was closed after 48 Burmese nationals crossed. Some military personnel also abandoned their posts to stand in solidarity with the people, citing corruption among the high-ranked military officers and the lack of will to kill their own people as the main reasons.

Although political strategists maintain that nonviolent resistance encourages the defection of military and police personnel, evidence from Myanmar shows that any serious attempt to divide the army or to create a split between the army and police force could result in more bloodshed, and that any breakdown in discipline would be rapidly crushed (*Selth* 2021). Defectors put themselves, their families, and associates in mortal danger. There are no safe spaces to hide, and defectors are often forced to flee to India or join the PDF. A team of Myanmar activists is using social media and messaging apps to encourage junta soldiers to defect from the military, and there are now ex-military associations that seek to topple the military by weakening it from within. People's Embrace which is run by the NUG claims to have facilitated the defections of a group of 2000 security forces personnel while a non-military organisation, People's Soldiers, encourages, facilitates, and supports defections by the national soldiers of Myanmar (*Bociaga* 2021a). Its website (<https://www.peoplesoldiers.org/>) states that only when the national soldiers of Myanmar stand for justice and join the people will this revolution have the least blood spilled and the highest chance of victory. The People's Soldiers Production Team has also begun an arms manufacturing operation known as Project A-1 to support the PDF's resistance efforts. By 15 February 2022, it was reported that over 16,000 soldiers and police officers had joined the CDM to fight against the military.

### 10. Civil Society and Democratisation

The resistance movement of civil society has been channelled through institutional channels and grassroots movements. Initially, the responses of international peace organisations including the 2000-strong UN contingent in Myanmar were uncoordinated. The two most senior UN officials, the Resident Coordinator and Humanitarian Coordinator (Ramanathan Balakrishnan) and the UN Special Envoy (then Christine Shraner Burgene) had previously been based outside Myanmar, and civil society organisations (CSOs) were at first uncertain whether to engage in mediation attempts with the generals or distance themselves. Their responses became increasingly robust and united. *Human Rights Watch* (2021) demanded a tough approach, 'Coordinated international and multilateral actions in response to the coup should include targeted economic sanctions on the military itself, its leadership, and its vast economic holdings, which provide the military with its revenue, as well as embargoes on military arms and equipment'. An HRW spokesperson stated, 'The military's outrageous assault on democracy, following atrocities against the Rohingya, should be a clarion call for the world to act as one to finally get the military out of politics and put the interests of Myanmar's people ahead of all other considerations'.

Myanmar's civil society and ethnic organisations also issued joint statements condemning the coup and urging action by the international community. Many cited the principle, Responsibility to Protect (R2P or RtoP), a global political commitment which was endorsed by all UN member states at the 2005 World Summit to address its four key concerns to prevent genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Since the coup, women's rights and women-led civil society organisations have played a leading role in supporting the national response. The Organizations/Networks Working for

Women's Rights and Gender Equality, a network of more than thirty organisations set up to support community women's groups across Myanmar, released an early joint statement on 4 February 2021. It declared that the current political situation, during the period that the whole country was facing the COVID-19 pandemic, was threatening the economic, physical and emotional security and stability of all people, including women and children, as well as critically undermining the ongoing process of peace building, democratisation and federalism in Myanmar (*Alliance for Gender Inclusion in the Peace Process* 2021). On 12 February, 177 Myanmar CSOs signed a joint open letter to the UN Security Council pleading with it to dispatch an urgent enhanced monitoring and intervention mission to Myanmar to monitor the fast-evolving situation on the ground and mediate between parties. The letter urged the Council to 'support Myanmar to achieve a roadmap that establishes a federal democratic union, ensuring a long-term sustainable peace, ethnic equality, and protection of the human rights of all peoples, and implements constitutional change that is in line with the will of the people' (177 Myanmar Civil Society Organizations 2021). On 17 February, 219 CSOs signed a joint letter to the international community, and in particular to International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and State Donors, asking them to freeze loans and comprehensively reassess their lending relationship with Myanmar, respect calls to condemn the coup and military violence, and align with strong targeted sanctions against the military and its cronies (*Forum Asia* 2021). Forum-Asia also released statements calling upon ASEAN to block Myanmar's military junta participation from all its platforms and engage with the National Unity Government.<sup>29</sup>

## 11. Religious and Moral Leadership

Close to 90% of the population of Myanmar identify as Buddhists, and many thousands have participated in the resistance movement. Monks, collectively known as the *sangha* (community), are venerated members of Burmese society who possess supreme moral authority and considerable political power. Monks led demonstrations against the generals in 2007 but have been far less prominent in 2021–2022, and some reports speak of a schism within the sangha. Many senior monks have been silent or have given their blessing to the Tatmadaw whereas more junior monks, particularly in Mandalay, the traditional centre of Burmese Buddhism, have been more likely to join the protests. Immediately after the coup, videos and tweets showed groups of Buddhist monks and *thilashins* (nuns) demonstrating in Yangon and Mandalay. On 15 February, a group of monks were filmed carrying signs and banners saying, 'reject military coup' and 'monks who don't want a military dictatorship'.<sup>30</sup> A few Buddhist monasteries and educational institutions denounced the coup, among them the Masoyein monastery in Mandalay and the Mahāgandhārāma monastery in Mamarapura. Some monks and *thilashins* have organised protest marches and campaigns against the military or offered aid and shelter to victims of violence. Others have refused alms from soldiers, their families, and supporters, thus denying them the opportunity to accrue good karma. Hundreds of lower-ranking monks have been jailed for protesting, and a few have disrobed to join the PDF.

Since the start of the political liberalisation in 2011, Myanmar has been troubled by an upsurge in extreme Buddhist nationalism, anti-Muslim hate speech and deadly communal violence, not only in Rakhine state but across the country. Nationalist monks and nuns were among the fiercest champions of the violence that drove nearly a million Rohingya into Bangladesh and neighbouring countries in 2017. They promote a radically cohesive national identity and sense of belonging based on a longstanding Buddhist heritage (Borchert 2014, p. 603) and preach that Buddhism and the Buddhist way of life are threatened by an internationally resurgent Islam. The fusion of ethnocentric nationalism and religion led U Ashin Wirathu and monks associated with the 969 Movement and Ma Ba Tha (Association for the Protection of Race and Religion) to fuel fears about Islam and Muslims (Walton 2013; Walton and Hayward 2014; Borchert 2007, 2014; Schonthal and Walton 2016; Fuller 2021). In 2019, Ashin Wirathu was charged with inciting 'hate and contempt' against the NLD civilian government but significantly was released by Myanmar's military junta in

September 2021. Sitagu Sayadaw, Myanmar's most influential monk, participated in the Saffron Revolution but is also known for his support for the military. His narrative of a Buddhism justified in suppressing the Muslim community has been the dominant narrative within Myanmar. He stayed silent after the coup even as security forces killed unarmed demonstrators. Finally, Sitagu International Buddhist Academy released a statement urging the government to act in accordance with the principles of the Dhamma and welfare of the people (*Insight Myanmar* 2021a). In line with Buddhist teachings, it mentions principles only and does not offer public guidance. As the military violence intensified, Shwekyin Nikāya, Burma's second largest monastic order, sent a letter to General Min Aung Hlaing expressing dismay and concern about the current situation in Myanmar. Its leading monks, who include Sitagu Sayadaw, ask the general to behave with *mettā* (lovingkindness) and according to the ten moral practices of the king/ruler of Buddhist tradition (see also *Insight Myanmar* 2021b).

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN's) Executive Director Kyaw Win urged the Burmese military to release the three monks, Ashin Ariya Vansa Bivansa (Myawaddy Sayadaw), Ashin Sobitha, and Shwe Nya Warand, who had been imprisoned for opposing toxic religious nationalism. He noted that 'Burma's military has long fostered a relationship with violent nationalist monks and silenced those seeking peace and harmony in the society' (Kartal 2021). Buddhist nationalism often manifests as a kind of ethnocentrism in which protecting the Myanmar-Buddhist identity is highlighted in propaganda and Islam is portrayed as an existential threat to the faith and the nation. The army's support of nationalist monks has often been apparent, and many observers feared that the regime would seek to weaponise religion and mobilise support by appealing to Buddhist nationalist sentiment (Ford and Oo 2021). Hardig and Sajjad argued that the military coup presented opportunities to Buddhist nationalists which might exacerbate Buddhist nationalism and extremist religious ideals (Härdig and Sajjad 2021). Artinger and Rowand (2021) reported that days before the February coup, Buddhist monks marched through the streets of Yangon, carrying banners claiming election fraud, and proclaiming the military as the protector of the state. They comment that such scenes are not uncommon in Myanmar, where Buddhism is deeply intertwined with the country's culture,

For the Buddhist nationalists who backed the army and its crackdown on Muslims, the coup may seem like an opportunity. Westerners rarely associate Buddhism with extremism or violence, but Buddhist movements in Asia have often raised few qualms about the use of force. Buddhist authorities have, at times, justified violence against the faith's enemies and supported authoritarian regimes. Myanmar is no exception. Since at least the end of British rule, the Buddhist monastic community (or *sangha*) has played an instrumental role in the political landscape of Myanmar.

In Myanmar, the mobilisation of national or ethnic identity based on religion has often served as a source of social division. However, after the coup, religion also functioned as an institutional and ideological connection with the international order. Burmese community groups within the country's diaspora and international Buddhist organisations sprang into action. Partnering with vetted intermediaries in Thailand and Myanmar, these groups continue to disperse aid in grants and in-kind support on the ground within Myanmar (Aung 2021).

The Catholic Church played a particularly impressive role immediately after the coup. On 7 February 2021, Pope Francis declared: 'In this very delicate moment, I want to again assure my spiritual closeness, my prayers and my solidarity with the people of Myanmar'. Priests, nuns, and seminarians in Myanmar demonstrated their support for the protesters by holding placards and banners in front of churches. On 3 February, Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, the Catholic archbishop of Yangon, appealed to the people of Myanmar to remain calm and not resort to violence. He promoted dialogue and mediation as the only way forward.



I share deep fellowship with all of you in this moment as you grapple with the unexpected, shocking events that are unfolding in our country. I appeal to each one of you, stay calm, never fall victim to violence. We have shed enough blood. Let not any more blood be shed in this land. Even at this most challenging moment, I believe that peace is the only way, peace is possible. There are always nonviolent ways for expressing our protests. The unfolding events are the result of a sad lack of dialogue and communication and disputing of diverse views. Let us not continue hatred at this moment when we struggle for dignity and truth. Let all community leaders and religious leaders pray and animate communities for a peaceful response to these events. Pray for all, pray for everything, avoiding occasions of provocation. ([Catholic Archdiocese of Yangon 2021](#))

The archbishop also addressed the international community. He thanked them for their concern and ‘compassionate accompaniment’ but implored them not to adopt violent measures:

... history has painfully shown that abrupt conclusions and judgements ultimately do not benefit our people. Sanctions and condemnations brought few results, rather they closed doors and shut out dialogue. These hard measures have proved a great blessing to those super powers that eye our resources. We beg you do not force concerned people into bartering our sovereignty. The international community needs to deal with the reality, understanding well Myanmar’s history and political economy. Sanctions risk collapsing the economy, throwing millions into poverty. Engaging the actors in reconciliation is the only path.

*Religions for Peace-Myanmar (RfP-M)*, which includes all Myanmar’s major religions, employed its many transnational links to appeal for the immediate release of political detainees, the restoration of civilian governance, and the promotion of peace and reconciliation efforts. *RfP* leaders continue to issue joint statements expressing interfaith solidarity against violence, urging peaceful negotiation and warning that pursuing military solutions leads only to endless war and endless misery. However, many now despair that Myanmar’s serious civil conflict can only be healed by deep dialogue and reform. Al Haj U Aye Lwin, the chief convener for the Islamic Centre of Myanmar and founding member of *RfP-M* ([Lwin 2021](#)), emphasised in a webinar on 11 June 2021 that religious leaders must keep trying to mediate in a way that is nonpartial but show an absolute commitment to democratic principles and a zero tolerance for militarism or totalitarianism. *RfP* statements are often coded in the language of human rights and ‘inclusive citizenship,’ which has reoriented religious support in favour of religious freedom, religious pluralism, and full and equal citizenship between religious communities.

## 12. The CRPH and NUG: ‘Taking Back the People’s Power’

Many Burmese believe that the outcome of the Myanmar Spring Revolution now largely depends on the capacity of institutional leaders to consolidate opposition forces. The elected members of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament), mostly from the NLD, attempted to provide Myanmar’s institutional leadership by forming the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). It offered key positions in its council to minority politicians, including representatives from the Kayah State Democratic Party, the Ta’ang (Palaung) National Party and the Kachin State People’s Party. The formation of an alternative government-in-exile, the NUG, by the CRPH was widely welcomed. Often called the ‘shadow’ or ‘underground’ government because its ministers are in hiding, either in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups or in exile abroad, its radical programme calls for a federal democratic union with an army accountable to the civilian government and a government that respects the human rights of all citizens. It is constituted as a coalition of democratic forces in Myanmar, including representatives from the country’s ethnic groups, formed under the terms of the Federal Democracy Charter, which the CRPH made public in March 2021.

On 5 March 2021, the CRPH announced its political vision, declaring its commitment to end military dictatorship; ensure the unconditional release of all unlawful detainees including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; achieve fully fledged democracy; rescind the 2008 Constitution and write a new federal Constitution. The CRPH stated that it would work steadfastly with all ethnic nationalities and strive for the full realisation of this vision. To pave the way for broader participation in the Spring Revolution, the CRPH removed all the ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) from the ‘unlawful organization list’ while designating the Tatmadaw a ‘terrorist organization’. On 31 March 2021, the CRPH abandoned the 2008 Constitution and presented a [Federal Democracy Charter \(2021\)](#) as an interim constitution which aims to end Myanmar’s long history of military dictatorship as well as meeting the longstanding demands of its ethnic minority groups for greater autonomy in their regions. The Charter states,

To bring an end to the conflicts and problematic root causes in the Union, to ensure all ethnic nationalities—population can participate and collaborate and to build a prosperous Federal Democracy Union where all citizens can live peacefully, share the common destiny and live harmoniously together; a Federal Democracy Union where democracy is exercised and equal rights and self-determination are guaranteed, all ethnic nationalities of the Union, all citizens enjoy mutual recognition and respect, mutual friendship and support and solidarity based on freedom, equality and justice, we intend to carry out the following activities:

1. Eradication of dictatorship;
2. Ultimate Abolishment of 2008 Constitution;
3. Building Federal Democracy Union; and
4. Emergence of Public Government.

The anti-junta movement’s determination in the face of the Tatmadaw’s escalating violence resulted in the growing belief that the people had the right to defend themselves and that military conflict might be necessary to defeat the coup ([Reuters Asia Pacific 2021](#)<sup>31</sup>; [Regan et al. 2021](#)). The NUG declared on 5 May 2021 its intention to establish a ‘People’s Defence Force’ to protect civilians as a prelude to establishing a Federal Union Army and called for unity and pan-ethnic solidarity. On 8 May, the junta responded by adding the NUG, PDF and CRPH to its list of ‘terrorist organizations’. The notice accused them of inciting the Civil Disobedience Movement to commit ‘violent acts’, including riots, bombings, arson and ‘manslaughter’. ‘We ask the people not to . . . support terrorist actions, nor to provide aid to the terrorist activities of the NUG and the CRPH, which threaten the security of the people’. Previously, the junta had declared these groups ‘illegal associations’ and warned that any contact with them would be considered high treason. But this new classification as a ‘terrorist organization’ means that anyone who communicates with its members, including journalists, could be prosecuted under the country’s anti-terrorism laws which carry heavy prison sentences.

On 7 September 2021, Duwa Lashi La, the NUG Acting President and an ethnic Kachin lawyer, declared a ‘people’s defensive war’ against the junta. He called for ‘a nationwide uprising in every village, town and city, in the entire country at the same time’. ‘We will remove Min Aung Hlaing and uproot dictatorship from Myanmar for good and be able to establish a peaceful federal democratic union that fully safeguards equality and is long-aspired by all the citizens’. He ordered ethnic armed groups to ‘immediately attack Min Aung Hlaing and the military council,’ urging them to ‘fully control your lands’. He called on police, military, and military-appointed government workers and personnel to join the resistance. ‘This revolution is a just revolution. A necessary revolution for building a peaceful country and an establishment of a federal union’ ([Regan and Olarn 2021](#)). On 13 September, the NUG formally announced the people’s defensive revolution against the military junta. It issued an order declaring a State of Emergency in the country, closing all government offices for an indefinite period, and a directive outlining the Code of Conduct for People’s Defence Forces. Following the international response to the declaration of war,

the NUG restated its commitment to creating a unified command structure to coordinate between civilian resistance forces and allied EAOs and to ensuring respect for the NUG's Code of Conduct, which it claimed to be in line with 'International Human Rights and Humanitarian Laws, and the Geneva Conventions'. The NUG also declared that it accepted the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, meaning that all actors in Myanmar could now be held accountable for their actions under the Rome Statute. It noted that, 'The international community obviously cannot be relied upon to intercede on behalf of the democracy movement and secure the safety and well-being of the people of Myanmar from the frontal and brutal assault of the military junta'. 'For that reason, the last seven months have clearly shown that national solidarity and collective action will be the most effective way to end the coup, chaos, and instability caused by the military'.<sup>32</sup> It called for 'the unity of all the people of Myanmar to uproot the military oppressors—the perpetrators of violence against the people—for good and to establish a peaceful federal democratic union that fully safeguards equality, freedom, inclusion and democracy for all'.

The NUG's decision to embrace violent resistance against the junta was hugely risky at a time when it was seeking support and recognition from the international community, including the UN. It was also risky in other ways. As a government that claims to place human rights and international treaties at the top of the agenda, the NUG was promoting a strategy which would almost certainly violate and override individual human rights. Retaliation, even in the name of democracy, could well play into the military regime's hands, offer SAC partial legitimacy, and escalate violence. Nevertheless, many anti-regime protesters believe fervently that the only way to achieve democracy and an inclusive federal state is by a common determination to rid the country of a military regime once and for all. Since late March 2021, people across Myanmar have taken up available weapons including slingshots, homemade airguns, and firearms to resist the junta. Thousands of civilians, some of them young city-dwellers more familiar with video games than real warfare, received secret military training (Paddock 2021). However, as the months passed, the regime began to sustain heavy casualties amid increasingly frequent resistance attacks not only from the battle hardened ethnic armed groups but also from the young civilian PDFs and from soldiers who had deserted their units since the coup.

### **13. Myanmar's National Unity Consultative Council: A Vision of Myanmar's Federal Future**

As a consultative body formed in April 2021, the NUCC is one of the most inclusive political dialogue platforms in Myanmar's history. It is made up of representatives from opposition groups that include, among others, the NUG, the CRPH, human rights and civil society organisations, the CDM, activist networks, ethnic minority political parties and EAOs. The NUCC was established under the Federal Democratic Charter (FDC), a document written as a precursor for a new constitution to replace the military-drafted 2008 constitution. Under this charter, the NUCC becomes the platform in which issues related to state/region governance, security and defence arrangements, are debated, and plans for a biannual People's Congress to develop a new constitution are discussed.<sup>33</sup> The NUCC is hugely significant for the political direction of Myanmar because it emphasises 'federalism' as its first priority. This differs from the NLD's 'democratic federal union' vision, which emphasises 'multi-party democracy'. The NUCC's emergence signals a more inclusive and consensus-based approach to dialogue and consultations among the opposition forces, and its significance is related to its potential to integrate and reconcile different interests, particularly EAOs and ethnic political parties opposed to military rule.

The NUCC accepts that scepticism and suspicion still beset its work, principally because of the lingering distrust of EAOs and ethnic political parties towards Bamar-dominant political processes. Htet Myet Min Tun and Moe Thuzar note that, 'A history of past broken promises, fragmented interests, and tensions and disagreements over the direction and management of the various efforts to resist military rule (including formation of a federal army) threaten the NUCC's potential to cohere and reconcile different interests'

([Tun and Thuzar 2022](#)). The consensus-based approach causes delays in projected activities. Still, the view is that the NUCC is ‘too important to fail’ because it has the potential to redefine the exclusionary narratives of national identity in Myanmar, which have driven conflict for decades. The NUCC’s emergence thus represents a new vision for federalism which is a closer representation of the 1947 vision for the country’s federal future than any previous process. Political stakeholders tend to view the NUCC as part of a solid foundation for a long-term federal democratic solution to Myanmar’s problems which would finally allow Myanmar to enjoy the peace and democracy that the country has never known.

#### 14. The NUG’s Vision of a Just and Inclusive Society

The NUG government appointed several ministers with longstanding credentials as reformers and humanitarians who have been expanding on the NUG’s priorities, values and hopes for the future in online meetings with sympathetic international governments, universities and organisations. These talks are designed to elicit support, and critics have argued that they are necessarily structured by the expectations of Western audiences and humanitarian lobbyists. On 22 February 2021, Dr. Sasa, a Chin Christian, was appointed by the CRPH to serve as Myanmar’s Special Envoy to the United Nations, and on 16 April 2021, he was elected to serve as the Union Minister of International Cooperation. He has declared his ‘unwavering’ commitment to democracy, freedom, justice and human rights for all, total eradication of military dictatorships and complete nullification of the 2008 constitution in all forms. He supports replacing the discriminative 1982 citizenship laws with a true Federal Democratic permanent constitution agreed through ‘inclusive consensus, convention, and referendum’. Sasa, who fled the capital disguised as a taxi driver in the days after the coup, continues to set out the NUG’s road map in a variety of international webinars and forums. Key points are that the NUG will (i) replace the Tatmadaw with an army under the control of civilian authority; (ii) abolish discriminatory laws and replace the existing constitution with one built on democratic principles; and (iii) build a democratic federal state with human rights in which the executive, parliament and judiciary operate independently.

Dr. Sasa, who once enthusiastically welcomed Myanmar’s nomination for a Nobel Peace Prize, now defends the NUG policy of violent action, explaining that ‘The people of Myanmar have been left with no other choice. They just have no other option left . . . The constant threat of military raids, arrests, torture and killings had pushed communities to take up arms’. Speaking to the *Financial Times* in a video call, he observed, ‘The people of Myanmar are using force to defend themselves from barbaric violence by the military . . . Villages, towns and communities across the country are being attacked by the junta using battlefield weapons’. Sasa insisted that the PDFs and EAOs are abiding by international humanitarian law and the Geneva Convention, and later released a statement on Twitter aimed at the international community, distancing the NUG from the assassinations of civilians by resistance groups that are not, supposedly, under NUG command. Despite such reassurance, intense violence has increased between junta forces and PDF members across the country except in Rakhine State. Bomb attacks and assassinations have targeted military and police forces, local administrators, regime officials, and civilians connected with the junta. Suspected military informants and leading members of the military-backed USDP are also targeted for assassination ([International Crisis Group 2021a](#)). The ICG points out that violent conflict in Myanmar can also be seen as the militarisation of ethnicity, creating a vicious cycle of violence that continues to escalate ([International Crisis Group 2020](#)). Moreover, the ethnic armed groups on whose support the NUG relies to build a united front have themselves a history of human rights abuses, such as forced recruitment, forced labour, money extortion, and restricting women’s rights ([The Irrawaddy 2021d](#)). Sasa accepts that the crisis cannot be solved by violence but maintains that before any kind of dialogue or negotiation can take place, the junta has to stop the killing and release all political prisoners.



U Aung Myo Min, the Minister for Justice, who is originally from Moulmein, Mon State, is a pioneer of human rights education in Myanmar and the first openly gay man in the democratic movement. He has worked closely with women, youth, refugees, migrant workers, and LGBTQ groups, as well as with legislators and government officials. He was a student leader in the 1988 protests and joined the armed student revolutionary group, the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF). U Aung Myo Min speaks of three strategies to end military rule ([Tea Circle 2021](#)).

The first is military action,

I understand why many Gen Z have decided to leave for the border like me and want to take some kind of military action. There are two ways, the conventional military army and also the guerrilla strategies. Young people think that we are left defenseless on the streets during the military crackdowns, and many are killed because they don't have weapons to defend themselves. So they really want to fight back. They need weapons. I understand how they feel.

The second strategy is non-cooperation,

... the civil disobedience movement (CDM), mainly by the staff, thousands of doctors, nurses, teachers, professors, and government servants, are still taking part in CDM. They are not going to work under the military government. There are huge numbers refusing to go even though the military is desperately saying everything is running well. We know that they cannot manage the situation while the massive CDM movement stays strong. This is another strategy. And this also is effective. You can see the military every day announces the list of people that got fired because they are part of the CDM. They threaten people who join the CDM. So, these are two strategies.

The third strategy involves diplomacy and the leveraging of international influence,

Third, the NUG is trying to work on the diplomatic strategy, using all kinds of international cooperation, trying to get the legitimate vote as the legitimate government. They are looking for international or bilateral cooperation for the NUG movement. This is also another strategy. That is why we are calling for intervention. We are asking ASEAN, EU, or the US government to take action on the military's 'three-cuts' policies.

U Aung Myo Min emphasises the NUG's commitment to peace with justice. His words are worth quoting at length:

The motto of my ministry is equality, peace, and justice. Those are the basic principles of human rights. Equality means nobody is subject to discrimination. We will stay committed to Articles 1 and 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Article 1 deals with equality and Article 2 is related to non-discrimination. These are our principles ... We have what we could call a "three H" approach. One is Head, putting in the international standards, teaching what the UDHR, CEDAW, CRC, and CRPD is. The second one is Heart, so people can practice the three values of non-discrimination, equality, and respect for diversity. So people can feel it and they can also think about what social norms and taboos are not in line with everyday life ... And finally, putting a Human Rights curriculum in the new system, from the primary level to high school. A faculty of Human Rights, or maybe, the Institute for the Study of Human Rights (ISHR) Myanmar! This is my passion. This is my dream. This was my dream as an activist before. Now that I'm the dreammaker, maybe, to put this into our government's policy. This military code of conduct will be finished very soon, [and will] respect the dignity and the rights of the people based on international humanitarian law and also the law of armed conflict. Some are ready to go, but some are not ok because of a long history of mistrust between Bamar and other ethnic people. We are solving the problem, showing that the federal union and

federal democratic constitution is not only for the Bamar, but for all the peoples of Burma, of Myanmar!

### 15. Reflections: From Dictatorship to Democracy?

Immediately after the coup, the campaigns in Myanmar were overwhelmingly nonviolent, and the majority continue to be so. They have failed to end military rule, but they have undermined the military government's legitimacy and ability to rule, empowered civil society and promoted the kind of constructive change which seeks to redefine societal relations. Lawyers and analysts exposed the lack of legal basis for the detention and removal of President U Win Myint, refuting the military's argument that the seizure of power was constitutional. Many of those who had been most critical of the NLD—including activists, other political parties, business elites and intellectuals—came out decisively against the coup and in support of the CDM. The early stages of the resistance movement demonstrated the strategic advantages of nonviolent resistance. The CDM achieved widespread international support, which amplified the demands of civil society and put additional pressure on the military to restore democracy. The military regime became internationally isolated, deprived of development aid and in the eyes of many governments a failing state. Myanmar transformed into a nation outcast from normal diplomatic networks. Even China, ASEAN and regional neighbours felt obliged to state publicly their opposition either to the coup or to the violence enacted by the army on unarmed civilians. The CDM's non-cooperation strategies have meant that Myanmar has experienced political and economic paralysis since the military coup. Despite horrific suffering at the hands of the military junta, the civil resistance movement has not been broken or divided and has brought about a process of democratisation that offers a road map towards a federal future. Throughout Myanmar, people defied the coup, refused its legitimacy, dramatised their disapproval, and refused to cooperate or collaborate. The CDM built a community of mutual respect, in the process undermining Buddhist Bamar majoritarianism and nationalism in the interests of pro-democracy unity. The public resistance agenda broadened and radicalised. No longer simply about the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and the restoration of the civilian government, it became about the process of democratisation itself, individual freedoms, and change in the way people are educated to think. There is recognition that freedom of expression, human rights and accountability will follow rather than precede the democratisation of all sections of Myanmar society. Through the NUCC, the anti-coup movement has achieved agreement on a range of topics, including the abolition of the 2008 constitution, even though negotiations on interethnic power sharing and a future federal democratic governance structure remain sensitive.

The conflict changed from a short-term anti-coup defence to a longer-term struggle against an established military regime. As state repression escalated, the agenda widened to address fundamental questions of constitutional reform, civil control of the military, federalism, and social justice. A committee of elected politicians declared the country's 2008 constitution void and put forward an interim federal charter to replace it. The 2008 constitution is now stigmatised by Myanmar's leaders as unfit for purpose, unrepresentative of Myanmar's diverse civil society and failing to enshrine the values of justice, fairness, inclusion, and respect. These moves, while more symbolic than practical, encouraged many of the country's armed ethnic militias to ally themselves with the mass protest movement. The NUG determined that it would create space where partner political parties, ethnic armed revolutionary organisations and civil society organisations could work together to discuss and validate political agreements and implement the way forward ([National Unity Government 2022](#)). It also committed itself to work with the EAOs and the PDFs to create a wider and more explicitly political front and strengthen a growing consensus across Myanmar society for a post-Tatmadaw country. While the old NLD denied culpability in the Rohingya crisis, the NUG declared their determination to bring to justice all those who committed abuses in Rakhine and other states in accordance with international law. Some pro-democracy Bamar who had themselves experienced oppression endorsed trans-ethnic

solidarity; others condemned SAC for seizing power but also condemned a more general ‘Burman chauvinism’. The resistance has therefore taken on an increasingly revolutionary character, with most dissidents no longer aiming for restoration of the status quo ante but for the Tatmadaw’s disbandment and its replacement by a new armed force that is not dominated by the Bamar ethnic majority. Most activists now work for a federal Myanmar, and for the freedom for ethnic communities to practise their traditions and cultures freely. However, as the conflict has prolonged, many activists, particularly striking teachers and medical personnel, have faced intimidation and the loss of jobs, even imprisonment and torture, and some have been forced to abandon the CDM to maintain and protect their families.

Questions remain as to whether the fragile unity reached during the aftermath of the coup could survive transition to power. Even after victory, there would be many challenges in integrating the very diverse groupings found in Myanmar and dealing with harsh economic, political, and social realities. Politically, the CRPH and the NUG are far more inclusive of ethnic nationalities than the NLD and recognise that democracy is unattainable without radical structural reforms which will destroy a classification system that drives inter-ethnic competition and the proliferation of non-state armed groups. NUG ministers have set out a vision of an inclusive and just federal democracy: a democracy that will protect the identities, cultures and languages of different groups while promoting the common values of freedom, equality, human rights, and democracy. However, they will have to carry people with them. Many ethnic groups remain wary of the NUG due to past tensions and their own sometimes violently divergent interests (*The Irrawaddy* 2021d). For example, the Arakan Army, despite opposing the coup and issuing supportive statements, seems intent on forging its own path and furthering its goal of autonomy apart from the NUG. Others, such as the powerful United Wa State Army (UWSA) under China’s unofficial protection, maintain a careful neutrality. Once in power, the CRPH would have to convince freed NLD leaders to support and honour the agreement (i.e., political roadmap) negotiated with the ethnic nationalities and persuade the Bamar public that federalism is the best way to address the long-standing civil war. From the start of public protests, some commentators have interpreted the priorities of the Bamar and non-Bamar ethnic groups as different. The key demands of Bamar protesters who rally behind the NLD flag have been: (1) the release of Aung San Suu Kyi (State Counsellor), President Win Myint and all other detainees; (2) respect for the 2020 election result; and (3) restoration of democracy and eradication of military dictatorship. On the other hand, the key demands of ethnic minorities and (some groups of) Generation Z have been: (1) the eradication of the military dictatorship; (2) abolition of the 2008 Constitution; (3) establishment of a genuine federal democratic union; and (4) release of all detainees including the President and State Counsellor. Twelve months after the coup, pressure is building on the NUG to turn talk into action, and despite enjoying broad public support, it may struggle to manage sharp internal differences between the NLD’s ‘old guard’ and those fighting for radical change.

The CDM’s most immediate goal has always been to rid Myanmar of the military junta. The UN Deputy High Commissioner Nada al-Nashif noted that the current crisis in Myanmar was ‘born of impunity’, with a long-standing lack of civilian control over the military and its disproportionate influence in the country’s political and economic institutions. She recalled the explicit warning by the HRC’s Fact Finding Mission in 2018, that ‘the Tatmadaw (Myanmar’s military) is the greatest impediment to Myanmar’s development as a modern democratic nation.’ (*United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner* 2018) She urged that ‘The Commander-in-Chief of the Tatmadaw, Min Aung Hlaing, and all the current leadership must be replaced, and a complete restructuring must be undertaken to place the Tatmadaw under full civilian control. Myanmar’s democratic transition depends on it’.<sup>34</sup> The military has been largely unaccountable as it bombed villages, cleared populations in the country’s ethnic regions and gunned down civilians, but the NLD’s record was also imperfect. Supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi have argued that she had little choice but to seek accommodation with the army to gain greater democratic

freedoms. However, critics maintain that the NLD could have done much more to improve human rights and democratic values.

The NUG's advocacy of armed violence will have consequences for generations to come. The move by the NUG towards a Federal Union Army was intended to build a coordinated and disciplined force against the Tatmadaw, but the result has been an increase in lawlessness and traumatising of the entire population. The NUG's efforts to secure diplomatic recognition—including its goal of occupying Myanmar's seat at the UN—were greatly complicated by the fact that it had put its imprimatur on a struggle that includes the killing of civilians and use of indiscriminate weapons ([International Crisis Group 2021b](#)). The fact that the civil resistance movement has descended in some regions into deadly counter violence comes as no surprise. The various nationality groups such as the Karen, Mon, and others all have their armies and were unlikely to adopt nonviolent policies. By October 2021, PDFs were operating in most of the country's townships but remained highly atomised in their struggle against military rule, lacking unified leadership or common longer-term objectives. The decentralised nature of the leadership has meant that it is impossible to monitor or discipline the ethnic militias who were already engaged in fighting the Tatmadaw or the civilian militias that sprang up in the wake of the coup. While the NUG has no military capability of its own, resistance forces continue to stage attacks, ambushing military convoys, bombing regime-linked targets and assassinating regime-appointed local officials, suspected informants, and others seen as loyal to the ruling junta. On 8 October 2021, *Frontier* reported that anti-military guerrilla forces were continuing to assassinate regime officials at a relentless pace and that the climate of fear was prompting many junta-appointed administrators to quit their jobs. On 4 November, a top executive of Myanmar's military-owned telecommunications company Mytel, was shot dead in an attack outside his home in Yangon. The ICG notes that as the security forces have been unable to protect regime-appointed local administrators, retired soldiers, members of the military-linked Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and others marked for death by resistance groups, regime supporters have formed their own paramilitary networks, known as Pyusawhti groups ([International Crisis Group 2021b](#)). However, pro-regime militias often become targets for resistance forces rather than a tool for the security forces to project power ([International Crisis Group 2022](#)).

## 16. Conclusions: Myanmar's Quest for a Federal and Democratic Future

Civil resistance has involved far more than opposition to the coup d'état. It has aimed at a more fundamental transformation of Myanmar into a democratic, federal, and inclusive state, in which the army is replaced by security forces under the control of a civilian government. However, during the post-coup period, what one commentator describes as beginning with the sounds of jubilant defiance has been replaced with the sounds of gun fire, explosions, and immense suffering ([Theresa 2022](#)). In the coup's immediate aftermath, most civilians died as security forces cracked down on nationwide demonstrations. Now, however, the rising death toll is a result of combat as civilians have taken up arms ([Fortier 2021](#); [Win et al. 2022](#)). After twelve months of struggle, Myanmar remains an unstable state and faces an uncertain future. The [Myanmar Study Group \(2022\)](#) argues that possible outcomes are boundless and unpredictable but include scenarios such as (i) continuation over the short to medium term of chaotic and increasingly bloody civil war that could become internecine; (ii) partial or complete secession from the union by some of the ethnic minority groups as their armies gain ground against the military; (iii) consolidation of harsh military control over some parts of the country; (iv) failure of the opposition movement to unite effectively around an agreed future for the country; and (v) the emergence of an empowered opposition government conceived as an inclusive federal democracy with security forces reconfigured along federal lines. Michael F Martin considers that Myanmar faces three likely futures: (1) the replacement of Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC by a democratic federal state; (2) the fragmentation of Myanmar into several separate sovereign states; or (3) the consolidation of the SAC's rule over the nation. He maintains that the



outcome will depend on how effectively the interests of Myanmar's ethnic minorities and their EAOs are considered.

This article has argued throughout that the pro-democracy movement's success cannot be gauged simply in terms of victory, especially in the short term, and has set out reasons why it has created some of the conditions for Myanmar's eventual transition to a sustainable peace. First, the CDM, which began as an online campaign, has expanded into a wider pro-democracy movement, mobilising vast swathes of Myanmar's population to oppose the illegal, unconstitutional seizure of power by the military. It includes a range of ethnic and religious minority organisations and armed groups and has attracted support from all sections of society. Myanmar's mass political defiance has not brought an end to the military dictatorship, but it has exposed the brutal nature of the regime to the world community and has provided the people with harsh but valuable experience with political struggle. Second, the CDM and members of the deposed elected NLD government have created alternative, more inclusive, political institutions. The CRPH was formed to serve as the interim elected legislature and the NUG as the executive branch. Third, the CDM developed an impressively diverse range of strategic nonviolent tactics, employing many of the methods of social non-cooperation, persuasion, and intervention catalogued by Sharp. (See Appendix A, Table A1.) This began a long-term process of reconciliation to build trust and create a stable peace by negotiating a political road map to a post-Tatmadaw future. Fourth, a generation of young people, women and men have not only provided the creative revolutionary leadership of the CDM, but many have been willing to pay with their lives to keep the democratic progress alive. Some of these leaders have developed the kind of international skills and regional understanding required to guide Myanmar into a democratic federal future and build a prosperous economy (Myanmar Study Group 2022). Mcpherson and Naing (2021) report on the utterly changed worlds of young women and men on the run or in hiding and paint a portrait of sacrifice and resolve. Fifth, the NUG, NUCC and CRPH have advanced the process of nation building and reconciliation by the recognition that peace is only sustainable when it addresses the underlying injustices and exclusionary policies that fuel grievances and when it moves the country towards a more constructive and inclusive conception of national identity and away from essentialist notions of ethnicity and religion. Myanmar's resistance movement has brought fresh understanding and sympathy between pro-democracy and ethnic nationality movements. Despite paying lip service to equality, the state has for decades privileged the majority Bamar, creating deep grievances that have pushed many ethnic minorities and EAOs into long-standing, low-grade civil war. Successive military regimes have maintained power through violence and division, intentionally inciting interethnic and interreligious conflict. The NUG shadow government works to implement a vision of Myanmar's future which delinks citizenship from ethnicity. It targets contemporary Bamar racism and proposes changes, which would help to ensure that all in Myanmar have access to citizenship and basic rights, mitigate discrimination against minorities, and create a more inclusive national identity. The NUCC's official remit is to promote inclusion and equality and is the crucible from which a new type of interethnic relations could emerge. Finally, NUG ministers have frequently spoken of the need for justice and accountability as well as reparation to all the victims of gross human rights violations and to all those who have suffered because of non-cooperation. Crimes that in the past could have been easily concealed are today much easier to detect and scrutinise thanks to satellite imagery. International, national, and local initiatives are already documenting the ongoing atrocities and war crimes being committed by the junta, to use documentation to build international pressure on the regime and to bring criminals to justice. However, to retain support, the NUG must go beyond rhetoric and provide services to relieve the suffering of the people. Myanmar Study Group (2022) reports that there are already early signs in some conflict areas that this is happening and that opposition forces and EAOs are increasingly taking over local administration, health services, and security control.

The resilience and bravery of the Myanmar people over the twelve months have been astounding. In the face of aerial assaults, and mass arrest and torture, they continue to strike, to protest, to speak out and to defend themselves. Thousands have made huge sacrifices in the cause of democracy and freedom. Mass street protests have gone, but strikes, boycotts and other forms of civil disobedience continue. Millions have made changes in their daily lives at great personal cost. Striking workers have been targeted for beatings and arrest. Millions of students have been forced to choose between attending government-run institutions and maintaining the boycott of state services and losing even more of their education. Pro-democracy supporters have refused to pay taxes, donating the money to armed resistance groups instead, or have withheld payment for electricity or other revenue sources, acts of civil disobedience aimed at depriving the junta of crucial sources of revenue. The economy had previously been projected to grow in 2021, but with the coup and the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank estimates that it has contracted by more than 18%. Myanmar's currency, the kyat, has plummeted since the coup to less than half its previous value, driving up prices for imports such as cooking oil, agricultural inputs such as fertiliser, and refined fuels. Many public services, such as healthcare and schools, are barely functioning, and the regime has halted many longer-term programmes reliant on state funding. Almost half of the country's population, around 25 million people, are reported to be slipping into poverty and food insecurity, and more than 14.4 million people are estimated to need humanitarian assistance and protection. Since the coup, thousands of Myanmar's people have experienced violence, imprisonment, and displacement. Some have sacrificed their lives fighting on the ground. Others have been hiding in cities, organising clandestine demonstrations, funnelling money to striking workers and strategizing. An entire Burmese generation who, unlike their parents, grew up in a world of smartphones and greater political freedoms have dedicated and often sacrificed their lives to overthrowing the regime (Mcpherson and Naing 2021).

International outrage over violence against protesters often depends on the nonviolent nature of a campaign of resistance, which illustrates the influence of the international system on the practices of resistance movements (Fortier 2021). This accords with recent academic findings which emphasise the advantages that nonviolence brings. For Gandhi's followers, the resort to violence must always be ethically wrong. For students of Sharp, the choice of violence must always be pragmatically unfortunate. The opponent will always have the means of violence, the means of oppression. In February 2021, Myanmar's civil resistance movement captured the world's imagination with its 'peaceful resistance to the rule of the men with guns'. It became a textbook example of creative and innovative strategic nonviolent resistance and non-cooperation. Unarmed protests exposed the brutality of the junta, undermined its legitimacy, and, in some cases, transformed allegiances. The NUG's declaration of war has been for the international community the most controversial of the NUG's decisions, yet it was welcomed by many Burmese people who simply want the Tatmadaw gone and who detest its extrajudicial arrests, tortures, murders, and bombing and burning of villages. The NUG and CRPH regard armed revolution as a temporary measure forced upon them by the military's unjustified and indefensible crimes against their own people, and they came to believe that it was vital to bring EAOs with significant military capabilities into the resistance movement and develop a unified multi-ethnic political and armed coalition.

Many military analysts accept that the military's intransigence created the conditions for outright, high-intensity civil war (Myers 2021). The army deploys heavy artillery, Russian Mi-17 transport helicopters and Mi-35 gunships, and it has wiped out entire villages in attempts to evict EAOs and PDFs. It uses its long-established 'four cuts' counter-insurgency strategy in these areas, a cruel approach that deliberately targets civilians in order to deprive insurgents of food, funds, recruits, and intelligence. *The Diplomat* pointed out that the PDF, a loose coalition of anti-coup armed groups with a fragile and tenuous overarching leadership structure and limited resources, has been waging asymmetric warfare against a 300,000-strong military armed by China and Russia. It concluded that

without uniting most EAOs and countering Tatmadaw airpower, the NUG and its People's Defence Force would find it almost impossible to defeat the junta by violent action and warned that the end of military rule might not immediately give birth to a safer reality, and that the resulting lawlessness might seriously undermine the revolution being waged in the name of creating a federal democracy (Bociaga 2021b). However weakened and demoralised the armed forces may be today, they retain the capability to unleash long-range artillery, airstrikes, cyberwar, drone attacks, and airborne assaults on populated areas. They rely heavily on air power for a range of functions: resupply, casualty evacuation, reconnaissance and surveillance, air support, and air-mobile operations. As the resistance gains ground, the army increasingly depends on helicopters, jet fighters and surveillance drones. In the absence of anti-aircraft weapons such as heavy machine-guns and surface-to-air missiles, the PDFs' best defences against air power are speed, dispersal, camouflage, and darkness. Although the NUG continues to have limited control over the PDFs and even less over guerrilla groups, EAOs are still gaining territory and the PDFs continue to expand in size, capability, and coordination, inflicting significant damage on military forces and local administrations (Myanmar Study Group 2022). Myanmar's shadow Prime Minister, Mahn Win Khaing Than, regards the military's absolute air superiority as the major obstacle to defeating Min Aung Hlaing's regime. The Human Rights Minister U Aung Myo Min posted on Facebook the comment that the regime is 'murdering from the skies,' and that its airstrikes on civilian targets violate domestic and international law and breach the 1977 Geneva Convention, which the then-junta ratified in 1992 (Myanmar Now 2021b).

Although the NUG's declaration of an all-out war against the junta may have diminished its legitimacy internationally, many Burmese civilians, young people especially, regard it as the last chance to get rid of a series of military dictators who have waged some of the world's longest-running civil wars, displaced millions of people, oppressed ethnic minorities and consigned generations to poverty and shattered dreams. They believe that when legitimate peaceful protest is met with state violence, protesters have the right to self-defence and that without struggle democracy may die. Activists also argue that if the resistance movement drags on, public sympathy may fade, or the military will drive resistance into the shadows. Reports of what is happening in Myanmar often conflict. Some political analysts claim that there are unprecedented numbers of soldiers defecting or being killed in action, and that the junta's armed forces are overstretched, battle weary and plagued by extremely low morale. Others describe a stalemate with neither side able to claim victory. Although the PDF has damaged the notion of the Tatmadaw's invincibility, dialogue and negotiation remain a very distant prospect. SAC previously declared the CRPH, the NUG and 'all their subordinates' terrorist groups and accused them of inciting the CDM to commit violent acts including riots, bombings, arson and 'manslaughter'. The NUG for their part have refused international pleas to negotiate with the military regime. This policy could simply ensure that cycles of violence and retaliation recur, that ethnic groups act autonomously, and that people grow weary of the struggle and gradually lose hope.

The importance of contextualising Myanmar's struggle in the global geopolitical arena and as a member of ASEAN was made clear in the early sections of this article. International organisations have continued to grow, including international tribunals that try war crimes and international peacekeeping forces that intervene under the developing idea of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect innocent people who are being persecuted and slaughtered by their own governments (Fiala 2018). In 2018, the UN Secretary-General declared: 'My aim is to forge a common vision and common systems and capacities across the United Nations to consistently and adequately support Member States in their endeavour to sustain peace and build resilient and prosperous nations in line with their commitments to leave no one behind' (UN 2018, para. 4). Many Burmese feel that the international community has failed to mount an effective response to the military coup and that the series of sanctions upon regime figures and military-owned companies have had

limited impact on the regime's capacity to operate. Western democratic governments, on the other hand, emphasise that they have provided technical and other forms of non-military support to the NUG and the CDM and offered humanitarian assistance through non-governmental organisations and UN agencies. The UN has established the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM), a body set up to collect and collate evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity in Myanmar and has persisted—against junta obstruction—in developing a response to the COVID-19 emergency in Myanmar through the Global Fund, COVAX, and the GAVI Alliance to ensure that the regime allows vaccines and anti-COVID assistance to reach all needy communities. However, the major powers have been increasingly focused on the global pandemic response as well as on other crises such as those in Afghanistan, Yemen and Ethiopia, and most recently and powerfully on the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This raises questions as to whether a UN permanent security force could or should do more in general to support states suffering from a military coup and whether Myanmar needs to be a far higher foreign policy priority for Western and regional governments, with greater weight thrown behind ASEAN efforts to mediate ([International Crisis Group 2021b](#)). The ICG argues that the international community should do more to assist those on the frontlines of the fight for freedom from military rule by prioritising humanitarian aid, supporting the pro-democracy movement, advocating for the release of all political prisoners and the lifting of the internet ban, and aiding asylum seekers, refugees, and ethnic minority groups. It urges that in the light of the suffering of the Burmese people, the UN and international actors should redouble their efforts to address the crisis's humanitarian and economic fallout and consider how best to support civil society organisations.<sup>35</sup> It reports that world attention to Myanmar is waning, despite the deepening impasse between the junta and resistance forces, and even though the crisis is playing out against a backdrop of deepening economic recession, health system collapse, and surging poverty and food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> More generally, it asks the UN and governments around the world to find ways to take strong and urgent action to avert or counter the devastating effects of a military coup and to respond to pleas for international action to protect civilians and hold perpetrators of grave crimes against humanity to account.<sup>37</sup>

The CDM and NUG's immediate goal is to overthrow the military, but this is only one step towards the building of a culture of peace and reconciliation. The shadow NUG has already begun this process of reconciliation by recognising the need to build greater trust and unity if the pro-democracy movement is to succeed in defeating the junta and—more importantly—in rebuilding a war-torn country. Zin Mar Aung, the NUG's foreign affairs minister, who was a political prisoner from 1998 to 2009, regards national reconciliation as key to the democratic revolution: 'As Myanmar is home to multi-ethnic groups, federalism is the only solution. This revolution is not only meant to uproot dictatorship from our land. We have a vision for state-building . . . to end decades long inequality and discrimination. In this regard, reconciliation and unity among different ethnic groups is utmost important and it is the key to end [the military junta]' (In [Stauffer et al. 2021](#)). Stauffer ([Stauffer et al. 2021](#)) admits that the NUG has made important progress by publicly acknowledging harms committed against the Rohingya; however, he argues that a broader effort that examines the dark history of violence against and alienation of ethnic and religious minorities is critical for reconciliation to occur between the NUG, civil society and the many ethnic groups that have been underrepresented for too long. He calls for Myanmar to embark on an intentional process of individual and collective healing and a joint pursuit of a just political order. To change the trajectory of the conflict, the opposition must unify around a nation-building process. 'To unify the country, the NUG must undertake a transformative reconciliation process built upon principles of restorative justice. Such a process must include three elements: acknowledging the past, establishing new norms and relationships, and constructing a shared vision for a just, inclusive society'. Stauffer urges that, 'If the NUG could build on their vision of the future and lead the nation in a reconciliation process,

the groups loosely connected with the opposition could, unify to defeat the military, build resilience to future military coups and set the country on a path toward sustainable peace’.

Many Myanmar watchers are predicting that Myanmar is likely to remain in a state of tumult for the foreseeable future (Horsey 2022). However, the CDM and NUG project a sense that this is an historical moment, a powerful sense that history is being made, that the people are building the future and a better tomorrow for all. Many political and religious leaders call for social renewal, the rebuilding of relationships, healing and restorative justice, at the same time acknowledging that a national process of reconciliation may take years. Dr. Sasa, whilst still on the run, told VOA, ‘Hopefully, we’ll see a new Myanmar, a new future, sooner or later . . . All the sacrifices we have made, history will look back and remember something great’.<sup>38</sup> The Acting President, in his 2022 Independence Day speech, spoke of a ‘second struggle for independence’ and dismissed the military as a terrorist organisation and the junta as a fascist dictatorship (*The Irrawaddy* 2022a). He rejected notions of dialogue saying that ‘the dialogue table is not the right place for criminals with blood on their hands’. He added however that the NUG would always open its arms to military personnel ‘who detest the military’s atrocities, who believe that their responsibility is to protect the country, not to be involved in politics, even though they may still be under the terrorist leadership at the moment’. The President made light of Min Aung Hlaing’s call for EAOs to mark the 2022 new year by engaging in a peace dialogue, describing it as an attempt to stall for time and find a political exit strategy from the crisis, as well as to deceive the international community and confuse the resistance forces.<sup>39</sup> He concluded his address by declaring that he had no doubt of victory. ‘I would like to urge you to let us tenaciously work together until we free ourselves from military slavery and bring back freedom, equality, and justice for the people who are the original owner of the sovereignty. Our cause shall triumph!’ (President Office, National Unity Government 2022). The NUG Prime Minister, a Karen Christian by background, in an interview on 22 January 2022, was similarly robust, asserting unequivocally, ‘We are expecting that our revolution will be successful by the end of this year’ (Lin 2022). He said that his administration at first struggled to convince ethnic armed groups to fight the junta but claimed that now, ‘victory is inevitable’. He acknowledged the suffering and sacrifices of the Burmese people but insisted that,

The country will have to suffer for several decades to come if we don’t win this fight. So we need to win this fight once and for all . . . We can form a new country from here. The people of Myanmar will go down in history for being a part of the formation of a new nation. This is not our revolution. This is the revolution of the people and the Generation Z kids. Please continue to fight and we will provide whatever support you need. We will try to lead you out of this mess as soon as possible.

The NUG leadership’s optimistic assessment of the prospects for the achievement of the revolutionary objectives of the resistance is intended to rally and reassure. However, commentators are divided in their predictions. Some warn that the ongoing political crisis in Myanmar has no end in sight and that violence is all but certain to escalate; others argue that, given the Tatmadaw’s significant losses on the battlefield, the People’s Defence Force could overrun the military’s control of many of Myanmar’s townships by mid-2022.

One of the key issues raised throughout this paper concerns Sharp’s contention that liberation from dictatorships ultimately depends upon the people’s ability to liberate themselves and that populations could regain from dictatorships control over governmental institutions by relentlessly attacking their sources of power and deliberately using strategic planning and operations to do so. This paper has analysed the transformative impact of the nonviolent, imaginative, and creative forces seen in the early urban resistance to the coup and argued that nonviolent protest initiated a process of democratisation that enabled considerable progress towards planning for the social and political reconstruction necessary to reconceptualise political morality and interethnic justice after years of authoritarian rule. Such conclusions confirm the findings of previous researchers that sustained



civil resistance during conflict increases the likelihood of democratisation. Unlike armed groups, nonviolent movements have fewer moral and physical barriers to participation and are therefore uniquely placed to generate leverage through mobilising large numbers of people against an oppressive government, and by attracting diverse groups of people from different socio-economic backgrounds, occupations, genders, and ages, have a greater chance of gaining sympathy or support from pro-government segments of society (see also [Chenoweth and Stephan 2011](#); [Abbs 2021](#), p. 13). The ‘constructive’ dimension of nonviolent movements means they are likely to bring about participatory practices that are conducive to participatory democracy and peace-building activities in post-conflict settings ([Dudouet 2011, 2013, 2017](#); [Pinckney 2016, 2018, 2021](#)).

Despite the fact that peacebuilding as an intentional discipline emphasises the advantages of nonviolent struggle over violent conflict and the democratising effects of political defiance and nonviolent resistance to oppressive regimes, this article has stressed that context is crucial. Generic guidelines and analyses are most effective when their application is strategic and takes into account the geopolitical, military, economic and social factors driving particular conflicts. The UN, international diplomats and peacebuilders have to grapple with the complexity of Myanmar’s ongoing political crisis and engage in realistic dialogues about future Myanmar politics. The principle of political control of the armed forces is rooted in the concept of a representative democracy. While nonviolent resistance continues throughout Myanmar, military victory has now become for some pro-democracy activists the most urgent way to settle the conflict and to begin the process of restoration and reconciliation. The National Unity Government insists that the military, with its record of violence, should be totally excluded from any talks about the future of the country. The military government for its part shows no sign of reversing the coup or ending the violence and restoring law and order. Any suggestions of negotiation and mediation are rejected by both sides. Meanwhile, although popular support for the CDM and opposition to the coup remains strong, Myanmar’s people are suffering as a result of the economic impacts of COVID-19 and the post-coup turmoil.

Nonviolent protest is not without huge cost. The devastating effect of millions of people working together to sabotage the administration and economy has caused great suffering as economic, education, health, and social protection systems have been destroyed. Moreover, the challenges of building unity even among the pro-democracy opposition are significant. [Martin \(2021\)](#) argues that if the people of Myanmar are to have a truly democratic government, the various components of the opposition movement must at some point agree to the framework for a democratic federal state. This would require the CRPH and the Bamar majority to be willing to offer the ethnic minorities and EAOs adequate terms to preserve the integrity of the nation of Myanmar. [Moo and Dillabough-Lefebvre \(2021\)](#) observe that finding a political language that unites peoples and addresses the conflict challenges in inclusive ways has historically proven difficult. However, although Myanmar’s future remains far from certain, the coup has created circumstances through which this seems possible. The civil resistance movement has opened the way for the rebuilding of Myanmar with greater political democracy, personal liberties, and social justice, and advanced the potential for a decentralised federalism. [Thant and Aung \(2021\)](#) wrote soon after the military coup, ‘The Myanmar people, through solidarity and alliances between long-divided communities, have a chance to build a better, stronger Union—one that holds a brighter future for all citizens regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender and sexual orientation . . . . Now, more than ever, amid the chaos created by the coup, the people of Myanmar have an opportunity to establish a true democracy’.

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## Appendix A



**Figure A1.** Political Map of Myanmar. (The map shows Myanmar and surrounding countries with international borders, the national capital Naypyitaw, state/division boundaries and major airports).

**Table A1.** Nonviolent Campaign Goals and Strategies for the Restoration of Democratic Government, Federalism and Civic Inclusion after the Military Coup in February 2021.

Nonviolent Goals and Strategies	Implementation and Impact
Goal(s) of the resistance movement	<p>(a) Peaceful transition of power back to elected government, release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all those detained by military.</p> <p>(b) Democratisation of society, federal justice, accountability of military, new constitution containing the values of free speech, free expression, free right to information.</p>
Methods of nonviolent protest and persuasion. Strategies, symbols and sounds of solidarity	<p>(a) Protests, blockades, strikes, vigils, murals, street performances.</p> <p>(b) Red ribbon, black ribbon, three-fingered salute, banging of pots and pans.</p> <p>(c) Posters, memes, online networks, creative arts.</p> <p>(d) Uploading videos and images of peaceful demonstrations and military violence to internal and global audiences.</p> <p>(e) Reaching out to the international community, activists across Asia, Milky Tea alliance, the Burmese diaspora.</p> <p>(f) Reaching out to members of the army and the police.</p>
Popular support for the nonviolent resistance movement	The vast crowds demonstrated solidarity, strengthening the concept of democratisation, inclusion, and diversity. Important legacy for post-coup democratisation.
Social diversity and inclusion	The emphasis on inclusion across ethnicity, religion, gender, class and region increases the likelihood of post-conflict democratisation, the development of empathy, trusted relationships, openness, transparency, and a sense of shared endeavour to build a new culture, based on mutual respect, equality and justice.
Leadership and participation of Generation Z	Many protests were led and organised by young people using online platforms and in the early weeks employing street performances, humour, satire, comedy, drama, and the creative arts.
Leadership and participation of women and girls	Women led from the front line. Unions consisting mainly of women supported nonviolent resistance through strikes, sit downs, and non-cooperation. This increased the agency and empowerment of women and the likelihood of post-conflict democratisation.
Participation and visibility of ethnic nationalities in civil resistance	Nonviolent resistance led to the building of bridges. Minority ethnic groups were visible in demonstrations and protests, and their support led to ideas of federalism and justice. Ethnic nationalities are more fully represented within the CRPH, NUCC and NUG and are playing a determining role in negotiating a post-conflict federalism.
Nonviolent economic non-cooperation	Economic non-cooperation targeted the junta's revenue and led to the boycott of its businesses and goods, the refusal to pay income tax and car tax and the avoidance of state transportation systems. Strikes by medical staff, teachers, university lecturers, engineers, farmers and other workers shut down state hospitals, schools, universities, and factories. Funding was funnelled to the CDM, IDPs and refugees.

Table A1. Cont.

Nonviolent Goals and Strategies	Implementation and Impact
Nonviolent political non-cooperation	Political non-cooperation involved the withdrawal of support from military government. The CDM boycotted government employment and positions, government departments, agencies, and other bodies, and withdrew from government educational and healthcare institutions.
Nonviolent interventions	Alternative political, social, and economic institutions trusted by the people were established.
Support of CSOs, NGOs, trade unions, women's organisations, ethnic nationalities, etc.	Civil society proved remarkably strong, and the coalition building among CSOs and civil institutions positively impacted the post-coup process of democratisation.
Support of international, national, and regional religious leaders and organisations	Protesters gained the support of international religious leaders, diasporic communities and networks, and internal support from certain Buddhist monastics, and faith-based and multireligious organisations and religious leaders.
Decentralised leadership	Decentralised leadership added democratic agency but meant that nonviolent protest was compromised particularly in the regions where civil conflicts had already taken hold. Despite a history of military coups and punitive reaction to pro-democracy protest, strategic plans were not in place to forestall military takeover.
Support of the international community	Diplomatic efforts, targeting of sanctions, travel restrictions, targeting of aid away from military government, falling away of international investment, decline in tourism. Humanitarian aid in the face of deepening economic crisis. Withholding diplomatic recognition of junta. China was seen as undermining Myanmar's transition to liberal democracy.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 2011, Sharp gave several hard-hitting explanations as to why resistance had previously failed to undermine military rule in Burma (Roughneen 2018). He observed that many of the opposition groups had armies or mini armies and thought that they would be weakened by going over to nonviolence. Moreover, all the various armed groups believed 'foolishly' that they could defeat the Army. Sharp characterised Aung San Suu Kyi as a moral leader rather than a strategist and recalled that, although *From Dictatorship to Democracy* was written for the Burmese, there were no Burmese groups who really took that analysis seriously or used it as a strategy for the liberation of Burma. 'People got arrested and sent to prison for carrying it, in Burmese and other languages, they could organise very powerful and brave demonstrations in Rangoon and elsewhere, but they did not plan a grand struggle. If you don't plan, if you don't have a bigger strategy, you're not going to win'.
- <sup>2</sup> The nomination said: '[The CDM] strives to create a united stand against the military's divide and rule tactics and for federal democracy. If successful, this holds the potential of ending Myanmar's long legacy of direct and indirect military rule and intrastate armed conflicts'. (*The Irrawaddy* 2021a).
- <sup>3</sup> The Tatmadaw, the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar, is administered by the Ministry of Defence and composed of the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. Auxiliary services include the Myanmar Police Force and the People's Militia Units.
- <sup>4</sup> The military government has since deferred the holding of multiparty elections and the lifting of a state of emergency until August 2023.
- <sup>5</sup> The NLD won 87% of contested parliamentary seats while the USDP managed a mere 7%. The NLD gained 396 out of 476 seats in Parliament, the USDP gained 33. USDP senior members, some former military generals, lost their seats while USDP strongholds such as Meiktila and Mandalay, went over to the NLD.
- <sup>6</sup> The military alleged that more than eight million votes had been fraudulently cast. The election process was not perfect. For example, the NLD government refused to allow voting in some places, citing fears of violence and ethnic unrest. Precedents for this existed in the 2010 and 2015 elections, but this time, the no-vote zones in the states of Bago, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rakhine and Shan were significantly larger. In July 2021, the UEC officially annulled the results of the 2020 general election and in August ordered political parties to prepare their financial records for upcoming audits.

- 7 Aung San Suu Kyi was sentenced to four years in prison on 6 December 2021, but General Min Aung Hlaing only hours later commuted the sentence to two years. On 19 January 2022, she was given a four-year jail sentence by a military court, and she is also facing further charges, including allegations of election fraud, corruption and violating the Official Secrets Act. (*Frontier Myanmar* 2021a).
- 8 These included Ashin Ariya Vansa Bivansa, known as Myawaddy Sayadaw, and Shwe Nyar War Sayadaw. Myawaddy Sayadaw, a prominent Buddhist leader and vocal critic of both the military and the extremist Buddhist nationalist movement, was forced to disrobe and ordered to appear in court. (*Myanmar NOW* 2021a).
- 9 President Joe Biden released a statement on 2 February 2021 declaring that the military takeover and detention of civilian officials was ‘a direct assault on the country’s transition to democracy and the rule of law.’ He later approved a new executive order allowing the United States to ‘immediately sanction the military leaders who directed the coup, their business interests as well as close family members.’ (*The New York Times* 2021a).
- 10 Ghoshal argues that Western democracies would achieve their goal not through condemnation or sanctions but through gentle nudging, persuasion and offering incentives. He claims that this ‘backdoor’ way is the only way in which the military would accept the need for the peaceful transfer of power back to Myanmar’s civilian elected representatives, and that the combination of external international pressure and internal protest might create an environment in which change is possible but that ‘international responses will matter only if stakeholders treat the coup leaders as partners in the progress towards democracy’. (*Ghoshal* 2021).
- 11 On 18 October 2021, Chairman Min Aung Hlaing declared that ‘To bring peace, stability, and true democracy . . . amnesty will be granted to those who have been convicted and those who have been prosecuted for their involvement in the riots due to the incitements of terrorist groups, CRPH and NUG so that they can do good deeds peacefully in the coming Thadingyut period’. *The Global New Light of Myanmar*. Available online: [https://cdn.myanmarseo.com/file/client-cdn/2021/10/19\\_Oct\\_21\\_gnlm.pdf](https://cdn.myanmarseo.com/file/client-cdn/2021/10/19_Oct_21_gnlm.pdf) (accessed on 19 October 2021).
- 12 This BBC News video shows tens of thousands of people taking part in protests in Myanmar. Myanmar coup: Internet shutdown as crowds protest against military. BBC News. 6 February. Available online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-55960284> (accessed on 15 February 2021).
- 13 Protesters joining a general strike to close everything except essential service. *Myanmar Now*. February 22, 2021. Available online: [https://www.myanmar-now.org/sites/myanmar-now.org/files/styles/mmnnow\\_details\\_image/public/news-images/152342512\\_2030154113798983\\_8788363327201537854\\_o.jpg?itok=5a9sGZW1](https://www.myanmar-now.org/sites/myanmar-now.org/files/styles/mmnnow_details_image/public/news-images/152342512_2030154113798983_8788363327201537854_o.jpg?itok=5a9sGZW1) (accessed on 22 February 2021).
- 14 Photograph of St. Francis Xavier nun, Sister Ann Roza Nu Thawng kneeling in front of police and soldiers during an anti-coup protest in Myitkyina, Myanmar, February 28. Sky News. Available online: [https://e3.365dm.com/21/03/768x432/skynews-nun-myanmar-military\\_5294532.jpg?bypass-service-worker&20210305211845%20600w](https://e3.365dm.com/21/03/768x432/skynews-nun-myanmar-military_5294532.jpg?bypass-service-worker&20210305211845%20600w) (accessed on 28 February 2021).
- 15 *Aljazeera*. In Pictures: Police escalate crackdown on protests in Myanmar. February 28. Available online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2021/2/28/inpictures-police-escalate-crackdown-on-protests-in-myanmar> (accessed on 5 March 2021).
- 16 (*ABC News* 2021a). UN: 38 died on deadliest day yet for Myanmar coup opposition. March 4. Available online: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/myanmar-forces-violence-protesters-76220335> (accessed on 5 March 2021).
- 17 Telenor was under pressure from Myanmar’s government to shut down its internet coverage in various parts of the country, which resulted in the loss of Telenor business in Myanmar. In the aftermath of the coup, Telenor cited ‘increasing pressure to activate intercept equipment that is subject to Norwegian and European sanctions for use by the authorities in Myanmar’ for its decision to divest.
- 18 (*BBC News* 2021b). Video footage shows people banging pots and pans to warn their neighbours of approaching security forces.
- 19 (*Screenocean* 2021). Shamans, shirtless bodybuilders, ukuleles, and diversity at sixth day of Myanmar protests. February 11. Available online: <https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/1600837> (accessed on 11 February 2021).
- 20 Myanmar: Women join anti-coup protest dressed in ball gowns and wedding dresses. *The Telegraph*. February 10. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5LoiAZ5Z-w> (accessed on 11 February 2021). See also: Women of Myanmar protest with women’s clothing and superstition. *Arirang News*. March 9. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDCSnbWjBfA> (accessed on 11 March 2021).
- 21 Generation Z: Protesters hold signs denouncing the military during a demonstration against the coup in Yangon on 8 February 2021. Available online: <https://mothership.sg/2021/02/myanmar-protesters-funny-signs/> (accessed on 10 February).
- 22 Protesters in Hong Kong, Myanmar, Unite Under Banner of ‘Milk Tea Alliance.’ Protesters hold signs supporting the “Milk Tea Alliance” of Asian anti-authoritarian activists during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon, 28 February 2021. Available online: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/hongkong-milktea-03022021135951.html> (accessed on 3 March 2021).
- 23 Teachers from Yangon University hold placards and flash the three-finger salute as they participate in the civil disobedience campaign against the military coup. 5 February. EPA-EFE/ Nyein Chan Naing. Available online: <https://images.theconversation.com/files/383981/original/file-20210212-13-1o376ov.jpg?ixlib=rb-1.1.0&q=30&auto=format&w=600&h=400&fit=crop&dpr=2> (accessed on 7 February 2021).



- 24 Medical workers join nationwide strike after military coup, Naypyitaw, Myanmar—5 February 2021. Photograph: Maung Lonlan/EPA. <https://www.shutterstock.com/editorial/image-editorial/medical-workers-join-nationwide-strike-after-military-coup-naypyitaw-myanmar-05-feb-2021-11747154h> (accessed on 7 February 2021).
- 25 AAPP Daily Briefing as of November 29, 2021. 1297 people confirmed killed, a total of (7608) people are currently under detention, while (341) people have been sentenced in person; of them, 34 have been sentenced to death (incl. 2 children); 1954 are evading arrest warrants; 118 people have been sentenced in absentia; of them, 39 have been sentenced to death in absentia. In total, 73 have been sentenced to death, in person and absentia. <https://aappb.org/?lang=en> (accessed on 30 November 2021).
- 26 Aung San Suu Kyi organised the 21st Century Panglong Conference in Naypyidaw, Myanmar, 31 August 2016, to which both ethnic minorities and the army were invited. During the conference, the EAOs called for a federal system that ‘guarantees justice, equality, self-administration and protection of racial, religious and political rights of ethnic minorities’.
- 27 A senior official from the influential Arakan National Party criticised the decision to accept the Rohingya and abolish the citizenship law as ‘rushed moves’. A spokesperson for the Arakan Liberation Party also criticised the move, accusing the NUG of ‘leaving out Rakhine leaders’ in its decision-making.
- 28 Brac de la Perrière reported that in contrast to the pacifist protests that were staged in the first few weeks after the coup, ‘In the cities, we’re now witnessing scenes of urban guerilla warfare. The only ones left [on the streets] are vindictive activists armed with make-shift weapons. And on the other side, security forces are responding with live fire’. She dismissed the creation of a Burmese federal army as more a utopian dream, than a reality. ‘And even if it was created, it would be much weaker—in terms of both numbers and resources—than the Tatmadaw’. (Cabot 2021).
- 29 Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions (ANNI), an initiative of the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), along with 16 organisations, urged The Myanmar National Human Rights Commission (MNHRC) to undertake investigations into serious human rights violations, including use of excessive force and lethal weapons against peaceful protestors, and other violations of fundamental freedoms that are being committed by the Myanmar military and security forces. (FORUM-ASIA 2021).
- 30 Buddhist Monks March in Opposition to Military Coup in Myanmar. BDG. February 18. Available online: <https://www.buddhistdoor.net/news/buddhist-monks-march-in-opposition-to-military-coup-in-myanmar/February> 18 (accessed on 20 February 2021).
- 31 This article includes a video showing youths training in an area held by the Karen National Union (KNU).
- 32 NUG Press Release (14/2021) September 13, 2021. The Myanmar National Unity Government (NUG) announced the people’s defensive revolution against the military junta on September 7, 2021. Available online: <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2021/09/13/press-release-14-2021/> (accessed on 14 September 2021).
- 33 Tun and Thuzar (2022) explain that a key challenge would be to gain the trust of ethnic armed groups and political parties towards Bamar-dominated processes.
- 34 (UN News 2021). Report by Tom Andrews, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and by UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights Nada al-Nashif.
- 35 As a result of the coup, the UN estimates that 3 million people across Myanmar need humanitarian assistance, up from 1 million prior to the coup. Save the Children warns that ‘Across Myanmar, 206,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, including 76,000 children, and that many are sheltering in the jungle in torrential rains without adequate food’.
- 36 On the first anniversary of the coup, Tom Andrews, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, urged the international community to take strong, meaningful steps to cut the junta’s access to weapons, funds and legitimacy (A/HRC/49/76). <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/report-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar-thomas-h-andrews-ahrc4976> (accessed on 16 March 2022). The Secretary-General’s Special Envoy, Noeleen Heyzer, is also said to be actively engaging all stakeholders in support of a Myanmar-led process and continuing ‘to mobilize immediate action, including through strengthened cooperation between the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to address the desperate needs of the people of Myanmar. Statement attributable to the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General—on Myanmar. 30 January 2022. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/node/261664> (accessed on 2 February 2022).
- 37 Interestingly, Oo (2021) urges the international community to bring all parties to the negotiable table to start constructive dialogues to achieve a peaceful resolution. to work with the UN and NGOs to provide humanitarian aid to Myanmar and finally, and most controversially, to engage with the Tatmadaw. Oo argues that as a long-term solution, the West should engage with the Tatmadaw to reform it as a professional army by discouraging their isolation and giving them access to a liberal education.
- 38 (Walker 2021). VOA interview with Dr Sasa who argues that the United Nations has an ‘obligation’ to recognize what the people want ahead of the 76th General Assembly in New York.
- 39 This was in response to the Myanmar junta releasing an announcement inviting ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) excluding those it has declared as ‘terrorist groups’ to attend preliminary peace talks on the Union Day. (The Irrawaddy 2022b).

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