



# HOW GENERATION Z GALVANIZED A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT AGAINST MYANMAR'S 2021 MILITARY COUP

Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than and  
Sue Ye Lin

# TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The **ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute** (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organization established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS), and Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Singapore APEC Study Centre and the Temasek History Research Centre (THRC).

**ISEAS Publishing**, an established academic press, has issued more than 2,000 books and journals. It is the largest scholarly publisher of research about Southeast Asia from within the region. ISEAS Publishing works with many other academic and trade publishers and distributors to disseminate important research and analyses from and about Southeast Asia to the rest of the world.

# HOW GENERATION Z GALVANIZED A REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT AGAINST MYANMAR'S 2021 MILITARY COUP

Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than and  
Sue Ye Lin

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

ISSUE <b>7</b>
2021

Published by: ISEAS Publishing  
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
publish@iseas.edu.sg  
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

© 2021 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission.

The author is wholly responsible for the views expressed in this book which do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

---

### **ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name(s): Jordt, Ingrid, author. | Than, Tharaphi, author. | Sue Ye Lin, author.  
Title: How Generation Z galvanised a revolutionary movement against Myanmar's 2021 military coup / Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than, Sue Ye Lin.  
Description: Singapore : ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, May 2021. | Series: Trends in Southeast Asia, ISSN 0219-3213 ; TRS7/21 | Includes bibliographical references.  
Identifiers: ISBN 9789814951739 (soft cover) | ISBN 9789814951746 (pdf)  
Subjects: LCSH: Protest movements—Myanmar. | Myanmar—History—Coup d'état, 2021. | Civil-military relations—Myanmar.  
Classification: LCC DS501 I59T no. 7(2021)

---

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd  
Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The **Trends in Southeast Asia** series acts as a platform for serious analyses by selected authors who are experts in their fields. It is aimed at encouraging policymakers and scholars to contemplate the diversity and dynamism of this exciting region.

## *THE EDITORS*

Series Chairman:

Choi Shing Kwok

Series Editor:

Ooi Kee Beng

Editorial Committee:

Daljit Singh

Francis E. Hutchinson

Norshahril Saat



# How Generation Z Galvanized a Revolutionary Movement against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup

By Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Sue Ye Lin

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- On 1 February 2021, under the command of General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's military initiated a coup, apparently drawing to a close Myanmar's ten-year experiment with democratic rule. State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint were arrested along with other elected officials.
- Mass protests against the coup ensued, led by Gen Z youths who shaped a values-based democratic revolutionary movement that in character is anti-military regime, anti-China influence, anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, and anti-sexist. Women and minorities have been at the forefront, organizing protests, shaping campaigns, and engaging sectors of society that in the past had been relegated to the periphery of national politics. The protests were broadcast to local and international audiences through social media.
- Simultaneously, a civil disobedience movement (CDM) arose in the shape of a massive strike mostly led by civil servants. CDM is non-violent and acephalous, a broad "society against the state" movement too large and diffuse for the military to target and dismantle. Semi-autonomous administrative zones in the name of *Pa-a-pha* or civil administrative organizations emerged out of spontaneously organized neighbourhood watches at the ward and village levels, effectively forming a parallel governance system to the military state.



- Anti-coup protests moved decisively away from calls for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other elected political leaders, or for a return to democracy under the 2008 constitution. Instead, it evolved towards greater inclusivity of all Myanmar peoples in pursuit of a more robust federal democracy. A group of fifteen elected parliamentarians, representing the ideals of Gen Z youths, formed a shadow government called the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) on 5 February 2021. On 1 March the CRPH declared the military governing body, the State Administrative Council (SAC), a “terrorist group”, and on 31 March, it declared the military’s 2008 constitution abolished.
- Gen Z’s protests have accomplished what has been elusive to prior generations of anti-regime movements and uprisings. They have severed the Bamar Buddhist nationalist narrative that has gripped state society relations and the military’s ideological control over the political landscape, substituting for it an inclusive democratic ideology.

# How Generation Z Galvanized a Revolutionary Movement against Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup

By Ingrid Jordt, Tharaphi Than and Sue Ye Lin<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

On 1 February 2021, the opening day of the new Parliament elected in November 2020, Sr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces, or Tatmadaw, launched a coup overthrowing the country's democratic government. The military declared a newly formed "State Administration Council" as the interim governing body, reserving to the Tatmadaw Commander-in-Chief the "exercise of legislative power by himself or by a body including him".<sup>2</sup> The arrest of President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, alongside other National League for Democracy (NLD) party members, writers, student leaders, activists, and monks, prompted a committee of fifteen ousted elected lawmakers to form a government-in-waiting under the name of the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)

---

<sup>1</sup> Ingrid Jordt is Associate Professor of Anthropology, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI, USA; Tharaphi Than is Associate Professor of Burmese, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL, USA; and Sue Ye Lin is working in civil society in Myanmar.

<sup>2</sup> "Myanmar Military Announces New State Administrative Council", *Myanmar Times*, 2 February 2021, <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/myanmar-military-announces-new-state-administrative-council.html> (accessed 17 March 2021).

and calling for Myanmar citizens and the international community to help restore democracy.<sup>3</sup>

A leaderless youth movement identified in Myanmar as “Gen Z” has since been shaping the anti-coup movement by amplifying a wide array of civil society and minority voices. Their youthful exuberance and refusal to accept military rule has encouraged resistance from all sectors of society and has united the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities in a common anti-regime movement. Gen Z’s protests have accomplished what has been elusive to prior generations of anti-regime movements and uprisings. They have severed the Bamar Buddhist nationalist narrative that has gripped state-society relations and facilitated the military’s ideological control over the political landscape. Gen Z has challenged attitudes and values that have restricted participation in national politics to a patriarchal, gerontocratic, and Bamar Buddhist majority. Emphasizing values that draw from global democratic ideals and imaginaries as well as universal Buddhist ethics, Gen Z has guided a movement of movements that is leaderless, emphasizes horizontal relations (rather than hierarchical ones), and accentuates a social justice orientation inclusive of all members of society.

This paper charts descriptively and analytically the first two months of Myanmar’s 2021 anti-coup protests. Revolutionary movements are messy, processual, and dialectical; we aim to capture a moment in an evolving situation, infusing our inquiry with historical context and genealogical reasoning so as to draw out certain features of particular political and cultural salience.

## **WHY LAUNCH A COUP D’ÉTAT NOW?**

Struggle between the civilian government and the military was built into the 2008 constitution. In overseeing the drafting of that charter, the

---

<sup>3</sup> The Republic of the Union of Myanmar Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, “Statement by the Representatives of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (National League for Democracy) (2/2021)”, Naypyitaw, 5 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/crph.official.mm/photos/pcb.102804515178862/102804455178868> (accessed 17 March 2021).

military reserved 25 per cent of parliamentary seats for itself and included provisos under which it might revoke civilian power by declaring a state of emergency.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, it would be more accurate to view Myanmar's transition in 2010 less as a transition to democracy than to a diarchy<sup>5</sup> with competing forms of government.

For the generals, being able to take advantage of the democratic opening of the country to foreign investment while limiting the space in which they shared governance with civilians seemed a winning strategy; it prolonged a principle of sovereignty that depended on the personal power of military strongmen. Assuming the new post of State Counsellor after the 2015 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi tried to subordinate the military's power under a democratic idea of popular sovereignty and the rule of law. Two attempts to change constitutional clauses to reduce the role of the Tatmadaw, made in 2015 and 2020, failed.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the military was able to entrench its economic power through new companies that participated in the opening up of the Myanmar economy.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> One such provision is number 417, with which the military attempted to justify the constitutionality of the coup; see Melissa Crouch, "Myanmar Coup on the Pretext of a Constitutional Fig Leaf", 4 February 2021, <https://melissacrouch.com/2021/02/04/myanmar-coup-on-the-pretext-of-a-constitutional-fig-leaf/> (accessed 26 March 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Diarchy was a constitutional feature of British colonial rule that tied Burma administratively to British India between 1923 and 1935. It was a form of limited self-government that allotted local rule over certain areas of government and which attempted to triangulate autocracy and democracy.

<sup>6</sup> "Voting Failed for [Changing] the Clause 436; Tatmadaw Will Continue to Hold the Power to Amend", *The Irrawaddy*, 13 March 2020, <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2020/03/13/217834.html> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>7</sup> One prominent example was the telecommunications concern Mytel; see "How Hundreds of Millions of Dollars From Mytel Subscribers Will Flow to Military Generals", *Justice for Myanmar*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/stories/how-hundreds-of-millions-of-dollars-from-mytel-consumers-will-flow-to-military-generals> (accessed 17 March 2021).

Viewed as the outcome of a contest between two ideas of state sovereignty,<sup>8</sup> as well as an elite struggle over personal power, the timing of Min Aung Hlaing's coup becomes comprehensible. The general faced compulsory retirement from his role as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces in June 2021; his term had already been extended for an additional five years in 2016.<sup>9</sup> Stepping down from his position meant relinquishing the power to oversee two vast military-controlled business conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL). Previous commanders of the Tatmadaw have more or less successfully exited the stage while remaining *éminences grises* thanks to the support of the loyal military subordinates who became their successors. But democratic civilian governance threatens this informal chain of succession on the part of military strongmen which in practice resembles monarchical succession.<sup>10</sup>

The NLD's sweep of the November 2020 elections represented an increasing side-lining of the military's political allies, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). It raised the possibility of a unity government, including parties representing ethnic minorities, that would pose a direct challenge to the military.<sup>11</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD had up to that point gambled with a dangerous means-ends calculus. They maintained a tacit, if not explicit, agreement with the military to not prosecute the generals for decades of war crimes and crimes against

---

<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Jordt, "Notes on the Coup in Myanmar: Karmic Kingship, Legitimacy and Sovereignty", 6 April 2021, <https://contendingmodernities.nd.edu/global-currents/myanmar-coup-kingship/> (accessed 12 April 2021).

<sup>9</sup> "Myanmar Army Chief Min Aung Hlaing Earns Five-Year Extension as Negotiations Around Transition of Power Continue", 13 February 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/1912525/myanmar-army-chief-min-aung-hlaing-earns-five-year> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Monarchical succession in pre-colonial Myanmar proceeded both by "blood and bone" succession principles and by the principle of the strength of a mighty man of endeavour in protection of the Buddhist realm. The Tatmadaw has conformed to this last pattern in its idea of being the guardian of a unitary state.

<sup>11</sup> Shoon Naing and Sam Aung Moon, "Suu Kyi's Party Pledges Unity Government After Election 'Landslide'", *Reuters*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-election-idUSKBN27T0DS> (accessed 26 March 2021).

humanity in exchange for space in the polity for the civilian government and democracy.<sup>12</sup>

The *détente* that locked the military and the civilian government in an arrangement in which each preserved the existential status of the other started to shift in the wake of the military's actions against Rohingya people in Myanmar's Rakhine State and the ensuing response of the international community. In 2019, Gambia brought Myanmar to the International Court of Justice on charges of committing genocide against Rohingya Muslims.<sup>13</sup> Broad international condemnation brought pressure to bear on international corporations to withdraw finance from military-owned businesses, while the US and the EU imposed targeted sanctions on military officials and on their cronies' private business interests.<sup>14</sup>

In the run-up to the November 2020 elections, Aung San Suu Kyi shielded the military internationally while committing to hold those responsible for any crimes to account as determined by a Myanmar investigation and through Myanmar's own justice system.<sup>15</sup> She thereby affirmed the sovereignty of the nation and defended the military's role in it. The move was broadly approved at home and solidified her popularity among the country's Bamar majority ahead of the elections.

The confluence of these events put Min Aung Hlaing's political survival and family-controlled financial interests in jeopardy. The general's personal ambitions for the presidency were well known, and

---

<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the results of the 1990 elections were reportedly nullified when the NLD figure U Kyi Maung voiced the possibility that once the NLD came to power it might pursue prosecution of top military personnel in the international courts.

<sup>13</sup> Priya Pillai, "The Gambia v Myanmar at the International Court of Justice: Points of Interest in the Application", Opinion Juris, 13 November 2019, <https://opiniojuris.org/2019/11/13/the-gambia-v-myanmar-at-the-international-court-of-justice-points-of-interest-in-the-application/> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>14</sup> "US Imposes Sanctions on Myanmar's Military Leaders over Rohingya Abuses", *The Guardian*, 17 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/17/us-imposes-sanctions-on-myanmars-military-leaders-over-rohingya-abuses> (accessed 17 March 2021).

<sup>15</sup> "Aung San Suu Kyi Defends Myanmar from Accusations of Genocide, at Top UN Court", *UN News*, 11 December 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053221> (accessed 18 March 2021).

it was rumoured that after the election, he approached Aung San Suu Kyi asking to be given the presidency.<sup>16</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi is said to have refused his request, leading to Min Aung Hlaing's humiliation, and escalating a private rivalry into a national crisis. With limited options, and a 516,000-strong military<sup>17</sup> indoctrinated with unquestioning obedience at his disposal, and confidence owing to the success of similar power grabs in Myanmar's history, Min Aung Hlaing undertook what he may have viewed as the only path available for preserving his skin and family resources.

In the month after his coup, Min Aung Hlaing followed many of the same strategies used in earlier military coups. The military arrested key political leaders and engaged in tactics intended to divide the remaining political opposition—for example, by inviting other political parties disaffected by the NLD into the new SAC government. It paid obeisance to the head of the State Sangha Council or *Ma-ha-na*, and it performed *yadaya* rituals to combat bad *karma*.<sup>18</sup> It arrested *bedin saya*—soothsayers or astrologers—who challenged Min Aung Hlaing's dark rituals with

---

<sup>16</sup> “Why Myanmar’s Military Seized Power in a Coup”, *Aljazeera*, 1 February 2021, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/1/who-is-min-aung-hlaing](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/1/who-is-min-aung-hlaing) (accessed 5 April 2021).

<sup>17</sup> Even though Myanmar's army is reportedly half a million strong on paper, many analysts believe that that figure number is inflated, for example, by the dead (ghost soldiers) and incapacitated veterans. Personal communication with Aye Aye Mar, VOA Burmese correspondence and former member of All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), 13 March 2021. The figure of 516,000 men and woman under arms is from Global Fire Power Index, “Myanmar”, 3 March 2021, quoted in Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, “Back to the Future? Possible Scenarios for Myanmar”, *ISEAS Perspective*, no. 2021/30, 12 March 2021, [https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2021\\_30.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ISEAS_Perspective_2021_30.pdf) (accessed 18 March 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Myanmar's military rulers have since independence drawn upon supernatural sources for the enhancement of their personal political power to include propitiation of spirits, astrological alignment, prophetic forecasting, alchemy, runes and wizardry among other repertoires that intersect and engage Buddhist practices but are seen as existing outside of Buddhism proper. *Yadaya* rituals are a dark art form directed at temporarily reversing or postponing power arrangements in the unfolding karmic moral order.

counter spells. The military also sought to justify its *coup d'état* to international audiences by, in this instance, using democratic claims. And it sowed chaos and violence in Myanmar's cities to demonstrate that the junta alone could protect society from anarchists and rabble rousers. At the core of these strategies was a broader argument justifying autocratic rule: that only the military could protect the unity of the Buddhist Bamar nation and that Min Aung Hlaing was the apotheosis of society and the state.

## **A NEW GENERATION CONFRONTS MYANMAR'S MILITARY RULERS**

The SAC junta's political and rhetorical strategies were mismatched to the movements and discourses that quickly formed on the ground. Two days after the coup, a massive civil disobedience movement, referred to in Myanmar as the CDM, was initiated by medical workers in 110 hospitals and health departments in 50 townships.<sup>19</sup> Waves of strikes and street demonstrations followed, with participation by workers and trade unionists in a broad range of sectors: firefighters, private bank employees, garment workers, teachers, and municipal and Union government staff.<sup>20</sup> Walkouts by railway workers involved virtually all employees. The military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise and Myanmar National Airlines were shut down, as were mines belonging to the armed forces. Consumers boycotted the military's retail businesses. The military responded by declaring most of the country's labour organizations illegal on 26 February, and by arresting and killing labour leaders<sup>21</sup> and evicting railroad employees from government housing.

---

<sup>19</sup> Kevin Lin, "Myanmar Workers and Unions on the Front Lines in Fight Against Coup", *Labor Notes*, 26 February 2021, <https://labornotes.org/2021/02/myanmar-workers-and-unions-front-lines-fight-against-coup> (accessed 5 April 2021).

<sup>20</sup> For a broad-based CDM, see Tharaphi Than, "Resistance to Military Regime in Myanmar Mounts as Nurses, Bankers Join Protesters Despite Bloody Crackdown", *The Conversation*, 15 March 2021, <https://theconversation.com/resistance-to-military-regime-in-myanmar-mounts-as-nurses-bankers-join-protests-despite-bloody-crackdown-155452> (accessed 12 April 2021).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



If the junta had expected to return to the *status quo ante* of military rule before the democratic period, it can only have been surprised to see where opposition to the coup was rooted: women, youth, labour, ethnic and religious minorities, civil society organizations (CSO), and subaltern communities of the politically disenfranchised. During the democratic interlude between military regimes, a broad range of civil society actors had sprung up to address social justice issues. The Letpadaung protests, the Myitsone Dam protests and the 2015 National Education protest each exemplified this trend. Successive strikes in the garment sector, which mostly employs women, had resulted in the 2011 Labor Organization Law. And NGOs, CSOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) addressed poverty, social justice, and community development at the grassroots level. Even subalterns, like the punk group Rebel Riot, sought to address poverty on the streets through their tiny “Food not Bombs” programme. Collectively, these civil society groups and engagements represented a broad base of mostly invisible reform that was quietly restructuring politics at the grassroots.

Female garment workers were at the forefront of the labour revolts in the early weeks following the coup. They shouted, “We must resist! We have nothing to lose but our chains.” Women paved the way for other protest actions, too. Esther Ze Naw Bamwaw, minority rights activist, and Ei Thinzar Maung,<sup>22</sup> a candidate for the Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS) in the November 2020 election, organized one of the early anti-coup marches on 6 February. That march set the tone for a movement inclusive of all ethnicities and directed towards establishing a federal democracy. Young men and women from garment factories and student unions have been at the forefront in organizing protests and other actions in Yangon. Ethnic minority members of “Generation Z” living in big cities such as Yangon and Mandalay also contributed to the enlargement and inclusiveness of the protests, connecting the movement beyond the cities to the ethnic minority areas. Ethnic youths have also lobbied their elders serving in administration in their home regions and joined with civil society groups to pressure their communities to join the anti-military resistance.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ei Thinzar Maung became the Deputy Minister of Women, Youths and Children Affairs of the National Unity Government formed on 16 April 2021.

**Figure 1: Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) staging a strike in Hlaingthaya, industrial satellite of Yangon in February 2021**



Source: Facebook, Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM).

The General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN) emerged<sup>23</sup> as another early organizer to mobilize minority peoples living in cities such as Yangon. Youths belonging to the GSCN pleaded with ethnic leaders to condemn the coup and not to cooperate with the leadership of the SAC, which sought to co-opt ethnic minority parties by offering them

<sup>23</sup> The GSCN was founded on 11 February. It brought together members of twenty-nine nationalities under four goals: (1) to abolish dictatorship, (2) to abolish the 2008 constitution, (3) to establish a federal democratic union, and (4) to free all those arrested for opposition to the coup. One of its powerful early gestures was to reclaim the word *taingyintha*, a term with negative connotations toward minorities not indigenous to Burma. The GSCN claims that it will use the term *lmyosyu* instead of *taingyintha*, regarding the latter as a legacy of the Burma Socialist Programme Party era (1962–88).

**Figure 2: The banner from the protest scene near Sule Pagoda in Yangon on 17 February 2021 reads “We have nothing to lose but our chains”, one of the Marxist expressions popularized by groups such as University of Yangon Student Union**



Source: Photograph courtesy of Khin Sandar Nyunt.

roles in the government.<sup>24</sup> The Arakan Army declared that it would stand with the people on 21 March, two days after eleven student leaders from Arakan or Rakhine State issued a statement of solidarity with students and people resisting the regime.<sup>25</sup> Members of ethnic nationalities have

---

<sup>24</sup> Jangai Jap, “Protesters and Bystanders: Ethnic Minorities in the Pre-Democracy Revolution”, *Tea Circle*, 22 March 2021, <https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/03/22/protesters-and-bystanders-ethnic-minorities-in-the-pro-democracy-revolution/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

<sup>25</sup> “Joint Statement by Arakanese Student Unions”, 21 March 2021, and “Rebel Militia in Myanmar’s Rakhine State Joins Other Minorities in Condemning Junta”, *Reuters*, 23 March 2021, [https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-rakhine-idUSKBN2BF1H5?fbclid=IwAR3CKEBBHPTEfQrSpYn0i8QsbLFbhAEXN6mdxwz\\_BIcXkE7LFP6DqbgmQ](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-rakhine-idUSKBN2BF1H5?fbclid=IwAR3CKEBBHPTEfQrSpYn0i8QsbLFbhAEXN6mdxwz_BIcXkE7LFP6DqbgmQ) (accessed 23 March 2021).

staged their protests under their own ethnic flags and have called for an “intersectional revolution”.<sup>26</sup>

A Bamar counterpart to the GSCN, the General Strike Committee (GSC), also formed to fight against the new military dictatorship. The organization drew its membership from twenty-five groups and parties. These included not only the NLD, which later denied involvement, but DPNS, the Arakan League for Democracy, and the Saffron Monks Network.<sup>27</sup> Unlike the GSCN’s “intersectional revolutionary” strategy, the GSC sought to unify messaging and protesters under a single banner. GSC supporters were immediately riven with controversy, revealing various cracks over leadership and party affiliations. Then on 3 March, a military crackdown in Yangon’s Tamwe Township resulted in the arrest of many GSC leaders and severely weakened the organization. In the meantime, the largely leaderless GSCN was able to spread its influence throughout the country. In the cities of Monywa and Mandalay, leaders such as Wai Moe Naing<sup>28</sup> and Dr Tay Zar San mobilized public participation in protests and smooth coordination among groups.

### *Mass Street Protests and a Generational Anti-Military Resistance Style*

The ongoing anti-coup movement in Myanmar has been led by passionate young people loosely identified as members of “Gen Z”. Representing

---

<sup>26</sup> David Scott Mathieson, “Ethnic Armies Rescue Myanmar’s Democratic Forces”, *Asia Times*, 22 March 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/ethnic-armies-rescue-myanmars-democratic-forces/> (accessed 25 March 2021).

<sup>27</sup> ““We take it that if we are disunited this way, it makes it weak. That is why we formed this committee in order to focus all the people under one banner so that they can shout and request for the same things,” said U Sandar Thiri”; “A General Strike Committee formed, made up of student leaders and political parties”, *Eleven Myanmar*, 21 February, <https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/a-general-strike-committee-formed-made-up-of-student-leaders-and-political-parties> (accessed 25 March 2021).

<sup>28</sup> Wai Moe Naing was arrested on 15 April 2021 in Monywa during the motorcycle protest after security forces deliberately crashed into his motorcycle.

approximately one quarter of the country's population,<sup>29</sup> the group was the first generation to grow up without traumatic memories of life under military dictatorship. Owing to a decade of liberalization and access to the internet and social media, Gen Z is also Myanmar's first generation of digital natives who participate and shape their identities in communication and dialogue with global digital media content.

In their first weeks, protests had a festival-like atmosphere, an exuberance reminiscent of the *Thingyan* or Myanmar New Year's festival. Much, if not most, of the early protest signage was written in English, reflecting how Gen Z directed its communication to global audiences—unfiltered by international media or domestic or political institutions. Gen Z asserted itself as the “voice of society” imploring international audiences to support the protesters and to intervene against their military oppressors.<sup>30</sup>

Some protest signage called for a temporary halt of the everyday. A couple dressed in wedding attire carried the sign, “Our wedding can wait, but not this movement”. Or, “A Nice Day for a Revolution”. Through street performances, sit-ins, parades and private—but photographed, videoed and circulated online—performances, the early movement was inflected less by rage than by indignation at the interruption to placid everyday life. “I cancelled the date with my girlfriend because I'm here for this shit ... Fuck Military coup”, one person wrote on a placard. “The only -ship I want is Scholarship, NOT Dictatorship”, wrote another. At yet another protest, a few young women dressed in pyjamas slept by the side of the road behind handwritten cardboard signs which asked passers-by to, “Wake us up when we get democracy” (Figure 3).

Cosplay parades featuring Weebs, Femboys, Marvel and Disney characters, and Dinosaurs intermixed with parades of drag queens,

---

<sup>29</sup> People born between the mid-1990s to 2012 are considered Gen Z; Republic of the Union of Myanmar, Department of Population, Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population with technical assistance from the UNFPA, “Census Atlas Myanmar: The 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census”, n.d., p. 16.

<sup>30</sup> English examples of placards from street protests were retrieved from Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram and other social media platforms.

**Figure 3: Members of Gen Z staging a sleepover protest in Yangon in February 2021**



Source: Facebook.

LGBTQ protesters, cartoon artists with giant cartoon figures, dog owners, and snake and iguana owners. A group of disabled protesters may have been most conspicuous in giving evidence of the myriad positionalities and locations of groups and individuals within society, all lined up to convey the idea that they wanted the democratic era back, to return to the time when diverse groups were allowed to participate in various civic activities.<sup>31</sup> Protests created a space for riotous performances of the silly, half-serious, transgressional and irreverent condemnation of the military takeover. Urgency was expressed in terms of the absurd, a disbelief that the peace of everyday life had been or could be shattered.

David Graeber explains how the ridiculous can be used effectively as one tactic among many in a protest repertoire.<sup>32</sup> For one thing, the optics of soldiers trying to suppress a dinosaur with truncheons, or violently crushing a parade of drag queens, surely has disadvantages for those in power in a hypermediated world.

In their critique of patriarchy, gender-normativity, gerontocracy and cultural monism, Gen Z launched a cultural revolution as much as they were setting in motion a political revolution. For example, protest repertoire juxtaposing the hyper-masculinized bodies of soldiers with transgressive gender embodiments—cross-dressed, gay and trans bodies—coded female and weak also contains a critique of militarized, patriarchal state power. One protester, a Femboy wearing a dress and apron, carried a sign in English that read, “Shoot me with the cum, not with the gun”. The feminization of male embodiment here confronts the power of the military through subversion of its assertion of rule by physical violence. The parallel with the 1960s-era American anti-war

---

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Shin Thant, “အင်အားပိုကောင်းလာတဲ့ နိုင်ငံတဝန်းက စစ်အာဏာသိမ်းမှု ဆန့်ကျင်ရေး ဆန္ဒပြပွဲတွေ”, *BBC Burmese*, 11 February 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/burmese/topics/c404v08p1wxt/page/19> (accessed 8 April 2021).

<sup>32</sup> David Graeber, “On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets: Broken Windows, Imaginary Jars of Urine, and the Cosmological Role of the Police in American Culture”, <http://balkansnet.org/zcl/puppets.html> (accessed 5 April 2021).

slogan, “Make Love not War”, iterates the logic of the oppositions of peace and war, love and hate, violence and non-violence—messages with global salience.

Other traditional ideas about gender were criticized as aspects of the military regime’s assumptions about power. One protester, dressed in a bright swimsuit declared, “The military coup is under my bikini”, evoking the 2007 International Panty Power Movement. Diasporic Burmese led that movement, in which they performed an action to diminish military power by using the culturally resonant idea that the principle of the feminine was polluting to the *hpon* or spiritual potency that underpinned a man’s power.<sup>33</sup> They directed that at then dictator General Than Shwe, who was known to employ a broad repertoire of supernatural *yadaya* ritual practices to sustain patriarchal military rule. Gynaecophobic beliefs that the emasculation of men’s physical power could be accomplished through proximal contact with women’s undergarments led to women protesters flinging their panties over the gates of Burmese embassies around the world. Participants in the movement had learned that the generals were using dark *yadaya* rituals to erode the power of UN and international dignitaries during their visits to Myanmar by placing women’s undergarments in the rafters above the beds where they slept.<sup>34</sup>

The carnivalesque exuberance of the opening days of protests against the 1 February coup soon gave way to a more sombre, visceral expression of hatred towards Min Aung Hlaing. Imagery and street theatre that

---

<sup>33</sup> နန်း in Burmese. The mission of the diasporic group is “Use your Panty Power to take away the power from the junta and support the people in Burma”; *Lanna Action for Burma*, <https://lannaactionforburma.blogspot.com/> (accessed 18 March 2021).

<sup>34</sup> “Whenever a UN envoy visits Burma, hotel staff are told to install a strip of a pregnant woman’s sarong or underwear within the ceiling of the VIP’s suite. Traditional Burmese men are often superstitious that coming into contact with women’s undergarments will diminish their *hpon*, or manly power”; Aung Zaw, “Than Shwe, Voodoo and the Number 11”, *The Irrawaddy*, 25 December 2021, [https://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion\\_story.php?art\\_id=14844&page=2](https://www2.irrawaddy.com/opinion_story.php?art_id=14844&page=2) (accessed 19 March 2021).



debased and demeaned the diminutive general—mocked for his height, photoshopped in high heels, compared to dogs—appeared. The general’s image was pasted on roads and pathways so that members of the public could defile him by placing their feet on an image of the most sacred part of the body, the head. The ritual of debasement was collectively understood to diminish the general’s spiritual reserve of *hpon*. This understanding accorded with the Burmese cultural pattern in which words and acts can, on account of their iconic and symbolic likeness and alignment, function as the site for action capable of producing real world impacts. Protesters delighted in the fact that strategic placement of Min Aung Hlaing’s image on major thoroughfares forced soldiers to participate in blunting the general’s *hpon*. In some sites, soldiers took the time to remove their leader’s images before proceeding to chase protesters.

In other “supranormal” protest actions, women strung their *htamein* or sarongs above the entrances to neighbourhoods to stop military trucks from entering their wards. That the tactic activated broadly shared cultural beliefs of the causative, and not just symbolic, consequences of a man contacting the polluting feminine principle, was evident in the fact that military trucks did not indeed drive under these supranormal barricades. These tactics were often more effective than physical barriers constructed of concrete and tires in slowing down the military, which had to back its trucks up to the clothes line to reach and cut down the polluting barrier before driving through (see Figure 4).

At the same time, Gen Z protests were also unmoored from traditional cultural icons and symbols. Even the main protest site in Yangon, the Hledan business and shopping district with its banks, restaurants and brand-name fashion shops, communicated a different set of associations from those of earlier anti-colonial and anti-military protests. The latter had identified the historically significant Shwedagon Pagoda as the symbolic locus for meaning, Buddhist identity and the political cause. More significantly, veteran activists identified Hledan as a strategic site location for its labyrinthine neighbourhood to facilitate escape in the event of violent confrontation with security forces. From the very outset Gen Z protesters were engaging strategically in the anti-coup movement.

*Figure 4: A group of policemen taking down a htamein line before proceeding to a protest site in Yangon in February 2021*



Source: Facebook, anonymous.

## *An Inter-Generational Anti-Military Dictatorship Movement Solidifies*

Min Ko Naing expressed alignment between veteran activists from previous generations and novice Gen Z activists when he declared in a 17 February message recorded in an underground location: “This revolution represents a combination of Generations X, Y and Z in fighting against the military dictatorship.”<sup>35</sup> The ’88 Generation student leader thus iterated a multigenerational history of anti-military uprisings as a single revolutionary movement and a common cause—Doh Ayay, “Our Cause!”

Veteran activists added their own tactics and strategies to the Gen Z movement. For example, they shared songs written during the 1988 protest period, which found new life at mass rallies with printouts of the words circulating through the crowds and with a new generation committing the words to memory. *Thway Thitsar* or *Blood Oath*, written by Htoo Ein Thin, a former member of the 1988-era All Burma Students Democratic Front, reached the status of a protest anthem and effectively connected the generations in a shared cause. Other songs, like *Kabar Makyay Bu* or *We Shall not Forgive*, also an ’88 era protest song, spoke to the sacrifice of fallen heroes and evoked the language of revolution in affirming the vow of a new generation to “fight till the end of the world”.<sup>36</sup> But the most popular protest song of recent months has been *A-lo-ma-shi* or *We Don’t Need It*. Written by Gen Z’s Than Zin Thway, it captured this generation’s spirit in the anti-coup movement, affirming through lyrics how everyone is together beating their pots, standing for

---

<sup>35</sup> “Do You Hear the People Sing? A Guide to Myanmar Protest Music”, *Khaosod English*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2021/03/01/do-you-hear-the-people-sing-a-guide-to-myanmar-protest-music/> (accessed 18 March 2021).

<sup>36</sup> On Myanmar protest songs, see “Do You Hear the People Sing? A Guide to Myanmar Protest Music”, *Khaosod English*, 1 March 2021, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2021/03/01/do-you-hear-the-people-sing-a-guide-to-myanmar-protest-music/> (accessed 18 March 2021).

***Figure 5: The Milk Tea Alliance is an online democratic solidarity movement connected to Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan and Myanmar that pushes back against Chinese domination in the region. It aligns itself with other global anti-authoritarian/pro-democracy movements such as various country-based Spring Revolutions. Protesters in Thailand and Myanmar have adopted the protest salute from the fictional Hunger Games movie series as a sign of resistance by people facing injustice everywhere.***



truth and democracy, hailing the strike movement, and calling for bravery and the sacrifice of blood to repel the dictators.<sup>37</sup>

Gen Z drew tactical understanding from veteran activists from the 1988 and 2007 uprisings as well as from social movement theory and tactics encountered through the Internet and in the university setting. Over time the movement increasingly drew connections with other anti-authoritarian protest movements and alliances such as the Milk Tea Alliance, protests in Hong Kong, Taiwan’s Sunflower protests, and the rolling anti-authoritarian Spring Revolutions that began with the Arab Spring in 2010. See Figure 5.

<sup>37</sup> “We Don’t Need It | အင်္ဂလိပ်စာ”, *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11sa7Va5C6g> (accessed 5 April 2021).

# A MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS EMERGES

## *The Gen Z Movement Distinct from Prior Movements*

In the democratic culture that emerged in Myanmar between 2010 and 2021, many autocratic features remained embedded in ideas about who might participate in politics. Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD successfully captured widespread anti-military sentiment and translated it into outcomes at the ballot box. But the gerontocratic stranglehold of the NLD and its approach alienated the youth, postponed minority concerns over national reconciliation until the Bamar could wrestle free of the military, gave little priority to human rights, and stifled diverse opinions about how to address the broad economic problems facing the nation. Before the coup, many youths steered clear of politics, complaining that they had decided not to vote in the elections because they could not find a candidate that they wanted to support. In a political atmosphere in which messages read as “vote for the party”, not for the candidate, and in which processes for selecting NLD candidates were based on party loyalty rather than personal qualifications, Gen Z became politically disaffected.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1 February coup, the protest environment afforded many youths the opportunity to contest not only the coup but the limited scope of democracy offered to their generation. Civil rights, especially the treatment of ethnic minorities, have been a central feature of Gen Z’s movement of values. The movement has been people-centred rather than a movement marked by well-defined leadership or centralized political influence. Gen Z aspirations are attitudinal and directed towards a universalism expressive of ideas promoting the defence of democracy and equality—rather than religious, racial or ethnic particularism. The student unions issued apology statements regarding their record of collective negligence and poor treatment of Rohingyas and other ethnic groups that suffered from military offensives in their lands.<sup>38</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> On 26 March 2021, various universities in Mandalay issued statements apologizing to Rohingyas and other minorities for having failed in the past to speak out on their behalf over human rights violations.

Their expressions were grounded in ideas of self-realization, sympathy, *metta* or loving kindness, and an extension of concern for the world in terms that drew from Buddhist ideas as well as Western notions centred on human rights. Before the revolution, these kinds of apologies would have been unimaginable. Even the word “Rohingya” was politically taboo in “Maha Bamar” nationalist social and political discourses. Gen Z human rights positions contrast with older generations’ attitudes and their fears of the impending destruction of the Bamar Buddhist nation, fears that the military and Buddhist nationalists had cynically whipped up during the democratic period. With intensified anti-coup resistance by the people and the rampant brutality by soldiers and police, “Maha Bamar” ideology has been successfully challenged and subordinated to more inclusive discourses of the nation. Almost overnight, the Tatmadaw’s nationalist justifications for military rule were swept away.

The political evolution of the anti-coup protests had two pronounced stages. In the early days of the protests, the people and organizations demanded the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and her supporters and for member of the *Hluttaw* or Parliament to resume their roles as legitimately elected officials. Then, as more diverse groups and people, especially young people, began to participate in the anti-coup protests and messaging, the direction of the movement began to shift. More robust democratic political demands gathered broad support for abolishing the 2008 constitution and establishing a federal democratic polity.

This development contrasted with the revolutionary movements of 1988 and 2007, which drew on culturally salient ideas of the Bamar Buddhist majority populace. In 1988, the challenge to the Ne Win regime led by unionized students confronted royalist ideas of power and authority vested in the authoritarian sovereign. Student leader Paw Oo Tun famously drew on this logic when he adopted the *nom de guerre* Min Ko Naing, or “conqueror of the king”, to capture the anti-regime logic of the students being “contenders for the throne” during the nationwide uprisings of 1988, at a time when the democracy discourse was still inchoate in the country.

In the 2007 Saffron Revolution, monks undertook a unified collective rebuke and excommunication of the military for violent actions taken against peacefully protesting members of the Sangha who were

advocating for the well-being of the people under conditions of a rice and oil price hike. The monks' uprising challenged the military according to culturally meaningful ideas about the obligations of a ruler to act as the benefactor and protector of the religion. It represented the Sangha's obligation to withdraw support of a "king", should protection of the religion require it. Hence, the symbolic protest imagery of "turning over the bowl" in refusal of the military's alms and of the merit fields that supported military power was tied to the crucial idea that transcendental sources of power acquired through protection of the religion sustains the sovereign.<sup>39</sup> Buddhist and royal symbolism have been absent from Gen Z protest repertoires. Their expressive and functional opposition is grounded in democratic ideas of the sovereignty of the people and the rejection of the capricious powers of military authoritarianism.

### *Diverse Movements Coalesce*

The Gen Z movement also generated deeply felt emotions and ties of affinity between diverse communities that had previously shared little common political space or necessity for civic association: ethnic minority groups, diverse religious groups, rural communities, and small towns from northernmost Kachin state to southernmost Kawthaung.<sup>40</sup> Gen Z's initial street protests, with their multi-messaged street theatre style, sparked creative protests elsewhere in the country in a competitive outpouring of expressive styles: "Floating Protests" at Inle Lake, the "Dawn Protests", the "Balloon Revolution" in Shan State, *nat-gadaw* or spirit master protests, the *Thapyaynyo* revolution in Mandalay featuring Eugenia tree leaves traditionally used to symbolize victories and spiritual power, and of course the ubiquitous 8:00 p.m. pan beating that seemed to unify the entire country from every house and every street.

---

<sup>39</sup> Ingrid Jordt, "Turning Over the Bowl", *Religion in the News X*, no. 3 (Winter 2008), <http://www2.trincoll.edu/csrpl/RINVol110No3/turning%20over%20the%20bowl.htm> (accessed 5 April 2021).

<sup>40</sup> "Myanmar's Protesters Voice Defiance", *Taipei Times*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2021/03/22/2003754281> (accessed 24 March 2021).

With their emphasis on values, Gen Z protests also connected to other movements elsewhere in the region and around the globe, staging “Milk Tea,” and “Spring Revolution” protests in Myanmar’s large cities and towns. Strike protests with their origins in the Civil Disobedience Movement proliferated as the logic for a non-violent leaderless movement: “GSC Strike”, “Five Twos Revolution” labour strike, the “Silent Strike”, the “Railway Strike”, “Night Strike”, “no-human strikes” in which proxies like hospital coats, signboards, flowers, and hard-hats stood in for living protesters. And then there was the gravest of all challenges to the military issued by the State Sangha Council *Ma-ha-na* threatening an impending monks strike.<sup>41</sup>

The broadening of the protest space was further amplified through social media. Messages on Facebook forecasting, for example, that the following day would be “collective car breakdown day” in Yangon, or “car slow down day”, enabled widespread participation in civil disobedience. Social media also amplified traditional resistance performances found outside the urban areas, such as the “cursing ritual ceremony” undertaken by hundreds of Bagan protesters at the location of twelfth-century Hti-lo-min-lo Temple in order to counter the rituals that Min Aung Hlaing performed in advance of the coup in the belief that his purpose and metaphysical powers would be aligned with previous rulers of Myanmar.<sup>42</sup> A street performance of the mythical Emerald Sisters subduing a *bilu* or ogre, personified as Min Aung Hlaing, reveal other protest forms that drew on mytho-historical repertoires of supernatural battles between good and evil (Figure 6).

---

<sup>41</sup> The *Ma-ha-na* has not followed through with its threat as of 11 April 2021 after the military responded with counter-threats to imprison and disrobe members of the council. Nevertheless, individual monasteries have “turned the bowl over” or staged strikes.

<sup>42</sup> “In Burmese, the name Htilominlo refers to the person that the spirit of the umbrella wishes to be king, at a time when the country needs a king to rule”; Zarni Mann, “Myanmar Military Chief Places ‘Hti’ at Bagan Temple Known for Divine Blessings”, *The Irrawaddy*, 27 February 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-military-chief-places-hti-bagan-temple-known-divine-blessings.html> (accessed 24 March 2021).



*Figure 6: A protest in Maubin, Ayeyarwaddy Region, in February 2021. Min Aung Hlaing is here symbolized as a bilu, a malevolent man-eating humanoid being decapitated by the benevolent Emerald Sister spirit guardian.*



Source: Facebook, anonymous.

These local events and their meanings were given a second life when translated and circulated to the international community on Twitter and Facebook, tracked by hashtags such as “#WhatsHappeninginMyanmar”. In this way, local meanings and regional and rural participation were not subordinated to the abstract discourses of the urban and educated classes and elites.

## **THE REVOLUTION MAY NOT BE TELEVISED, BUT IT WILL BE ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

The Gen Z movement is distinctive for the way in which it has targeted the rhetorical messages of the military. Through social media it has made visible the military’s use of propaganda through the apparatus of the state—through broadcasting the sense of business as usual on MRTV state television, for instance—to present a veneer of normalcy. Gen Z has leveraged digital literacy to function as citizen journalists to reveal corruption, as in exposing how the military stole trustee funds from Shwedagon Pagoda to keep the government functioning in the face of civil service walkouts. This revelation forced the military to protest on national television that it was only borrowing the funds and intended to pay them back with interest!

Gen Z digerati have also learned from veteran activists, for example by exposing the military’s “chaos” repertoires, used to divide and sow confusion. To this end, the digerati have circulated newspaper articles through social media describing the same tactics dating to the 1980s and before. “Chaos tropes” were first used by British colonial rulers and later by Myanmar’s military regimes to excite the public’s fears that “dacoits” or other “morally deranged” criminal elements of society would provoke murderous pandemonium in the social order. Provoking fear of the moral breakdown of society and descent into anarchy is one of the military’s well-worn tactics for eliciting the people’s reliance on the military state for security. When, in mid-February, the SAC junta emptied prisons of 23,000 criminals in preparation for the arrest of anti-coup protesters, it directed and paid many of these criminals to carry out arson and to ransack residential areas in opposition

strongholds.<sup>43</sup> Some of these thugs were mere adolescents dropped at the outskirts of neighbourhoods where they were directed to make mischief. Gen Z activists exposed military tactics like these on social media so that counter tactics might be adapted.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, as competent as Gen Z are in availing themselves of digital communication technologies, it is the military that is highly trained in psychological warfare or PsyOps. It has utilized TikTok in consolidating its *coup d'état* in a manner similar to the way that it used Facebook during the Rohingya persecutions: as a platform promoting military propaganda, and chaos agents inciting hate speech, violence, the circulation of disinformation and the dissemination of conspiracies about vulnerable communities, and also broadcasting propaganda to soldiers and policemen to remind them that their cause is the national cause. When Facebook permanently banned Tatmadaw-linked pages and military personnel and supporters, those users moved to TikTok, where they have openly operated in defiance of user guidelines—such as when uniformed army and police display their guns while delivering death threats to anti-coup protesters. Like Facebook before it, the Chinese-owned TikTok has been slow to act in halting the amplification of disinformation, hate speech and the incitement of violence.

### *CRPH Government in Waiting and the Rise of “Pa-a-pha,” Semi-Autonomous Administrative Zones*

While Gen Z protesters and activists were creating a movement of values, NLD parliamentary members reorganized as the CRPH—a civilian government-in-waiting and a channel for UN and international bodies and foreign governments to continue to provide support and continuity

---

<sup>43</sup> Generally known as “5,000 [kyat] eaters” (ငါးပေထောင်စား in Burmese) among the public, these people are often hired by the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and army supporters to stage anti-NLD rallies, attack anti-military protesters and use other tactics intended to create social bedlam.

<sup>44</sup> A number of these chaos agents were arrested by the ward dwellers. They confessed that they had received money for these tasks from the military authorities or the USDP. These confessions were then circulated on social media.

to the ousted NLD government. The CRPH found itself in the position of lagging behind an emergent revolutionary consciousness that aspired to reach beyond NLD party incrementalism. To remain relevant, the CRPH was forced to adapt its policies on the fly in conformity with new collective aspirations. In the effort to step in front of an already moving parade and reserve for itself the semblance of legitimacy to represent the aspirations of the anti-coup movement, CRPH professed democratic goals that had previously seemed beyond reach: abolition of the 2008 Constitution, forming a federal army with the ethnic armed organizations, and remaking the polity as a federal democracy.

The rise of semi-autonomous administrative zones is another example of how CRPH followed political activities already in motion while solidifying leadership of the anti-coup movement. When wards faced coordinated attacks from security forces or from thugs, residents started to discuss in their neighbourhoods and on social media how to defend their communities from attacks. Neighbourhood protection associations spontaneously formed in the early weeks of February as a defence against the military's night raids and kidnappings. They started building barricades and deployed watchmen. In some wards, every household paid the fees to the night-watchers, while in others one person from each family in the street or block would rotate taking night-watch duty. Neighbourhood watches established channels for information-sharing through various social messaging apps—Messenger, Signal, Zello, PTT Walkie Talkie—in addition to the pot banging alarm system used when the military entered neighbourhoods when the Internet was down at night.

These grassroots defensive techniques were soon mobilized to target pro-military informers and local administrative authorities reporting on the opposition from inside neighbourhoods. Ward and village tract level administrative associations emerged and elected their own representatives, ousting junta-aligned representatives from their posts. In townships such as Thaketa, in eastern Yangon, households brought their own padlocks to lock the military-controlled township administrative office. Administrative replacements were selected through local committee decision-making and, where necessary, funds were collected to support individuals in their roles representing these new *Pa-a-pha*

or people’s administrative organizations.<sup>45</sup> The message sent to the security forces was that *Yat-mi-yat-pha*—community elders or influential respected persons<sup>46</sup>—were now in charge of local governance and that they refused military domination in the community sphere.

On 21 February, the CRPH—leading from behind— encouraged the public to form *Pa-a-pha* as part of the interim public administration programme.<sup>47</sup> It formalized the organizational purposes and means for resisting the coup through an interim arrangement of community-led administration. It declared procedures for selecting *Pa-a-pha* members; units were to include at least eleven people drawn from members of the parliament, the CDM, civil servants, protesters and groups of elders. The CRPH also outlined duties and responsibilities as follows:

- (1) To assist and protect public security, the rule of law and workers participating in the CDM.
- (2) To communicate with the CRPH’s information and public affairs section.
- (3) To contact station police to ensure the rule of law and, in the absence of police cooperation, to ask assistance from local people taking part in the maintenance of public safety and of security in their respective communities.
- (4) To contact the CRPH when trying to solve difficulties encountered in the CDM movement.

---

<sup>45</sup> *Pa-a-pha* in Burmese means ပြည်သူ့အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအဖွဲ့. (၀အ၀၀).

<sup>46</sup> *Yat-mi-yat-pha* have social and political roots in both Bamar and non-Bamar communities. Outside the formal administrative structure, their traditional role is to advise, assist and lead a community and its numbers in times of social and religious affairs crises. They are also largely involved in community development—road building, well construction, and the like. But they can also become active in political mobilization.

<sup>47</sup> Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw “ကြားကာလပြည်သူ့အုပ်ချုပ်ရေးအစီအစဉ်” [Interim Public Administration Programme], 21 February 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/crph.official.mm/photos/pcb.1191298568796661/119129443546369> (accessed 21 February 2021).

- (5) To be responsible to community members.
- (6) To obey the instructions and directives issued by the people’s government and to defy the orders and laws issued by the junta.

The *Pa-a-pha* movement has continued unabated. In Chin State, some towns declared on 13 March that they were establishing *Pa-a-pha*, justifying these new autonomous administrative zones on the basis of the 1896 Chin Hill Regulation Act and 1948 Chin Special Division Act, as well as customary legal structures.<sup>48</sup> The Karen National Union also declared their territories autonomous in late February. Urban Bamar and minority ethnic groups in frontier areas are using the *Pa-a-pha* framework as a way to remake the administrative state as a revolutionary governance structure in defiance of the military state.

## THE SAC JUNTA’S FAILED NARRATIVE

“Either I or my enemy, whoever can protect the nation and the religion, let that side win the war.”<sup>49</sup>

The quotation, attributed to the eighteenth-century founder of the Konbaung Dynasty, King Alaungpaya, and allegedly uttered before he went to war against the Mons, was posted on Facebook by General Min Aung Hlaing’s wife Kyu Kyu Hla. Min Aung Hlaing and his wife have been actively projecting on Facebook and in public performances their alignment with the Buddhist principle of support of the religion by making donations at important sacred locations associated with kingship. These activities function as a way of asserting a claim for the inevitability and righteousness of Min Aung Hlaing’s rise to absolute power.

---

<sup>48</sup> Ardeth Maung Thawngmung, “Back to the Future? Possible Scenarios for Myanmar”.

<sup>49</sup> The Burmese version is ငါသည်လည်းကောင်း၊ ငါ၏ရန်သူသည်လည်းကောင်း အမျိုးဘာသာဘာသာနာကို အခွန်ရှည်အောင် စောင့်ရှောက်နိုင်သူသာလျှင် စစ်နိုင်ပါစေ။

The couple has also drawn on other cultural repertoires of prophecy and omen-making that accompany a king's rise to power and the ushering in of a new era or political dynasty. The use of *yadaya* has been a central tactic used by Myanmar's generals, who believe that these rites increase one's power over others and can bring a desired future to pass. In early February, the dark wizard monk Visipaik Sayadaw<sup>50</sup> advised Min Aung Hlaing that the success of his *coup d'état* depended on violent force and predicted a positive outcome for Min Aung Hlaing if he followed the advice offered in the following couplet, "Shoot in the head. Change the era."<sup>51</sup> It is unknown whether the Tatmadaw high command has instructed security forces to implement this action, or whether security forces have independently chosen to align with this well-known dark prophecy. What *is* known is that their willingness to target protesters with deadly shots to the head seems to have become the symbolic act of terror most associated with the military's efforts to compel the population into silence and submission.

All of Myanmar's post-independence military rulers have seen themselves as successors to Burma's pre-colonial warrior kings. They have sought to tie their legitimacy to kingship and religion.<sup>52</sup> The Tatmadaw and pro-military nationalists are now asserting a justification

---

<sup>50</sup> Visipaik is one of Min Aung Hlaing's long-relied-upon spiritual advisors. He is what is known as an *auk-lan* (literally, under road/path) monk. *Auk-lan* monks are not considered legitimate monks by orthodox Sangha standards as they do not conform to the *Viniya* (monk's disciplinary code) and are known for their involvement in evil or dark uses of power. Over time, Myanmar's generals have become increasingly aligned with dark monks and wizards and other power-enhancing supernatural sources in their efforts to sustain personal power and autocratic rule.

<sup>51</sup> In Burmese, ခေတ်ကိုပြောင်းဖို့ ခေါင်းကိုက်။

<sup>52</sup> See Bertil Lintner, "Burma's Warrior Kings and the Generation of 8.8.88", *Global Asia*, September 2007, [https://www.globalasia.org/v2no2/feature/burmas-warrior-kings-and-the-generation-of-8888\\_bertil-lintner](https://www.globalasia.org/v2no2/feature/burmas-warrior-kings-and-the-generation-of-8888_bertil-lintner) (accessed 5 April 2021), and Ingrid Jordt, "Breaking Bad in Burma", *Religion in the News*, 19 December 2014, <http://commons.trincoll.edu/religioninthenews/2014/12/19/breaking-bad-in-burma/> (accessed 5 April 2021).

for the return of the military to power. They are asserting the soldiers' status as legitimate rulers on the basis of their willingness, like prior kings, to protect the Buddhist realm and the Bamar nationalist cause. What they are not doing is affirming human rights, the rule of law and equality or imagining a democratic future for the country.

However, if General Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC junta's government are to be successful in making this claim of political legitimacy, they must have the support of the Sangha. Without Sangha support, their claim has no standing. Min Aung Hlaing has been anxious to demonstrate his obeisance and respect for the Sangha, bringing offering and assurances to the *Ma-ha-na* in the days following the coup. At that time, the head of *Ma-ha-na*, Bamaw Sayadaw, warned the senior general through parable that a large elephant could be brought down by a small bird.<sup>53</sup>

As security forces intensified their violence against peaceful protesters, the Sangha increased its warnings to Min Aung Hlaing. On 4 March, the powerful and respected Shwegyin Sect wrote an open letter signed by the Shwegyin Sayadaw and four other high-profile monks. The monks exhorted the Commander-in-Chief and his forces to remember the mutual responsibilities that exist between monks and lay devotees and vice versa. They requested that out of *metta* the authorities conform to the ten moral practices of a Buddhist king, as described in the Anguttara Nikaya scriptures.

On 14 March, the Saffron Sangha Network in Mandalay issued the ultimatum that they would carry out *pattaneikkuzna kan*, a monks' strike excommunicating the SAC and their families from merit making and other rituals, in response to security forces' treatment of the monks in Myadaung, a leading teaching monastery in Mandalay. And on 16 March the *Ma-ha-na* sent an open letter warning that it was stopping all administrative functions and would also be determining at its upcoming state assembly meeting whether to "turn the bowl over" for a *pattaneikkuzna kan* strike. This warning gave junta authorities a

---

<sup>53</sup> The Burmese equivalent of David and Goliath is "Wild Elephant and Skylark bird" (ဆင်ရိုင်းကြီးနှင့် ဘီလုံးငှက်ငယ်).



final chance to follow the monks' recommendations to bring peace to the country.<sup>54</sup>

Min Aung Hlaing must retain the alignment of the Sangha with the military junta if the former is to justify his regime in Buddhist terms. He has responded to the *Ma-ha-na* admonishment and strike threat by warning the State Sangha Council monks that they might face arrest and that SAC would “purify” (i.e., replace) the forty-seven members with other (regime-friendly) monks. Rumours have already circulated that Min Aung Hlaing wants to create a “fake *sasana*” or phony religion in order to legitimize his rule.

## CONCLUSION

The hopeful and carnivalesque atmosphere of the early protests and mass rallies against the February coup had by mid-March evaporated in most cities. Gen Z anti-coup efforts reached beyond Myanmar's national borders, meaningfully connecting to broader regional and worldwide anti-authoritarian revolutionary movements. At the same time, they also interjected a regionally salient critique of Chinese hegemony. Domestically, the movement has unified inter-generational struggles against military dictatorship and colonialism and forged a bond of common purpose between the Bamar majority and the ethnic minorities. It has also sustained the inclusion of labour, the civil service, and disparate political parties, and civil society actors.

As the anti-coup movement adapted with the non-violent tactics available, it evolved towards the strategic goal of dividing society against the military state by building on tactics of civil disobedience, labour strikes, the creation of semi-autonomous administrative zones, boycotts of Chinese and certain Myanmar businesses, “doxing” and social punishment campaigns. On 26 March 2021, Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

---

<sup>54</sup> Sebastian Stragio, “Myanmar Buddhist Association Signals Break with Military Junta”, *The Diplomat*, 18 March 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/myanmar-buddhist-association-signals-possible-break-with-military-junta/> (accessed 23 March 2021).

The CRPH, working from undisclosed locations, formed a “National Unity Government” (NUG) on 16 April 2021, a day before Myanmar new year. The NUG is a coalition of democratic forces including stakeholders from the country’s ethnic groups. It has issued a Federal Democracy Charter that includes plans for a federal army to replace the Tatmadaw.

**ISEAS**  
PUBLISHING

30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace  
Singapore 119614  
<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>

ISSN 0219-3213

TRS7/21s

ISBN 978-981-4951-73-9



9 789814 951739