FUGITIVE PROFESSIONALISM

Community networks and the work of public life in and beyond post-coup Myanmar

Edited by Gustaaf Houtman

RCSD The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development Chiang Mai University

LUCE HENRY LUCE FOUNDATION

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Papers from the Fourth International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)

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PREFACE

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti

The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University (CMU), Thailand, has for decades, and with more urgency since the military coup in February 2021, worked to provide a safe and active space in which researchers, students, and other concerned people from Myanmar can pursue academic exchange and collaboration.

In line with this commitment, from August 2-4, 2024, RCSD organized the Fourth International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies (ICBMS4) at CMU, under the title "Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State." One of the largest international conferences on Burma/Myanmar studies in the region, it brought together more than 800 participants, the majority from Myanmar. It gave scholars, students, practitioners, and civil society actors a platform to present their work and to discuss the realities emerging in post-coup Myanmar, with particular attention to grassroots dynamics and to the search for new "sites of possibility" amid intensifying armed conflict and a deepening humanitarian crisis.

This volume brings together seven papers presented at the conference, together with an editor's introduction. The chapters examine how communities have responded to state failure by building alternative systems of care, communication, education, finance, healthcare, and social support. These initiatives are more than emergency responses. They are sustained efforts to organize collective life and meet basic needs where the state has lost legitimacy or can no longer provide essential services. Rather than treating communities as victims of conflict or as passive recipients of aid, the chapters follow the ways people come together to build institutions and develop practices that allow social life to continue.

Several contributors write under pseudonyms, and some details of place and organization have been withheld. The conditions under which this work was done are themselves part of what the volume documents.

A central theme of the volume, and the source of its title, is fugitive professionalism. Doctors, teachers, journalists, researchers, financial specialists, and other professionals refused to work for the military, or were driven out of the institutions it controls. Many were dismissed and then criminalized for it, and could continue to practice only in hiding or in exile. Their professional commitments survived this. They have adapted their skills and knowledge to new circumstances, often working through informal organizations and flexible networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. They do not simply preserve the work they were trained to do. They learn and develop new ways of practicing their professions as they respond to conditions of conflict, displacement, and uncertainty.

Similar practices can be observed among displaced and migrant communities in border areas such as Mae Sot, where professionals and community members have established their own schools, health services, media initiatives, research networks, and forms of assistance for young people and the newly displaced. Comparable responses have emerged in other contexts of war and institutional breakdown, including Yemen and Syria, where people have created services and support systems beyond the effective reach of the state (Elayah et al., 2024; Selvik, 2021).

Many of these horizontal practices have deeper historical roots. Ethnic minority communities in Myanmar have long developed systems of autonomy, mutual assistance, local governance, and resource management beyond the direct control of the central state. Lowland Bamar society has its own horizontal traditions, among them *parahita* welfare associations and neighborhood funeral societies, so these practices are not confined to the uplands. As the introduction sets out, the idea of Zomia, associated with upland societies that have negotiated, evaded, or resisted state authority, offers one framework for thinking about them (Scott, 2009). The concept of the mandala, by contrast, describes the centralized and hierarchical authority historically associated with the Bamar-dominated state.

These concepts should not be treated as a rigid opposition between free communities and an oppressive center. Communities and decentralized organizations are not necessarily egalitarian or inclusive, and

may contain internal hierarchies, inequalities, exclusions, and competing interests. Nor do all actors seek to withdraw from the state. Some resist military power directly, some negotiate with existing authorities, and others build alternative institutions while still imagining a future political order. Zomia is most useful, then, as a way of drawing attention to diverse practices of autonomy and negotiation rather than as a fixed geographical or political model.

The importance of the volume extends beyond the institutions and networks it describes. These practices also represent a form of epistemic resistance, a struggle over who is entitled to produce knowledge, whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate, and how knowledge is created and shared under conditions of repression. The military claims authority not only over territory and institutions but over education, information, expertise, history, and public truth. Professionals and communities challenge that claim when they continue to teach, research, deliver services, and communicate outside official structures, and when they adapt what they know and how they work to new constraints.

Fugitive professionalism and epistemic resistance are related, though not identical. The first describes the conditions under which professionals continue their work outside military-controlled institutions. The second is the political significance that work acquires when it challenges the military state's authority to determine what counts as legitimate knowledge.

The epistemic agency involved, however, is not simply the ability of professionals to preserve and apply their existing expertise. Their initiatives combine formal training with local experience, and digital technologies with long-established practices of reciprocity, producing approaches that cannot be understood as extensions of either state institutions or informal community systems. Communities hold practical, historical, ecological, and political knowledge developed through everyday struggles, knowledge that concerns not only how people survive but how they understand responsibility, reciprocity, justice, and collective life. It carries values concerning the commons, care, autonomy, and the right of communities to take part in decisions affecting their lives, and it should not be treated as information for professionals to extract, document, and translate.

Professionals must therefore learn to recognize community members as knowledge holders and political subjects rather than as objects of research. This is what knowledge co-production requires: collaboration in defining problems, interpreting evidence, producing explanations, and considering possible responses, together with a critical view of the assumptions, categories, and institutional forms in which professionals were trained.

Through this process professionals may gradually become what Gramsci (1971) called organic intellectuals. Organic intellectuals do not stand above society and speak for others from a position of superior knowledge. They develop through sustained relationships with particular social groups and struggles, learning from people's experience while helping to connect local knowledge with wider questions of power, justice, and political transformation. Their task is not to replace community voices with a more sophisticated professional language but to help articulate connections among experiences that may at first appear separate: struggles over education, land, health, food, natural resources, ethnic identity, displacement, and political representation. The role matters most where formal institutions have been weakened and knowledge production itself becomes a form of political engagement.

The authors of this volume occupy that position. They do not only study these processes, they take part in them. By continuing to research, document, teach, communicate, and provide services under repression, they challenge the military state's monopoly over legitimate knowledge, and their engagement with communities may in turn transform their own professional identities and assumptions.

The volume can therefore be understood as part of what Gramsci called a war of position: a long-term effort to build the social, cultural, intellectual, and ethical foundations of an alternative political order (Gramsci, 1971). A war of position is not confined to direct confrontation with military power. It also involves developing institutions, relationships, forms of knowledge, and shared values that make another political future imaginable and practicable.

This task cannot be undertaken by professionals alone, nor can communities and local organizations remain isolated within separate

struggles. Many of the initiatives described here still respond to immediate needs within particular professional fields, territories, or communities. They share an opposition to military rule and a desire for peace and democracy, but these commitments do not by themselves provide a common vision for the society that should follow.

Teachers, doctors, journalists, researchers, community leaders, civil society organizations, ethnic institutions, resistance actors, and media networks need spaces in which they can exchange experience and recognize areas of shared concern. Greater coordination is needed, but it should not mean imposing a single ideology, organization, or political center. It should create conditions in which diverse actors can develop common principles and cooperate while respecting political plurality and local autonomy. Important questions remain concerning social and economic reconstruction, ethnic equality, education, resource governance, food sovereignty, and relations among communities and wider political institutions.

The challenge is not merely to maintain alternative services until a state can be restored, and the future should not be imagined as a return to the institutions that existed before the coup. The experiences documented here encourage us to ask what kind of state and society should be built, whose knowledge should guide that process, and how communities can become active participants in determining their own futures.

Brought together through relationships of equality, the specialized knowledge of professionals and the historical and ethical understanding held by communities may contribute to a shared political imagination grounded in the commons, food sovereignty, resource justice, poly-ethnic coexistence, democratic federalism, and education for emancipation. Such an imagination will not by itself resolve Myanmar's conflict or dislodge military power. It can, however, help build the intellectual, ethical, and institutional foundations needed to move beyond the present interregnum. Those foundations may already be visible in the practices of mutual aid and cooperation described in this volume, incomplete and sometimes contradictory as they are.

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INTRODUCTION

ABSTRACT

This introduction frames a volume on how Myanmar's communities have responded to the military coup of February 2021. The regime's claim to be the country's organizing center is collapsing: for most of its people it neither provides nor protects, and where it still reaches it governs by destruction. Into the space it has vacated, communities have taken over essential services and run them on different principles, through ties of reciprocity and personal obligation. The volume sets this against a long contrast in the region, between the centralizing lowland model that Wolters called the mandala, in whose tribute idiom the military still rules, and the more egalitarian, horizontal outlook of the upland ethnic nationalities. It develops the idea of fugitive professionalism, expertise that escapes state capture without abandoning the work itself, to describe how doctors, journalists, teachers, and financial intermediaries keep the substance of their disciplines while remaking their practice under collapse and danger. The question it leaves open is whether the Bamar majority will accept the federal settlement the nationalities have long sought. Seven chapters follow the change across its sectors, from explosive ordnance response through mobile finance, healthcare, and journalism to education and revolutionary poetry.

This collection examines Myanmar's altered political landscape after the military seized power on February 1, 2021. Five years on, the regime no longer functions as a state for most of its people. It does not meet the basic needs of the population, it has lost its monopoly on violence, and where it still reaches it governs more by destruction than by any authority the people accept. They have not waited for it. Where the state has withdrawn or been refused, communities have taken its place, running essential services through interlocking webs of personal obligation and mutual aid. These flexible, mutually supportive practices were once confined to the upland borderlands, and they have spread, unevenly, into the lowland heartland the military still claims as its own.

The Civil Disobedience Movement makes this transformation plain. When professionals across many sectors refused to work for the regime, at a scale and intensity that observers of civil-service resistance describe as extraordinary (Drechsler, 2021), they did not simply stop working. They reorganized their skills into horizontal networks beyond the reach of the state, creating what this introduction calls fugitive professionalism, expertise that travels and adapts instead of settling into fixed institutions. The word is meant in a precise sense. The regime brands these doctors, teachers, and journalists as fugitives from its law, but what they flee is capture, not their calling, and they carry the substance of their disciplines with them. To be fugitive here is to slip the state's hold while keeping faith with the work, a practiced refusal rather than a retreat.

Youth protesters use digital tools with an adaptive logic much like the physical mobility highland communities once relied on (Jordt et al., 2021). Ethnic armed organizations, long practiced in horizontal governance, find their models newly relevant nationwide. The National Unity Government and the People's Defense Forces, despite their hierarchical names, work through distributed networks that constantly reconfigure to evade state surveillance. Even formal bodies such as civil society organizations now operate through the reciprocal, trust-based connections that define Zomia-like formations. These are not simply attempts at parallel governance. They are experiments in a fundamentally different organizational logic (Thawnghmung & South, 2025).

FUGITIVE PROFESSIONALISM

Post-coup Myanmar resists the usual political categories. Networks organize themselves through what Sahlins (1972/2017) calls generalized reciprocity, as people, technologies, and practices combine and recombine as circumstances demand. Authority works across many overlapping networks, none controlling territory but each performing a specific function. Professional knowledge survives the collapse of institutions through what I term *fugitive professionalism*. By this I mean practice that meets four conditions. It keeps the core substance and judgment of a discipline. It sheds the fixed infrastructure that tied the discipline to the state, together with the state's power to make credentials count. It is sustained by reciprocal and community ties rather

than by bureaucratic authority. Finally, it is validated by shared risk rather than institutional certification.

The second condition asks for care, because the chapters are full of professionals who still hold their degrees and diplomas. What falls away is the credential's force rather than the certificate itself. A license works only while an institution stands behind it, and the institutions that once stood behind these have become the pursuers. The doctor in hiding keeps her qualification as knowledge and as proof of training, yet it authorizes nothing now, and the register that once carried her name serves the state as a list of suspects. When this volume speaks of professionals keeping their formal credentials, it means this: the paper survives, its old power does not, and what has replaced that power is the fourth condition.

The fourth condition deserves a word, because it is the one the old institutions cannot copy. Certification once flowed from the state. Trust now flows from exposure. The patient believes the doctor who is hunted for practicing, and the reader believes the journalist whose byline carries a price. Shared danger has become the credential. Together the four conditions mark fugitive professionalism off from the professional who flees and stops practicing, from the one who stays and serves the regime, and from the untrained hand who fills a gap without disciplinary substance.

Two chapters sit at the edges of this definition, and they are kept there deliberately. The villagers who dig mines out of their fields with knives and bare hands hold no discipline at all. They mark the outer boundary of the concept, the point where need outruns even fugitive expertise, and the mine-action chapter records the unease of trained practitioners at such work alongside the courage it takes. The poets mark the opposite edge. Their craft was never the state's to certify, so they had nothing to shed, yet they are validated by shared risk as surely as the doctors are, and the junta has killed poets for exactly this writing. One case shows the need that calls professionalism out of hiding. The other shows the fourth condition standing alone. The concept is offered as a lens wide enough to hold both, and the volume keeps them in view because they test it.

Fugitive professionalism transforms institutional expertise. A doctor who leaves a state hospital sheds whatever depended on fixed infrastructure, the specialist equipment, the referral chains, the license that needed a ministry behind it, and picks up skills the training never covered, learning to work under surveillance, to improvise through severe scarcity, to move an entire clinic at a few hours' notice. Journalists replace editorial hierarchies with distributed verification systems and learn counter-surveillance alongside source protection. Teachers redesign semester-long courses as compressed modules that can survive weeks without connectivity. Financial intermediaries combine formal banking knowledge with informal *hundi* practice. In each case the core disciplinary content persists, but the knowledge becomes fugitive in the literal sense. It flees institutional capture while keeping its professional substance. Danger also pares the discipline back to its core. The mobile clinic that compresses a 12-step examination into seven keeps the clinical judgment while letting the fuller protocol go, and the pattern repeats across the chapters, so what survives is the essential practice rather than its complete institutional form. This is adaptation under constraint, at times leaner than the original and at times reaching people the institutions never did, and the volume reads it as such rather than as expertise carried across untouched.

The concept has neighbors in the sociology of professions. That literature treats professionalism as a project of jurisdiction and market closure, an occupation winning, through the state, the license to judge its own work (Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001). It explains exactly what collapsed in 2021. Professional jurisdiction in Myanmar ran through the state, so when the state turned on its professionals, licensure, registration, and institutional employment fell together. What that literature does not describe is the sequel documented here, in which a profession sustains jurisdiction over its own work through networks that certify by trust and shared exposure. Fugitive professionalism names that sequel. It also differs from clandestine professional work under other tyrannies, the resistance surgeon, the samizdat seminar, in one respect the chapters keep returning to. There, professionals worked in hiding while waiting for the state to change hands. Here, for now, validation runs through no state at all.

The practice itself is old. The ethnic health and education systems of the borderlands have worked this way for decades, and the wider scholarship on governance beyond the state describes its institutional side (Thawnghmung & South, 2025). The literature on rebel governance likewise records insurgent authorities providing courts, schools, and clinics across many civil wars (Arjona, et al, 2015; Mampilly, 2011; Mampilly, 2015), and it bears on the armed side of Myanmar's resistance. The networks this volume follows differ in that professionals rather than an armed authority carry the services, and most answer to no single command. What is new is its spread to the lowland professional class, and the speed of that spread needs explaining. Horizontal forms that took the upland nationalities generations to develop were adopted in the heartland within months, and the reason runs through every chapter of this volume: a shared digital infrastructure carried them. The Facebook page, the encrypted channel, the mobile wallet and its hundi shadow gave dispersed practitioners what mountain terrain had long given the uplands, distance from the center's gaze, paths the center cannot map, and a way of holding a network together without a fixed address. Digital networks did for the Bamar core in months what terrain did for the uplands over centuries. It is this compression, not any sudden conversion of outlook, that explains how quickly the lowlands came to do what the uplands long did.

THE MANDALA AND ZOMIA

Myanmar's political landscape has long swung between contrasting models of organization. The pre-colonial lowland Bamar kingdoms saw power radiate outward from a central ruler to form a fluid, center-focused network built on tribute and personal ties. O. W. Wolters (1999) gave this formation its name, the mandala: a fluid and often unstable arrangement in which power radiated from a charismatic center and contracted as the ruler's prowess waned, rather than a state with fixed borders and a bureaucratic apparatus. The name is the analysts' rather than the kingdoms' own. In the Indic statecraft from which the word descends, the *rājamaṇḍala* is itself a circle of kings, but a circle always drawn from one throne, each ruler plotting the rings of ally and enemy around himself, and where the region's inscriptions carry the word at all, they use it in the same way, for a realm's own circle seen from its center. What the tradition never supplies is a view from above,

a map of equal units, and that absence is what the argument below turns on. Related accounts converge on the same finding. Tambiah's (1976) galactic polity makes the same point, and even Lieberman's (2003, p. 33) solar polity, which stresses how far the Burmese state integrated over the long run, keeps the sacral center as the point toward which power gravitates. In each, power, legitimacy, and organizing principles concentrate in a dominant node, and resources flow upward to sustain it (Tambiah, 1976; Wolters, 1999). The military state that inherited this picture is no mandala in that sense. It is a bureaucratic, territorial apparatus that conscripts, taxes, and draws borders. What it kept from the mandala is the tribute idiom, the claim to sacral centrality and the image of a single protector at the still point of the nation, and that claim, rather than a living mandala, is what the coup has thrown into question.

In contrast stand the highland regions that Willem van Schendel (2002) named Zomia. He coined the term as a corrective to the area-studies boundaries that had carved highland Asia into fragments, and he defined the zone by its shared lifeways, its linguistic affinities, kinship systems, mountain agriculture, and old trade networks, rather than by any claim about state evasion. That second claim is Scott's (2009). Scott read highland orality as a deliberate refusal of state legibility, a fugitive culture built to frustrate the lowland state. The opposition between mandala and Zomia that this volume draws is a political and structural one, built on van Schendel's geography rather than his argument, and it parts company with Scott on the documentary question, on grounds the next paragraph gives. The highland peripheries have long held more decentralized, flexible, and mobile social structures, fostering horizontal, reciprocal relations (Sahlins, 1972/2017) and a resilience against central control, with periods of oscillation between hierarchical and egalitarian forms (Leach, 1954). Michaud and Ovesen (2000) and Sadan (2013) complicate the picture further, showing that highland communities engaged with and transformed state structures rather than simply evading them, and crafted histories beyond the state. The political fluidity that Robinne and Sadan (2007) trace in Kachin dynamics points to continuous innovation and to strategic repositioning in relation to hierarchy and the state, rather than to mere avoidance of it.

The parting of ways is this. Scott's binary of literate state-makers below and unlettered state-evaders above does not survive the documentary record, since highland communities have long kept and used texts. The divide that holds is a divide in what writing was for. The lowland mandala used documents vertically, to project the sovereign's will downward and to draw legibility upward, while peripheral communities used them horizontally, to bind allies, codify custom, and limit their own leaders, as the written constitutions of the Karen and Mon resistance organizations still do. A polity that organized itself as a ranked circle of persons under a sacral center left behind a political language fluent in ranking persons and far poorer in binding them as peers. The grading is audible in the language itself, in the pronouns, honorifics, and verbs of giving that register relative standing in nearly every exchange, while the vocabulary of horizontal compact is thin and much of it borrowed. A separate study develops the argument (Houtman, forthcoming), but the observation itself is open to any speaker of Burmese. That inheritance, more than terrain, is what the post-coup networks are now testing: whether horizontal practice can find durable horizontal form in the center's own tongue.

This volume reads the post-coup landscape against that long contrast. The centralizing model the military embodies has not held, and the more egalitarian, horizontal practices long associated with the uplands have become the working basis of daily life across much of the country. We do not claim that the highlands exported their forms to the lowlands wholesale. The lowland heartland keeps its own dormant traditions of non-state mutual aid, the *parahita* welfare networks, the neighborhood funeral societies, the *wunthanu*-style associations of the 1920s (Griffiths, 2019), and much of what the coup did was to wake them. Cut off from the state at the same moment, communities across the country reached for similar reciprocal solutions because little else was available, and where the longer experience of the upland nationalities in governing without a strong center served as a reference, the chapters say so.

Since 1962, the military has pressed for centralized control, and in doing so it has compelled communities across the country to build survival networks grounded in reciprocity. Groups such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Organization built parallel systems of governance that reflected these alternative logics,

sustaining themselves through horizontal networks of mutual obligation (Loong, 2021). The 2021 coup pushed this further than before. As state violence and collapse spread into central Myanmar, the nimble, decentralized, reciprocity-based practices long associated with the uplands took hold well beyond them. Unlike earlier parallel systems, which tried to reproduce government services through settled organizations, post-coup groups stay fluid and move quickly when threatened. Communities now practice a selective appropriation, drawing on both hierarchical expertise and horizontal solidarity while inventing hybrid forms. Doctors keep the clinical protocols learned in state medical schools but deliver them through mobile teams organized by village networks. Financial intermediaries use the digital banking skills they acquired in the formal sector to run informal hundi transfers.

How far this amounts to a lasting reordering, rather than the familiar contraction of a weak center, is a question the chapters pose more than they settle. What is clear is that the population has taken over functions the state abandoned and has run them on principles the old center never used. The military still operates in the tribute idiom, drawing labor, revenue, and loyalty toward itself and treating their withdrawal as betrayal. The upland nationalities have long stood for something more egalitarian, a politics of obligation negotiated among rough equals. The deeper question the coup has reopened is which of these the country will build on.

STATE FAILURE AND EMERGENT FORMATIONS

The military's conduct after the coup intensified its long neglect of citizen welfare. The junta had already shown callous disregard during crises such as Cyclone Nargis (2008) and the Sagaing earthquake (2025). Now it actively weaponizes state failure, confronting citizens with an unprecedented scale of threats, treating whole segments of the population as enemies and engaging in active obstruction of essential aid and a disregard for civilian welfare (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

This systematic violence has driven the shift described above. Communities have become self-reliant. What began as a way to survive has hardened into resistance, the horizontal reciprocity our framework sets out. Drawing on professional expertise, existing

relationships, and new digital tools, they build the heterogeneous networks that assemblage theory describes (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), joining people, technologies, and practices into post-coup assemblages that stay fluid while they function, constantly evolving through processes of assembling and reassembling. These formations are deliberately flexible, adapting rapidly under pressure rather than building permanent structures. They maintain stability precisely through their capacity to change.

Two examples make the change concrete.

Myanmar's health system was built on the center's logic, with specialist hospitals concentrated in Yangon and Mandalay, resources flowing upward to military facilities, and civilian care rationed along administrative lines from the center outward. After the coup, an estimated half or more of the public health workforce left state facilities and rebuilt its practice outside them (see chapter 3). The Loyalty Mobile Team in Kayah State serves 30 camps holding some 30,000 displaced people, compressing its own twelve-step intake examination into seven steps that take eight to 10 minutes, and moving constantly to avoid military detection. A doctor in Chin State, on the junta's wanted list, runs a hospital and five mobile units in a region where the ratio of doctors to patients is reportedly one to 45,000 (see chapter 3). These mobile units are no thinner version of hospital medicine. They work on a different principle altogether. The clinic travels with its team. Its accountability runs to the village that shelters it, not to the ministry, and what holds it together is mutual obligation where the state had relied on command.

Mobile money tells a similar story. The state designed digital financial platforms, KBZPay and WavePay, for financial inclusion, extending the center's reach into peripheral economies. After the coup these same platforms became instruments of surveillance, a blurring of historical political dynamics in which the center's old tribute logic acquired networked tools, with more than 18,000 accounts frozen in the 18 months to late 2022, according to leaked junta minutes (The Irrawaddy, 2023; see chapter 2), and transactions as small as 1,000 kyats (MMK) flagged as evidence of support for the resistance. Communities responded by reverting to hundi networks and trusted intermediaries. Hundi is no upland inheritance. It is an old remittance craft of the Indian

Ocean trading world, run on personal trust through merchants and brokers, and it had survived for generations at the margins of every formal system the lowland state built. The coup changed its standing, turning a channel the center had treated as marginal into the trusted one. Money began to travel through personal relationships rather than state-monitored channels, following the very pattern of reciprocity-based exchange that Sahlins describes.

Across every sector documented in this volume, the pattern recurs. People have stopped trusting official structures. They build their own systems, which put community protection first. When something works, they strengthen it. When it becomes dangerous, they abandon it.

Five years on, these networks have established themselves. The State Administration Council was already assessed in 2022 as holding stable control of under a fifth of Myanmar's territory (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar [SAC-M], 2022, 2024), and its military reach now extends mainly into contested zones across much of the country (ISP-Myanmar, 2025). Alternative systems have accordingly grown from crisis responses into lasting institutions. Using the council's services now carries real risk, whether surveillance, arrest, or the outright denial of access.

Security shapes every decision these networks make. Health workers streamline procedures so they can move quickly, educators divide information among themselves, and financial networks relocate constantly to dodge surveillance. This is more than adjustment. It changes how professional skills themselves function under dictatorship. The researchers who produced this volume's chapters work under the same conditions, in what Houtman, et al. (2025) call being "thrice under fire," where they face criminalization for taking part in the Civil Disobedience Movement, study communities under military attack, and work without institutional protection.[1] The knowledge they produce is validated through shared risk rather than institutional authority, and their methods were remade accordingly, into methodological assemblages that prioritized participant safety and ethical knowledge production over procedural purity. The evidence gathered this way is weighted toward the resistance and

1. Several contributors to this volume write under pseudonyms, and some identifying details have been withheld, to protect them and the communities they work with from reprisal.

the communities that sustain it. That is a strength for access and a limit on reach. What follows documents a tendency that is real and spreading, not a settled nationwide condition, and large populations remain under the council's administration even as its claim to be the country's organizing center erodes.

These formations work on many levels at once. Township specialists partner with village health centers, economic networks connect neighborhood intermediaries to the cities, and information travels both down from resistance intelligence and up from local reports. They close the divide between state and society, provide stability amid upheaval, and reshape professional skills for new realities.

This resilience exacts a heavy price. Beyond the psychological toll, these formations face cascading practical failures: medical supplies run out during surgery, students give up when the internet stays down, and journalists' children cannot go to school. Every network described here carries both the risk of falling apart and the spark for innovation, and the chapters record the two together.

ETHICS AND THE PROTECTION OF SOURCES

The conditions described in this section shaped the research as much as the practices it records, and the volume's ethical ground rules should be stated plainly. Formal institutional review was impossible without creating the very records that endanger participants, so the chapters follow a common understanding reached between the editor and the contributors. Interviews and surveys were conducted with participants' informed consent, given orally where a signature would itself have been a risk. Several contributors write under pseudonyms, and the editor has verified their identities in confidence. Research participants appear under pseudonyms or pen names unless they are public figures cited for what already stands in the public record. Locations, dates, and organizational details have been withheld or generalized wherever their combination might point to a person at risk, and each chapter has been read before publication with that danger in mind, since details harmless on their own can identify someone when taken together. Where doubt remained, detail was removed. Responsibility for these judgments rests with the editor rather than with the contributors.

THE CHAPTERS

Drawing on papers from the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, this volume examines how these assemblages challenge both centralized governance and the older models of resistance. The chapters describe formations that cross the conventional boundaries of state and society, and they open new ways to understand community resilience under extreme pressure. They run from the ground upward, from staying alive amid explosive ordnance, through moving money and mending bodies, to carrying news, sustaining learning, and making shared meaning of it all in verse. The coup's first weeks produced poems before they produced mobile clinics, and the needs documented here were answered at once and together, so the sequence simply lets each chapter draw on the networks the ones before it describe.

Mrat Aye and Saw Matthew document how communities respond to the explosive ordnance crisis that has deepened since the coup, with Sagaing Region alone accounting for 35 percent of national casualties where casualties had previously been all but unknown. Their chapter traces the full range of response: digital explosive ordnance risk education through Facebook campaigns and mobile apps, community clearance by villagers working without formal training, victim assistance that includes mobile prosthetic workshops using 3D printing, and the strategies that local actors and social media figures have developed to reach conflict-affected populations.

Bradley, Gar Gar, and Vox document how communities moved between the digital banking platforms that became instruments of surveillance and the informal hundi networks, developing adaptive financial practices that kept money circulating outside state control.

Chun Lean Lim and Noom Hseng Nang trace mobile health through three cases, in Taunggyi, Kayah, and Chin State, and argue that community-based care filling the gaps the state leaves is a recurring pattern in Myanmar's history rather than merely an emergency response to the coup.

Maung, Rasidi, Myat, and Wits examine how journalists have reorganized their practice under systematic targeting, with more than 170

journalists arrested since the coup and Myanmar ranked among the world's worst jailers of the press. The chapter documents how verification standards, source protection, and editorial processes have been rebuilt for clandestine work, including the 3-2-1 verification rule and layered security protocols that cover digital, physical, and psychological dimensions.

Yucca Wai and Joseph Andersson document the particular challenges facing women journalists in exile, who confront gendered threats that include online harassment, sexual intimidation, and the disproportionate burden of sustaining family networks across borders. Their chapter shows how women have developed distinctive ways of organizing and mutual support that differ from those of their male colleagues.

Tauk documents how students keep access to virtual instruction through institutions affiliated with the National Unity Government, private virtual universities, and independent study. Drawing on surveys and interviews, the chapter finds that students across all regions and types of institution report strikingly similar experiences despite stark differences in infrastructure and conflict, which the chapter reads as a systemic rather than a local response. Students develop technological redundancy, collaborative resource-sharing, and sophisticated security practices, among them pseudonyms, VPN rotation, and counter-surveillance.

Chaw Su Mar Win, Mar Lar, and Myat Htoo Kywe trace how revolutionary poetry circulates through the same informal networks that distribute medicine and information, from Facebook pages to trusted contacts sharing files, personal archives, and recited verse. The poems serve as both documentation of state violence and active components of resistance, turning collective trauma into shared meaning and sustaining revolutionary morale in verse rooted in Burmese tradition.

KEY PATTERNS ACROSS SECTORS

Three patterns recur across the chapters: the primacy of security, the transformation of professional networks as formal and informal elements fuse, and the gendered distribution of the labor that sustains them. The most pervasive is security, which has become the primary

organizing principle. Health workers adapted clinic operations for mobility and discretion, journalists created encrypted verification networks, and financial intermediaries developed ways to assess trust that do not depend on institutional documentation. These adaptive practices recur in every chapter.

Formal and informal elements also combine in unexpected ways. Community networks filled the gaps left by collapsed state institutions, and informal financial systems such as hundi gained prominence as formal banking became risky. Fugitive professionalism is visible across every chapter. Doctors, journalists, teachers, and financial intermediaries changed how they work rather than abandoning their skills, adjusting specialized knowledge to new constraints while keeping their core professional standards.

Gender, finally, shapes these formations in ways the chapters make visible. Women face greater security risks while often carrying the main responsibility for sustaining community networks. The chapter by Wai and Andersson documents how women journalists in exile confront gendered threats, from sexual intimidation to the disproportionate burden of maintaining family connections across borders, and develop ways of organizing that differ from those of their male colleagues. Across the volume, women's labor in maintaining reciprocal networks often goes unseen precisely because it is coded as care rather than resistance.

WHAT THIS MEANS

These networks are a fundamental change in how people organize, well beyond a crisis response. They produced neither the institutional breakdown many predicted nor the simple highland escape that Zomia scholarship describes, but hybrid structures in which professionals keep their formal credentials while working through horizontal networks that build independent zones of essential services without the state.

Horizontality is not by itself a virtue, and the volume does not claim it is. The collapse that produced mobile clinics and teacher networks also produced scam compounds, drug routes, and armed groups that tax and conscript by force. Decentralization can be predatory as readily as reciprocal. The chapters describe a particular kind of horizontal

formation, one held together by reciprocal obligation and professional standards and turned toward community protection, and it shares the landscape with coercive forms it must be told apart from. Even the ethnic organizations that pioneered horizontal governance are armies with their own hierarchies and revenue demands. The reciprocal networks studied here are part of the post-coup field, not the whole of it.

A second objection deserves an answer here. Much of the money that sustains these networks originates outside the country, in diaspora remittances and foreign grants, and a skeptic may call the result a remittance economy in Zomia's clothing. The chapters suggest otherwise. The origin of funds does not set the organizing principle of their use. What the evidence shows is that reciprocity rather than bureaucracy moves resources to where they are needed, and distribution is where an organizational logic lives.

Whether these fluid networks can be given durable form is a real question, and the resistance has begun to pose it, most visibly in the Federal Democracy Charter adopted in 2021. That question of formalization, and the documentary and linguistic forms it would take, sits to one side of this volume's concern. What matters here is the prior shift the chapters record, the movement of organizing capacity itself away from the center and into the horizontal networks that now carry it.

CONCLUSION

Five years after the coup, the clearest fact about the Myanmar state is that its claim to be the country's organizing center is collapsing, and for most of its people it neither provides nor protects. The people have not waited for it. They have taken the most important functions of the state into their own hands and run them through overlapping networks of reciprocal personal obligation, the kind of horizontal, mutual arrangement the upland nationalities have practiced for generations.

The military still works in the tribute idiom, drawing labor, revenue, and loyalty upward and treating withdrawal from them as betrayal. It extracts what it can where it holds ground, through conscription, taxation, and resource revenues that need no one's consent. But the everyday relationship of tribute, the daily flow of service and allegiance

toward the capital, has broken down across most of the country. Professionals withdrew their labor through the Civil Disobedience Movement. Households moved their money through hundi, beyond the platforms built to watch it. Each withdrawal loosened one more of the ties through which the center used to hold.

What has held communities together in the state's absence is fugitive professionalism. Doctors, teachers, journalists, and brokers have carried the substance of their disciplines out of the institutions that failed them and into horizontal networks sustained by mutual obligation. Every chapter in this volume documents some part of that work.

Whether these arrangements will last is uncertain, and the volume does not pretend to settle it. What they hold open is a multiplicity of possible futures. What the coup has laid bare is an older divide. The lowland center has always governed by gathering power to itself. The upland nationalities have long preferred a more egalitarian politics, a settlement negotiated among rough equals rather than dictated from a capital. The networks now sustaining the country lean toward the second. The question the war has reopened, and which no chapter here can answer, is whether the Bamar majority, raised on the centralizing model, will accept the federal arrangement the nationalities were promised at Panglong in 1947. The frontier leaders read that promise as a compact among equals, the Bamar leadership as a devolution the center could grant and withdraw, and the nationalities have sought its honoring ever since. Even the resistance reaches for the inherited language and administrative forms of the center, from the people's administration bodies that echo the bureaucracy they would replace to the older idioms of loyalty. The deeper question is therefore whether the political vocabulary the Bamar majority has inherited can carry a federal settlement at all, a question pursued in a separate study (Houtman, forthcoming).

The military has kept the center by force and lost the country in substance. What it will not provide, the people now provide for themselves, on terms closer to the uplands than to the capital. For international actors the implication is plain: capacity now sits with these networks, their redundant channels and shifting locations are necessities of survival rather than organizational failures, and any approach that still assumes a state partner is addressing an empty chair. Whether the

terms on which the people now live can be written into a settlement the Bamar majority will accept is the question the coup has left, and the one on which everything else now turns.

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CHAPTER 1

EXPLOSIVE ASSEMBLAGES: COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROTECTION NETWORKS IN MYANMAR'S POST-COUP LANDMINE CRISIS

Mrat Aye & Saw Matthew

ABSTRACT

Since the February 2021 coup in Myanmar, civilian casualties from landmines and explosive remnants of war have increased dramatically, with 1,052 casualties recorded in 2023 alone. Traditional humanitarian responses like Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) face severe implementation challenges, as the State Administration Council (SAC) blocks access to conflict-affected areas while resistance forces struggle to protect civilian populations. This chapter examines innovative adaptations developed to overcome these constraints, including digital risk education via targeted social media campaigns, mobile applications, and radio broadcasts; community-led victim assistance through emergency cash transfers and mobile prosthetic clinics; and local clearance initiatives. These approaches represent significant departures from conventional humanitarian mine action and illustrate how local actors have leveraged available technologies and networks to deliver life-saving interventions in contested environments. The findings highlight practical strategies that may have relevance beyond Myanmar in other conflict settings with restricted humanitarian access.

Keywords: media, protection, landmines, conflict

The conflict landscape in Myanmar has transformed dramatically since the February 2021 military coup. What distinguishes the current crisis from previous periods of conflict is its geographic expansion from traditionally contested ethnic borderland areas into previously peaceful central regions. Communities in Sagaing, Magwe, and Mandalay regions now face explosive ordnance threats for the first time, with little prior knowledge or experience to guide their responses.

This geographic shift coincides with significant changes in conflict dynamics—the emergence of People's Defense Forces and other new resistance groups, intensified fighting in previously stable areas, and increasingly aggressive military tactics by the SAC, including widespread use of landmines and aerial bombardment. These developments have created a complex humanitarian challenge requiring innovative approaches across all aspects of mine action. These innovations can be understood through assemblage theory, as communities develop flexible combinations of diverse elements—technical expertise, local knowledge, digital platforms, and adaptive practices—that function as coherent safety systems while remaining adaptable to changing conditions.[1] Rather than simply replicating conventional humanitarian approaches under pressure, these assemblages create novel organizational forms that navigate between state control and resistance spaces.

This chapter examines the adaptation strategies developed by humanitarian actors, resistance forces, and local communities to address explosive ordnance threats under the severe operational constraints of post-coup Myanmar. It analyzes both the technical innovations in risk education delivery and the community-based approaches to victim assistance and clearance that have emerged where formal humanitarian systems cannot function.

LANDMINES AND UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE

Landmines are explosive weapons, which can be concealed below or above ground, and are specifically designed to kill or maim people, or in the case of anti-vehicle mines, disable or destroy vehicles. Landmines can be activated in several ways, most commonly by pressure from above, via a tripwire, or a radio or mobile phone signal. Most landmines are "victim activated," meaning it is the victim who triggers the

detonation of the mine through some action, such as stepping on a mine or walking through a tripwire. As victim-activated mines are not targeting a specific individual or vehicle, they can remain dormant for years or even decades, killing or injuring those who activate it far after it has been laid. Finding and removing them can be challenging, as they can be made from various materials, such as plastic, wood, or metal, and are often concealed or camouflaged, to make detection difficult.

Unexploded ordnance, or UXO, are explosive munitions, such as rockets, bombs, mortars, fuses, grenades, or artillery rounds, which have been fired, launched, dropped from an aircraft, or thrown, but have not detonated as they were designed to do. These unexploded munitions are by nature often extremely unstable; even light handling or touch can detonate them. UXO will often be found in areas where there have been battles or skirmishes and like landmines can lay dormant for years, remaining an ever-present threat to civilians who live in or travel through the affected area.

Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) refers to all explosive munitions which are left behind in a conflict area and includes both UXO and abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO), which are munitions that have not been fired or dropped but are left in an area. Throughout this chapter, both terms (UXO and ERW) will be used, with UXO referring specifically to unexploded munitions and ERW encompassing the wider range of explosive threats.

The usage of anti-personnel landmines emerged initially as a tool to protect larger anti-vehicle landmines and prevent their disarmament by opposing forces.[2] This later expanded to their use as a defensive weapon to protect strategically key areas such as bases and camps as well as infrastructure such as bridges, airports or roads. Additionally, they were used as an area denial weapon to restrict an enemy's movement to specific areas. Later, landmines became a common tool in both conventional warfare and unconventional conflicts, where landmines could be deployed to target both combatants and civilians alike; the latter in order to terrorize populations, deny them access to land, and restrict their movement. Two key characteristics of landmines are worth noting. The first concerns the most common form of landmine, the anti-personnel blast mine, which is not specifically designed to kill its victim but

rather seriously maim them. The perverse logic underpinning this construction is that in a conflict situation, a wounded combatant requires more resources and manpower to support them. Thus, by injuring a soldier with a landmine, more soldiers will be required to carry them, care for them, and remove them from the battlefield, taking their attention away from actual combat. If the mine simply killed, this would not be the case. The second is that factory-produced anti-personnel landmines, due to their materials and robust construction, can remain dormant but active for years or even decades after they have been placed. This means that civilians in a former conflict zone can face being maimed or killed decades after fighting has ceased.

Globally, landmine and UXO contamination remains a serious problem for dozens of countries, although the production and use of landmines has slowed in recent years. Historically, over 50 countries have produced landmines at one point, but today, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) estimates that production is most likely occurring in five countries: India, Iran, Myanmar, Pakistan and Russia. Such a reduction can be partly attributed to extensive advocacy efforts by the ICBL and others. These efforts led to the adoption of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty (sometimes referred to as the Ottawa Convention), which entered into force in March 1999.[3] The treaty not only prohibits production, use, and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines but also requires the implementation of mine risk education and victim assistance programs. While over 80 percent of the world's states have joined the treaty, China, Russia, the United States, Myanmar, and others have yet to do so. While the treaty has led to the reduced production and use of landmines, they remain a threat in many countries, where they lie dormant from conflicts decades ago, have been recently planted either by state militaries not party to the treaty, used by non-state armed groups who cannot sign international treaties.

LANDMINE AND UXO THREAT IN MYANMAR

It is difficult to overstate the scale and persistence of the landmine and UXO threat in Myanmar. Since its independence from Britain, decades of internal conflict have left vast swaths of the country's border areas littered with unexploded rockets, mortars, artillery shells, aircraft bombs, and grenades. Extensive use of anti-personnel blast and fragmentation

mines by the national military, known as the Tatmadaw, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) placed by non-state armed groups, and extensive UXO contamination, combined with poor mapping and non-existent clearance programs, means civilians are regularly killed and maimed by mines and UXO. Myanmar has not signed the Mine Ban Treaty and is likely one of only four nations on earth still actively producing landmines, through its *Ka Pa Sa* (Myanmar Defence Products Industries) factories in West Bago Region.

Since the February 2021 military coup, conflict has increased significantly across the country, so new contamination is regularly added to previously contaminated areas across the Southeast and in Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states. With fighting in new areas, such as Chin State, Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay regions, civilians who were previously not cognizant of this issue now face a significant threat. These areas have become conflict zones as they emerged as strongholds of anti-coup resistance, with many members of local defense forces coming from these regions. The SAC has responded with brutal military campaigns that include widespread use of landmines and explosive ordnance, creating new contamination in previously unaffected areas.

Furthermore, prior to the coup, despite the presence of multiple humanitarian mine action focused NGOs[4], no formal humanitarian clearance of explosive threats occurred in Myanmar. This trend continued following the coup, although ad hoc localized efforts have occurred, which will be explored further here.[5]

The impact on civilians in Myanmar of landmine and UXO contamination is staggering. Between 2015 and 2020, UNICEF recorded over 1,000 civilian casualties from landmines or UXO, while from 2021 and 2024, nearly 3,000 civilians were killed and injured; both figures are most certainly significant undercounts.[6] Of these recorded casualties, each year between 30 and 45 percent are women and children.[7]

In addition to killing and causing horrific injuries to civilians, landmines and ERW also impact civilians in a number of other ways. Primarily, landmines and ERW deny access to land, as uncertainty around the explosive risks mean people are reluctant to travel over or utilize land with suspected contamination. In a country where a

significant percentage of the population engages in agriculture, this can have a devastating effect on livelihoods and food security.[8] Further, more than one million refugees from Myanmar currently live in displacement sites in Bangladesh and Thailand. Their areas of origin in Rakhine State and the southeast of Myanmar are extensively contaminated and therefore any durable solutions addressing displacement must take this contamination into account and eventually remove it.

POST-COUP CONTAMINATION

While Myanmar faced extensive contamination prior to the coup, this event and subsequent conflict dynamics introduced new elements to the contamination context. These new elements largely consisted of a much larger scale of use, by both SAC and resistance forces, a wider geographic dispersion in terms of contamination, especially into new areas, and the introduction of new weapons, such as aircraft bombs, IEDs, and cluster munitions.

According to the Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor report for Myanmar in 2023, there has been extensive use of antipersonnel landmines by SAC troops and various other armed actors, in nearly every part of the country. Contamination around key infrastructure such as mobile phone towers, extractive enterprises, and energy pipelines by SAC troops has increased since they seized power in February 2021. The report also indicated that instead of acquiring landmines from the clandestine arms market or removing them from minefields for re-use, non-state armed groups continued to produce various types of improvised mines in 2022-2023. These included improvised blast and fragmentation antipersonnel mines that are victim-activated, improvised antipersonnel landmines, claymore-type directional fragmentation mines, anti-vehicle mines, and anti-personnel mines equipped with anti-handling devices (mechanisms that trigger detonation when someone attempts to remove or disarm the mine).

News of seizing or capturing antipersonnel mines by resistance groups from SAC forces is frequently shared on social media, often by the resistance forces themselves. These seizures appear to most commonly include at least five types of antipersonnel landmine: MM1, MM2, MM3, MM5 and MM6 variants, which are produced by the

state-owned enterprise Myanmar Defence Products Industries, known as Ka Pa Sa.[9]

These variants differ in their design and destructive capabilities: MM1 is a stake-mounted fragmentation mine modeled on the Chinese Type-59, MM2 is a blast mine similar to the Chinese Type-58, MM3 is a bounding fragmentation mine that leaps into the air before detonating at waist height, MM5 is a directional fragmentation mine similar to the American Claymore, and MM6 is a copy of the American M14 low-metal-content anti-personnel blast mine; the anti-vehicle mine in the series is the MM4. Each presents distinct detection and disposal challenges for both deminers and civilians.

In addition to captured and repurposed weapons, resistance forces, particularly People's Defense Forces (PDFs), have developed a relatively sophisticated capacity to manufacture and deploy improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These weapons are used to target SAC vehicles and personnel throughout the country, prompting various defensive and counterinsurgency strategies from the military junta.[10]

Cluster munitions, which house smaller sub-munitions within a larger bomb casing, are then dispersed over target areas. Myanmar was not known to have produced them until reports and evidence emerged in 2023 indicating that it may have manufactured a domestic cluster bomb, and that since 2021 have been used by the Myanmar Air Force in several attacks around the country. Resistance forces and community-based groups have identified possible uses of these weapons in Kawkareik and Myawaddy in Karen areas, Pekon and Demoso townships in the Karenni/Southern Shan theater, and Mindat in Chin State. The ICBL-Cluster Munition Coalition's August 2023 briefing reviewed photographs of cluster bomb remnants from aerial attacks by the Myanmar Air Force, documenting per-incident casualties that included seven people killed and more than 20 wounded in Demoso Township. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) also published photographs of remnants from a suspected domestically produced cluster bomb used in an April 2022 attack in the P'Loo village tract of Myawaddy Township, Kayin State, near the border with Thailand.[11]

Multiple sources have confirmed the use of cluster munitions in Myanmar post-coup. The Landmine Monitor has documented cases with photographic evidence, while KHRG has published detailed reports with forensic analysis of recovered munition fragments. Additionally, independent researchers and international human rights organizations have corroborated these findings through interviews with witnesses and examination of impact sites. These reports collectively represent significant evidence of domestic production and deployment of these internationally condemned weapons by Myanmar's military forces.

Lastly, it is important to highlight how contamination in "new" areas has increased significantly. Prior to the coup, most landmine and UXO casualties occurred in the Southeast (Karen and Karenni areas), Shan and Kachin states in the Northeast, and more recently, in Rakhine State, since the emergence of the Arakan Army. Since the coup, new areas such as Sagaing and Magwe regions and Chin State have been hugely impacted. According to the Landmine and ERW Incident Information Report for 2023 released by UNICEF Myanmar, there were a total of 1,052 victims from 599 incidents over the course of the year. Of this figure, 35 percent of the total casualties occurred in Sagaing Region alone. This is a staggering figure, considering that prior to the coup there were usually zero casualties in this area annually.[12] In 2022 and 2023, casualties were also recorded in areas like Mandalay and Yangon regions, where mine and UXO contamination was previously unheard of. Although comprehensive survey data is not available due to the current context, it is likely that such significant casualty figures are due to a combination of increased use by SAC forces and a total lack of previous exposure to the threat among the civilian population, meaning awareness levels of risks and mitigation measures would be extremely limited.

HUMANITARIAN MINE ACTION (HMA)

While the challenge facing Myanmar, or any country impacted by landmine/UXO contamination, is grave, there are various strategies to address the threat. Globally, Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), which is the overall strategy for dealing with explosive threats from a humanitarian perspective, is defined by the United Nations as having five pillars. These pillars include 1) Explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), 2) Victim assistance (VA), 3) Advocacy, 4) Stockpile destruction, and 5)

Clearance.[13] The International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) provide a set of minimum standards from which contextually relevant, usually national-level standards can be developed and implemented. This is to ensure that activities under the five pillars are carried out safely and efficiently and provide a standardized approach for humanitarian mine action organizations to follow.[14] The following section will primarily focus on one of the pillars, EORE, but also highlight key interventions within two others, victim assistance and clearance. Specifically, the following sections will analyze how various stakeholders in the post-coup landscape have employed strategies and tools to respond to the increasing threat of landmines and UXO.

The convergence of these factors—increased contamination, wider geographic spread, new weapon types, and limited humanitarian access—has created an environment where traditional approaches to explosive ordnance threats are largely ineffective or impossible to implement. This situation has necessitated significant innovation and adaptation across all pillars of humanitarian mine action. The following sections examine these evolving responses, with particular focus on how various stakeholders have developed alternative approaches to explosive ordnance risk education, victim assistance, and clearance in this challenging operational environment.

POST-COUP RESPONSES IN MYANMAR

Explosive ordnance risk education (EORE)

Explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) refers to activities that seek to reduce the risk of injury from mines/ERW by raising awareness and promoting behavior change through activities, such as public information dissemination, education and training, and community mine action liaison.[15] With guidance from IMAS, EORE organizations and facilitators must adhere to the fundamental principles of EORE. These include delivery of factually correct information, emphasizing what people can do to stay safe— information and strategies that can prevent accidents rather than focusing solely on the dangers of mines/UXOs. It involves tailoring key messages with the right quantity and choice of information, challenging myths where necessary, and involving the audience in the strategy making process in the implementation of risk

education activities. There is a variety of communication channels and techniques that can be used in information sharing of key safety messages to the affected communities, depending on culture and context: person-to-person or interpersonal communication, small media, traditional media and mass media.

Some international operators directly conduct the risk education activities in their target locations for IDPs, returnees, and conflict-affected communities, including children. However, one of the first steps to reaching more community members in remote and conflict-affected areas and addressing access constraints is to build and strengthen the EORE local resources, such as humanitarian front line workers, civil society organizations, community-based organizations and community volunteers. To this end, some international organizations provide standardized training of trainers for implementing local partners and community volunteers.

In Myanmar, delivery of explosive ordnance risk education with the standardized EORE information, education and communication (IEC) toolkit by international mine action operators was officially approved by the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement of Myanmar government, in 2015. While EORE activities took place prior to this, these were generally ad-hoc and utilized bespoke tools developed by individual facilitators. From 2012, the Mine Risk Working Group (MRWG) coordinated the process of standardizing the risk education tools. The MRWG was the coordinating body that brought together various stakeholders involved in mine action, including government departments, INGOs and local NGOs, UN agencies, and other relevant authorities and actors. It aims to enhance the coordination and collaboration among key stakeholders and to address the impact of explosive ordnance before the military coup.[16]

The MRWG effectively ceased to function following the February 2021 coup. While some coordination mechanisms have been established among humanitarian actors operating outside the SAC framework, there is no longer a centralized, officially recognized body coordinating mine action activities in Myanmar. UN agencies and international NGOs now coordinate through informal networks and the Mine Action Area of Responsibility, but these lack the official mandate and cross-sectoral participation that characterized the pre-coup MRWG.

Post-coup challenges to traditional EORE

Traditionally, EORE was facilitated through face-to-face sessions and utilized printed materials, which a facilitator could show to the audience. Following the coup, this modality became increasingly challenging, due to security risks around carrying such materials. Further, the environment became particularly challenging for international operators who had not extended their letters of agreements (LoA) or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the SAC's Department of Rehabilitation, which is the focal department for liaison and is responsible for providing approval for submitted workplans and travel authorizations for implementation of mine action related activities in the country after February 2021. As a result, organizations that do not have valid organization registration, LoA or MoU with the government must conduct activities in a low-profile manner. Random and thorough security checks, arbitrary arrests and detentions by SAC's troops at many checkpoints have worsened, hindering the ability of organizations to conduct awareness sessions with visual materials.

What has emerged in response are dynamic assemblages that integrate digital technologies, media networks, and community knowledge systems. Unlike conventional EORE, which operates through standardized protocols and centralized coordination, these assemblages function through multiple interconnected nodes that can rapidly adapt as conditions change.

The announcement that the SAC would begin enforcing the military conscription law and forced recruitments by other armed actors further complicated the movement of EORE facilitators in the continuation of EORE delivery. It simply was too risky for them to travel in some areas. There have also been reports of SAC troops targeting humanitarian workers throughout the country. As a result, adding IEC materials which portray explosive weapons, into this mix, could further threaten EORE facilitators.[17] Meanwhile, the landscape of EORE delivery in areas controlled by local people's defense forces, the National Unity Government's (NUG) administrative apparatus, or ethnic armed groups in the northwest or southeast of Myanmar, for example, differs from those by SAC. These actors are generally more receptive to allowing or conducting EORE awareness sessions, supporting the mobilization of communities, and handling administrative and logistics

matters. A staff member from one local CSO, based in the northwest, shared her experience of this, stating

> In our operation areas, we usually have to inform the township level administrative body (referring to the *Pa-Aa-Pha* also known as People Administration Teams) for getting prior approval for implementing activities in target villages in their controlled areas. They welcome our projects and are quite supportive in our implementation in reaching out to respective village level committees and mobilization of people as needed.

According to the Mine Action Area of Responsibility's most recent data, over 420,000 people were reached by risk education messages in 2022, with preliminary figures for 2023 suggesting this number increased to approximately 475,000. This growth represents a significant achievement given the deteriorating security situation and increasing access constraints throughout the country.

Innovative digital and media-based approaches

The challenges to traditional EORE delivery have spurred the development of alternative digital approaches that leverage existing communication channels and technologies. These can be broadly categorized into social media outreach, traditional media integration, mobile applications, and interactive learning platforms—each offering unique advantages in reaching different segments of the affected population.

According to statistics published in the DataReportal Digital 2024: Myanmar report, Myanmar has a total population of 54.78 million. The data reveals that there are 64.28 million cellular mobile connections in the country, meaning there are more SIM cards than people in the country. Additionally, 24.11 million individuals, or 44 percent of the total population, are internet users, and 18.50 million have social media accounts.[18]

Recent independent assessments suggest the DataReportal figures may underestimate the impact of post-coup internet restrictions. While mobile penetration remains high, effective internet access has been compromised by SAC-imposed shutdowns, bandwidth throttling, and

content blocking in many conflict-affected areas. This has created a digital divide between urban centers with relatively stable connectivity and rural areas where access is intermittent or severely limited.

Social media campaigns and targeted outreach

It is important to note that Myanmar has a unique relationship with social media, particularly Facebook, which for many years has been synonymous with "the internet" for many Myanmar users. Even before the widespread adoption of smartphones, many people used Facebook-enabled feature phones, and the platform remains the dominant social media channel in the country despite post-coup restrictions. This dominant position makes Facebook particularly valuable for EORE outreach, as messages can reach populations that might not access other internet platforms.

Social media platforms offer multiple advantages for humanitarian actors: direct engagement with target audiences, broader reach, scalability in response to changing contexts, and cost-effectiveness compared to traditional in-person activities. For example, the Explosive Ordnance Risk Education in Myanmar Facebook page has shared key information to contaminated areas through Facebook's targeted advertising functionality, which allows posts to be targeted at users within highly specific geographic areas.[19]

Approaching trusted and credible media outlets is also crucial for influencing people's behaviors, as messages conveyed through these channels are more likely to be taken seriously and accepted by the audience. Given the evidence that media outlets have extensive audience reach, some HMA actors have established their relationship and partnership with some local media outlets from conflict-affected areas in dissemination of safety messages around the risks posed by landmines and other explosive ordnance.[20]

This allows them to reach a large and diverse range of audiences on social media platforms through analyzing the various demographic data such as age, gender, locations and interests, and ensure that the messages are tailored and delivered to the right audience. Media outlets can offer varieties of multimedia functionalities or contexts including videos, texts, images, audio, etc. to create more impactful and

persuasive messages. It could be observed that risk education messages delivered through coordinated campaigns by many media outlets at the same time using the multimedia contents are often more engaging, memorable, and compelling.

These various elements don't simply function as separate tools but interconnect to form a cohesive yet flexible assemblage. When internet shutdowns affect certain areas, the assemblage shifts emphasis to radio broadcasting. When carrying physical materials becomes dangerous, digital components intensify. This constant process of adaptation—territorializing certain connections while deterritorializing others—allows the assemblage to maintain effectiveness despite changing constraints.

Creating consistent messages informing of the risks across multiple platforms increases the likelihood of retention and reinforces the positive behavior change by the audience when they come across explosive ordnance. Particularly in Myanmar, social media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and influencing behaviors. Ads of specific posts are pinned and targeted with key safety messages and offer interactive engagement, such as discussions, feedback, comments, sharing posts. Overall, this enhances the intended reach and makes campaigns more impactful. Communicating EORE messages before, during and after emergencies or extreme weather events, using targeted Facebook ads, like those conducted for Cyclone Mocha in the Northwest region of the country, also proved a widely used method for delivering important, urgent or time-sensitive messages.

Radio and alternative communication methods

Conversely, there are a number of challenges in utilizing social media as a dissemination tool. Primarily, many areas are facing internet shutdowns, which make access to tools like Facebook or TikTok extremely difficult.[21] What other methods are then employed? One strategy is using local radio stations (or portable radio devices) for dissemination of tailored public service announcements run by local media outlets on explosive ordnance risk education. This can be an accessible medium not requiring internet access and can be used to reach those conflict-affected people in remote areas. This includes ethnic and religious minority groups who may not have consistent access to internet but are at most risk of frequent displacements/movements due to intensive fighting and

offensive military raids, particularly in the Southeast and Northwest regions of the country. For example, Karen Information Center (KIC), a local media group in the southeast of Myanmar, regularly broadcasts in S'gaw Karen language and includes landmine/UXO awareness PSAs as part of its coverage. Many other local radio stations do the same in their areas.[22] Local communities often trust in local radio stations and see them as a reliable source of information, as they are also part of the community and understand local issues and concerns. However, it is difficult to measure the exact number of audience reached by radio programs, and estimates must rely on agreed-upon sampling ratio within their coverage areas. Analysis on the effectiveness of local radio stations will still need to be explored and recorded.

Online education and mobile applications

Regarding the use of various innovative channels to reach a diverse target audience, it has been observed that the online self-learning course on EORE, which offers a certificate upon completion, is provided by e-learning university/digital learning platforms established by the generation of digital knowledge and Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) students, in cooperation and consultation with the country-based international mine action actor.[23] The CDM refers to the widespread movement of civil servants, educators, healthcare workers and others who refused to work under the military junta following the coup. Many CDM participants, including students, have since created alternative education platforms to continue learning despite being unable to attend formal institutions.

The course is developed in an interactive way with user-friendly functions together with videos, photos, articles, and quizzes, which can be easily accessed and completed via mobile devices both in Android and IOS versions without any limitations for those students and youths living in areas with high levels of explosive ordnance threats amid active armed conflicts. The course is designed to equip participants with knowledge about safe and unsafe behaviors, and encourage them to share these safety messages with their surrounding communities.

Various stakeholders have also utilized messaging applications to raise awareness. UNICEF utilizes a Viber channel called "Thuta Talk" (သုတစကားဝိုင်း) to disseminate important and timely information

to mothers, caregivers, and the most vulnerable communities in Myanmar. This platform is also used for dissemination of key information about landmine/UXO risks.[24] Using an interactive approach, this channel helps families stay safe and healthy through questions and quizzes, reaching around 36,637 subscribers, who also may forward content to friends and family members. In promoting awareness of the risks around explosive ordnance, UNICEF also uses U-Report, a digital community and innovative social messaging tool for young people, by young people. This platform allows them to raise their voices and share opinions on topics that matter to them.[25]

In addition to the above social media platforms, in 2018 an interactive Mine Risk Education/Explosive Ordnance Risk Education mobile phone application in Burmese language for iOS and Android platforms was developed to allow the dissemination of messages anywhere the app is used as well as support in-person EORE facilitation.[26] Originally developed in Burmese, it was later updated to include Jinghpaw, Shan, S'gaw Karen, and Ta'ang languages, focusing on the languages used in the most heavily contaminated areas. At the time, this application was one of the first of its kind developed globally, specifically for EORE dissemination, in local languages. While the active user-base of the app is limited in terms of large-scale utilization, it can be a powerful tool for facilitators, especially when they are not able to carry traditional materials such as flip charts, posters, flyers and other physical materials, due to security reasons.

Victim assistance (VA)

Victim assistance refers to the comprehensive support provided to individuals, families and communities affected by landmines and UXO. This includes ensuring the rights of victims are respected, providing access to emergency medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychological support, socio-economic opportunities, and addressing their needs across short, medium, and long-term timeframes.[27] A holistic victim assistance approach encompasses emergency and continuing medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial support, economic and social inclusion, capacity building, appropriate laws and policies, and robust data collection.

Given the current political and conflict landscape, it is not feasible for international mine action operators to conduct clearance or humanitarian demining in many affected areas. While EORE is crucial, it alone cannot guarantee the safety of affected people due to the numerous factors that influence behavior change and adhere to safe practices. Indiscriminate artillery shelling and airstrikes on civilian infrastructures and areas are major threats contributing to the rising number of victims, meaning that victim assistance structures and interventions are critical in the current time period in Myanmar.

In the years since the coup, the social protection system for persons with disabilities (PWD), including mine victims, is managed and provided for by state and government bodies and has deteriorated significantly on improving the quality of life. The collapse of administrative structures and the lack of technical support from international and national experts have prevented the successful strengthening of the national management and support bodies. Even before the coup, Myanmar lacked a centralized and national database for systematically collecting detailed information on victims, including the type, the severity of injuries, and the assistance they have received. This absence hindered the ability to fully understand the scope of the issue, tailor support services effectively, and inform policy makers in decision-making process to develop and implement effective victim assistance policies and strategies with evidence-based insights.

In response, communities have developed victim assistance assemblages that blend elements previously separated by institutional boundaries: emergency cash transfer networks operated through community trust systems, mobile prosthetic services that combine professional expertise with local accessibility, and hybrid care models that integrate formally trained medical professionals with community-based providers.

Emergency cash support and medical assistance

One intervention, which has been effectively employed since the coup in terms of VA, has been the disbursement of emergency cash support to victims. This covers transport and medical treatment costs immediately after an incident and has been crucial in saving lives. In conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, the health infrastructure has historically been poor, with transport being difficult and expensive, due

to the need to travel long distances to access care. Historically, this has been a challenge in ensuring victims of landmines or UXO to receive proper care. They may not be able to afford the costs to travel and pay for care. A cash intervention addresses this and allows an individual to cover initial costs, whether that be in SAC-run health facilities or in mobile or static health clinics run by resistance forces. These cash infusions are generally administered by local civil society or key community volunteers, people who have access to conflict-affected areas and are trusted by local community members.

One blast survivor from Sagaing Region, injured by explosive weapons and assisted through the same community networks that serve mine survivors, told these authors:

> I lost my right leg, from above the knee, due to damage to the main artery on 1st January 2024, after undergoing a major operation. The incident was caused by 60 mm mortar round which the SAC had fired near my village. We have been facing offensive military raids by SAC troops every four or five months. I was hospitalized at the local clinic immediately after the incident, and I survived thanks to the first aid provided by a female volunteer before I could reach the clinic, which took many hours. I am now in the recovery process, undergoing physical rehabilitation exercises. I want to express my gratitude to those who supported me with 500,000 MMK for my medical expenses. Though the amount is not huge, it has been really useful for our family during these difficult times as we have no income amid the ongoing conflict.[28]

This case illustrates how victim assistance assemblages operate through connections that cross conventional institutional boundaries—funds flow through informal networks rather than official channels, care combines professional knowledge with community-based approaches, and rehabilitation adapts formal protocols to mobile contexts.

Physical rehabilitation and prosthetic support

For example, in Hpa-an, Kayin State, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been running a rehabilitation center for

more than 20 years, providing prosthetic and rehab services to those in Southeast Myanmar. For those who are unable or unwilling to access SAC-controlled Hpa-an, the health department of the KNU, the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW), also runs a number of clinics in their areas. Post-coup, many of these efforts have been disrupted in places like Sagaing and Magwe, where a lack of resources on prosthetics and rehabilitation has previously existed. However, there are some organizations beginning to set up and operate mobile prosthetic workshops in high-risk areas such as Kayin, Kayah, Rakhine, Shan, Sagaing, as well as in the border areas of neighboring countries, staffed by trained local personnel who provide customized prosthetic legs to victims free of charge. 3D printing technology has also been employed in some of these contexts, opening up new opportunities to expand capacity to support victims, which may not have been previously possible.[29]

The capacity building programs to equip community-based volunteers with theoretical and practical knowledge of basic rehabilitation, prosthetic leg repair and referral mechanisms are also increasing. Meanwhile, the movements of mobile teams by large service providers to support victims in remote and hard-to-reach areas are restricted amid ongoing armed conflicts. Training local people from locally based organizations is the most sustainable way to deliver continuous support to victims. Therefore, a number of mine action actors are training frontline humanitarian workers and responders in basic first aid and trauma care techniques, in addition to their standardized EORE Training of Trainers (ToT).[30] In areas controlled by ethnic armed groups (Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations or EROs) or local defense forces, the deployment of mobile health units and the establishment of new static clinics, in some cases partly staffed by CDM doctors and nurses, have also been critical in supporting victims of explosive weapons.[31]

Livelihood support and mental health care

Additionally, a limited number of organizations also implement livelihood support or income-generating activities for mine victims and their families, aimed at fostering their economic recovery and overall well-being. Some organizations provide capacity-building and vocational trainings, such as handicrafts, agricultural techniques, and starting small businesses, with the purpose of fostering resilience of victims by equipping them with skills and resources to recover and rebuild their

lives. The typical grant sizes provided by organizations in the country range between 500,000 and 1,500,000 Myanmar kyat (MMK) (approximately 250-750 USD) and are meant to help a survivor start their own businesses or work in a trade. However, funding for long-term livelihood support is scarce, as a significant portion of the already meager resources available is prioritized for emergency life-saving interventions.[32]

Beyond physical injuries, the psychological impacts of explosive weapons incidents require specialized support. Many survivors experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other psychological conditions. Some initiatives have begun training victims in psychosocial support and psychological first aid, enabling peer-to-peer mental health support where survivors mentor and support new victims.

While virtual mental health programs are limited by internet accessibility issues, physical safe spaces where victims can share experiences are critical. However, the shortage of mental health professionals in Myanmar—exacerbated by the coup as many have fled, joined the CDM, or cannot practice openly due to security concerns—means such spaces remain few and far between.[33]

Clearance and community-led responses

Clearance encompasses all technical operations involved in detecting, identifying, and removing or destroying explosive threats from designated areas, ultimately returning the land to safe civilian use. Importantly, "humanitarian clearance" is more comprehensive than military-focused clearance, which may only clear areas needed for specific military objectives. Prior to the 2021 coup, no formal humanitarian clearance of explosive threats occurred in Myanmar, despite some progress in discussions between the mine action sector, the Department of Social Welfare, and the Tatmadaw. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent coup halted any further advancement.

The post-coup situation created a particularly challenging environment regarding contamination: no formal clearance capacity or experience existed in-country while contamination rapidly increased in both scale and geographic spread. Large populations were displaced

into new areas or, more recently, returning to contaminated areas of origin as resistance forces pushed back the SAC.

Despite the absence of formal humanitarian clearance capacity, various ad-hoc efforts have emerged throughout Myanmar. These are often undertaken by resistance forces—whether EROs, PDFs, or civilians. Documentation shows local villagers or resistance members improvising clearance by digging out anti-personnel mines with knives or even bare hands. In Northern Shan State, one ERO was filmed using a mechanical digger smashing its bucket into the ground to detonate anti-personnel blast mines around a village.[34] These courageous but extremely dangerous efforts reflect communities' desperation to address the threat using whatever tools and knowledge are available.

The clearance initiatives that have emerged represent particularly striking examples of assemblages under extreme pressure. These combine technical knowledge gleaned from diverse sources, locally available tools, and community risk-sharing practices to create makeshift but functioning clearance systems where formal humanitarian demining cannot operate.

One local civilian deminer in Kayah State named Phoe Zaw, who received no formal training, told Britain's Channel 4 News after removing an anti-personnel blast mine:

"I'm really happy I found it, and I'm proud that I've done it. I've saved a civilian from losing a leg." When asked about the risks, he stated:

> Yes of course, I keep thinking about getting injured by a landmine. But what does it matter, if I lose a leg, I have to continue doing this job. As long as I am alive, I will continue doing this for my people.[35]

STRATEGIC ADAPTATIONS AND FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Myanmar's landmine and UXO problem is grim: increasing contamination, limited risk education, scarce victim assistance, and almost no survey or clearance operations. Yet civilians, civil society, and

resistance groups have crafted innovative ways to lessen these weapons' impact on communities. Their approaches are practical and resourceful, often created with minimal outside help.

These grassroots efforts underscore the desperate need for more resources supporting local responses. When funding, training, and equipment reach local actors, they can better tackle the devastating effects of explosive weapons themselves. A few key possibilities stand out:

Local leaders who know their communities can make a real difference. In heavily mined regions like Sagaing and Magwe, the National Unity Government (NUG) and its local representatives are often well positioned to deliver EORE and victim support. Their deep community ties make people listen when they speak. In Southeast Myanmar, we've already seen how working with alternative government bodies helps reach more people with life-saving information and support.

Popular social media figures who command large followings could be powerful allies. Influencers with massive audiences have already backed the resistance movement and could share crucial safety messages, reaching people who tune out traditional warnings. Their trusted voices might actually change how their followers behave around dangerous areas.

Digital approaches show promise but require ongoing adjustments in this volatile environment. We must keep tracking what works, refining methods, and building local capacity. Digital tools should add to—not replace—in-person outreach, especially in Myanmar, where internet service is spotty and frequently cut by military authorities. When the SAC tightened VPN restrictions in June 2024, adding to the Facebook ban in force since February 2021, it forced everyone to rethink digital strategies entirely.

Documenting and sharing knowledge matter enormously. EORE teams need to analyze their results, share what works, and create guidelines others can use. This exchange drives innovation in Myanmar's challenging environment. We have noticed that internet and phone usage differ significantly between men and women—one digital campaign

reached 80 percent men and just 20 percent women, showing we need targeted approaches based on who uses these technologies.

Finally, international organizations must better understand and support community-based clearance and victim assistance efforts. Throughout post-coup Myanmar, local humanitarian responses are often better placed than outside interventions—and sometimes they're the only option available. International donors and agencies should channel more funding and support to these local solutions.

CONCLUSION

Myanmar's post-coup reality has pushed humanitarian workers to find inventive approaches to explosive threats. From Facebook campaigns to traveling prosthetics clinics, from village-level clearance teams to online training, these adaptations represent crucial responses to extraordinary challenges. Many might work in other conflict zones where traditional humanitarian access has been blocked.

Explosive contamination is likely to worsen as the fighting spreads. This means continually reassessing threats and developing more effective responses. Even with these innovations, the problem grows as conflict expands across the country. This worsening crisis demands ongoing threat assessment, creative problem-solving, and stronger coordination between all parties involved in mine action. These efforts offer the best chance to protect people under challenging circumstances.

Making mine action work remains challenging, especially in active conflict zones where the military junta imposes harsh, unpredictable restrictions. While this chapter outlines some current responses to explosive remnants of war, more research is urgently needed to understand both their effectiveness and how this crisis will affect Myanmar for generations to come.

The explosive ordnance response networks that emerged after the coup demonstrate how communities create alternatives when official systems fail. Unlike centralized bureaucratic institutions, these decentered assemblages adapt quickly, combining diverse elements that accomplish more together than any single approach could manage on its own.

NOTE

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ENDNOTES

[1] Assemblage theory draws primarily from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), and later developed by DeLanda (2016). It provides a framework for understanding how heterogeneous elements come together to form functional wholes that maintain flexibility and adaptability. See references.

[2] For more information on this, see 'A History of Landmines' by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) - http://www.icbl.org/en-gb/problem/a-history-of-landmines.aspx

[3] The full name of the treaty is "the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction." For full text of the treaty see: https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/8DF-9CC31A4CA8B32C12571C7002E3F3E/$file/APLC+English.pdf. While non-state armed groups cannot be party to the Mine Ban

Treaty, there are alternatives, such as the Geneva Call Deeds of Commitment.

[4] Prior to the coup in Myanmar, HALO Trust, NPA, MAG, Humanity & Inclusion, DCA, and DRC-HDP actively worked on risk education, victim assistance, and survey-related projects; clearance and stockpile destruction were prohibited.

[5] See the 2022 ICBL Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor Report for Burma/Myanmar.

[6] While surveillance systems have improved in recent years, it is still likely that civilians in remote areas of Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states are injured or killed by landmines or ERW, and this information is never reported to higher authorities or media. This is due to geographic remoteness and poor internet connectivity.

[7] Statistics on casualties are regularly published by UNICEF and the Mine Risk Working Group; for the latest data see: https://themimu.info/sector/mine-action.

[8] For a detailed review of how communities are impacted by ERW, see the 2012 KHRG report 'Uncertain Ground', available here: https://khrg.org/sites/khrg.org/files/khrg1201.pdf.

[9] Landmine Monitor Report. (2023). https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Landmine_Monitor_Report_Dec2023_ENG.pdf.

[10] Extensive use of IEDs by PDFs in the Dry Zone has led to various strategies by the SAC to disrupt their use, including the use of jamming technologies (Myanmar Now, 2023).

[11] International Campaign to Ban LandminesCluster Munition Coalition. (2023, August). Cluster munition production and use in Myanmar/Burma. https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2023/08/31/cluster-munition-production-and-use-in-myanmar-burma/. Local community groups also reported photographic evidence to the authors of attacks in Karen areas of Southeast Myanmar; it appears these cluster bombs are repurposed mortar shells packed in casing.

[12] For example, the Landmine Monitor Report for Myanmar (2017) only mentions suspected hazardous areas in one township in Sagaing Region (Indaw) and none in Magwe; see https://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Landmine_Monitor_Report_2017_ENG.pdf

[13] For more information on the five pillars, please see: https://www.unmas.org/en/5-pillars-of-mine-action

[14] For more information and the full list of IMAS available, please see: https://www.mineactionstandards.org/about-imas/

[15] For the full IMAS document on EORE, please see: https://www.mineactionstandards.org/standards/12-10/

[16] The MRWG met regularly at the Union level in Naypyitaw, and at the State/Region level.

[17] For one example of this phenomenon, please see "Our health workers are working in fear; After Myanmar's military coup, one year of targeted violence against health care." Physicians for Human Rights (January 2022).

[18] DataReportal. (2024, January). Digital 2024: Myanmar. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-myanmar

[19] For a compilation of digital EORE initiatives, see the Explosive Ordnance Risk Education in Myanmar Facebook page, UNICEF's Thuta Talk channel, and the MRE App.

[20] For an example of a post related to landmine risk awareness by local media, please see here: https://fb.watch/t16zqFEWz_/

[21] Access Now. (2023). Myanmar: Keep It On internet shutdowns 2023. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/myanmar-keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2023-en/

[22] For more information see the Radio Karen website, run by KIC: https://radiokaren.org/schedule/

[23] Spring University: https://sumlearn.springuniversitymm.com/

[24] See the Thuta Talk Viber channel, administered by UNICEF (reference list under UNICEF Myanmar).

[25] For more information on the U-Report tool, please see: https://ureport.in/

[26] For more information or to download the application for iOS or Android, see: https://mreapp.org/

[27] For comprehensive guidelines on victim assistance approaches, see UNMAS IMAS 13.10.

[28] Interview with the authors, February 2024.

[29] For information on humanitarian healthcare initiatives including 3D-printed prosthetics, see: https://www.3dnatives.com/en/3d-printing-revolutionizes-prosthetic-care-for-amputees-myanmar-border-180420246/

[30] Based on the authors' engagement with mine action operators, at least six organizations are actively training local first responders on these topics, throughout Myanmar.

[31] For a detailed description of how CDM medical personnel are bringing their capacity and experience to resistance-run facilities, please see: https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-cdm-doctor-performing-brain-surgery-amid-the-bullets/

[32] There is little information publicly available on the employment of these programs in the post-coup context; these authors are aware of a few programs, but the scope is extremely limited.

[33] For more on the severe lack of mental health services in post-coup Myanmar, please see: https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/its-heartbreaking-myanmars-mental-healthcare-vacuum/

[34] Radio Free Asia, n.d.

[35] For this clip from the full Channel 4 documentary, please see: https://x.com/channel4news/status/1800836131275104445?s=61&t=rXeYQJ8gFHKTNEA0gwyWrg

CHAPTER 2

DIGITAL REPRESSION: MOBILE MONEY SURVEILLANCE IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

Bradley, Gar Gar & Vox

ABSTRACT

Mobile money and banking systems have become an integral part of daily life in post-pandemic Myanmar. However, following the military coup in February 2021, these systems have been transformed into instruments of surveillance and control, enabling the junta to monitor transactions, seize assets of those supporting resistance efforts, and arrest dissidents. This research examines how the military junta's regulation of mobile money usage has created a pervasive surveillance assemblage, its impact on users, and the emergence of alternative financial assemblages in response. The digital financial landscape has become a critical battleground in Myanmar's struggle between techno-authoritarianism and techno-democracy, with the military junta advancing from traditional surveillance methods to a more encompassing networked strategy. This shift includes strategic cooperation with telecom companies and banks, significantly enhancing surveillance capabilities through what we describe as post-panoptic surveillance systems characterized by decentralized, multi-nodal monitoring integrating various data sources. The research also explores the creative responses and lines of flight developed by communities to circumvent repression, including parallel financial systems, encrypted communications, and alternative payment networks. Despite severe security constraints that limited our research methods, the results provide valuable insights into how Myanmar's communities are assembling and reassembling financial practices in response to state failure, often transforming rather than abandoning professional financial standards in the process. For many, participation

in these alternative financial assemblages represents not just survival but also an act of political resistance against authoritarian control.

Keywords: digital repression, finance sector, mobile payments, digital coup, surveillance, assemblage, post-panopticism

INTRODUCTION

Mobile money and banking systems have become an integral part of daily life in post-pandemic Myanmar. Following the military coup on February 1, 2021, however, these systems have been weaponized against citizens. As one 23-year-old respondent recounted: "Right after my mobile money account was frozen, my home got raided, my family had to legally disown me. After that, I also lost all my IDs and documents." Hers is among the more than 18,000 accounts that leaked junta documents suggest were frozen in the 18 months to December 2022 (The Irrawaddy, 2023).

The policing of mobile money and bank accounts is among the many consequences of the February 2021 coup and the subsequent rise of armed resistance. The military junta has vigorously attempted to suppress funding efforts for the anti-junta resistance. This effort has resulted in the freezing of thousands of bank accounts, significantly impacting citizens and leading to numerous personal tragedies.

This study aims to unravel the surveillance mechanisms and the motivations behind the military regime's actions in the financial sector. It focuses on how the policing of mobile money has been used as a strategy, and its implications for account holders. Lastly, we offer some thoughts on how Myanmar citizens might respond to the surveillance and controls placed on their banking and financial transactions.

Myanmar citizens are currently grappling with unprecedented surveillance, censorship, and legal repercussions for expressing themselves digitally. According to Freedom House's 2023 report, Myanmar is the second-most repressed country in terms of internet freedom (Freedom House, 2023). This reflects a global trend where authoritarian regimes actively work to divide the internet into oppressive

segments (Shahbaz et al., 2022), using techniques of digital repression which include surveillance, censorship, internet shutdowns, targeted persecutions of online users, and dissemination of manipulated information and disinformation (New Digital Dilemmas, 2023). Frequent internet shutdowns imposed by the junta, particularly targeting mobile internet, have severely crippled access to essential online financial services (EngageMedia, 2022).

Digital financial repression sits within the broader menu of the junta's coercive tactics. The Myanmar regime's stranglehold on digital spaces is not an isolated incident but part of a larger, more concerning trend of digital repression across the globe. The situation in Myanmar serves as a stark reminder of the extent to which authoritarian regimes can go to curtail freedom and dissent in the digital age.

As digital rights researchers, we aim to explore the less-reported procedures, consequences, and impacts of these surveillance mechanisms. This brought us to the specific issue of policing mobile money, its underlying causes and impact. This resulting paper is based on key informant interviews with victims, surveillance experts, economic experts, and mobile money agents, supplemented by publicly available reports, analyses, and media resources. Our hope is for this paper to serve as a preliminary knowledge base for further exploration into this issue.

METHODOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

This research draws on qualitative interviews conducted with a diverse group of key informants, including victims, economic experts, surveillance specialists, and financial agents, to capture the complex nature of the issue. A total of 10 key expert interviews were carried out. The study employed a qualitative research methodology to uncover not only the events themselves but also the underlying narratives, motivations, and structural causes that shape them.

This research was conducted under the conditions of a repressive regime, which imposed significant restrictions on our ability to interview key stakeholders due to security and sensitivity concerns. We faced considerable challenges in finding and engaging with critical stakeholder groups such as legal experts and banking personnel. The

harsh surveillance environment necessitated the development of innovative research methods that prioritized participant safety.

In keeping with the security-first orientation of this volume, we developed encrypted interview techniques that minimized digital traces, protecting our sources from potential reprisals. When evidence emerged of account freezes among mobile money users, we adapted our research protocols to ensure secure communication with participants, often using multiple channels and coded language. The same flexibility we saw in financial assemblages shaped our own research methods, which had to bend to authoritarian constraints.

POLICING MOBILE MONEY AS LOW-HANGING FRUIT

The underlying motivation behind the severe actions against mobile money users is twofold: to impose high-impact punishment on pro-revolution entities, and to reinforce the surveillance ecosystem. This dual purpose illustrates how the junta has assembled various elements—legal frameworks, technological systems, and institutional cooperation—into a powerful apparatus of control.

The junta, with its control over state institutions including major internet service providers and banking systems, has worked diligently to cut off funding to resistance groups. Monitoring transactions and cash flows has become a priority for them, as it presents a low-effort, high-impact strategy. This represents what the volume introduction describes as the "blurring of historical political dynamics," where traditional centralized control mechanisms are being reinforced with new, networked surveillance capabilities.

Prior to the 2021 coup, Myanmar had experienced a remarkable transformation in its financial landscape, effectively leapfrogging traditional banking development stages. Following widespread internet and mobile phone availability around 2017, the country rapidly adopted digital financial services, bypassing the traditional credit and debit card phase that many other nations experienced (Loughnane, 2017). This digital leap was crucial for individuals historically excluded from formal banking, especially those in rural areas. By 2019, one industry account put mobile money market penetration as high as 80 percent

(Kyaw, 2022), though survey-based estimates of adoption were far lower; smartphone penetration surged to 80 percent by 2018—a figure that remarkably surpassed that of the United States at the time (Oxford Business Group, 2020).

The mobile banking market featured several key players, including Wave Money (a joint venture between Norwegian Telenor and local Yoma Bank), KBZPay (developed by Myanmar's largest private bank), M-Pitesan (a collaboration between Qatari Ooredoo and CB Bank), along with TrueMoney, OK Dollar, and Ongo. These platforms offered services ranging from person-to-person transfers and bill payments to merchant transactions via QR codes and airtime top-ups. Some innovative platforms, such as AGD Bank's Onepay, even allowed users to register without possessing a traditional bank account, significantly expanding access for the unbanked population.

Following the coup, the junta's monitoring of mobile money transactions evolved rapidly, demonstrating how quickly new surveillance assemblages can form when authoritarian power consolidates control over previously separate systems. The initial instances of freezing mobile wallets and bank accounts, as reported by the media, date back to early August 2021: the earliest individual report appeared on August 6, 2021 (CDM Medical Network, 2021), followed on August 9 by the freezing of a KBZPay account that was crowdfunding assistance for internally displaced people in Karenni region (Myanmar Pressphoto Agency, 2021). Anonymous sources claim that the scrutiny of banking transactions started even earlier, as soon as one week after the coup, with private finance institutions being required to submit transactions data daily (Nyane & Lipes, 2021; RFA, 2021).

On August 13, 2021, the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) issued a directive instructing banks, financial service institutions, and mobile money service providers to closely monitor and report any transactions suspected of involvement in the Spring Lottery fundraising organized by the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) (Khit Thit Media, 2021). The "Spring Lottery" was a fundraising initiative organized by the NUG, Myanmar's parallel civilian government formed in opposition to the military junta. The NUG was established in April 2021 by elected lawmakers who were ousted in the February coup,

along with representatives from ethnic minority groups and civil society. The lottery was designed to raise funds for the NUG's operations, including support for civil disobedience movements and resistance efforts against the military regime. By monitoring transactions linked to this lottery, the junta aimed to cut off financial support to the resistance and identify those sympathetic to the opposition movement.

The vice-chairman of the CBM on August 17, 2021, announced on national television a close monitoring of mobile money wallets and financial activities. The bank also issued a warning against funding terrorist organizations and threatened financial institutions if they failed to report and comply with authorities (Nyane & Lipes, 2021).

Alleged meeting minutes from the Central Committee for Counter-Terrorism (CCCT), supposedly from December 2022, reported the closure of over 18,000 accounts in an 18-month period (The Irrawaddy, 2023). The state newspaper reported the freezing, closure, and seizure of accounts suspected of being linked to money laundering, violence, and financial support (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2022).

DIRE CONSEQUENCES AND PUNISHMENTS

The freeze or closure of mobile money accounts can be seen as one part of a broader surveillance assemblage deployed by the junta. This assemblage combines various elements—legal frameworks, financial monitoring, physical raids, and asset seizures—into a coordinated strategy of repression that exacts a significant psychological toll on those caught in its web. A common pattern emerged from our interviews: within six months of bank service termination, respondents said authorities often conduct raids on the addresses registered with the banks. This demonstrates the direct integration of digital financial surveillance with physical state violence, using know your customer (KYC) data to locate individuals for repression.

A significant number of these raids result in the seizure of immovable property assets. Some cases even escalate to imprisonment, or in some situations, victims are forced into exile or go underground to avoid arrest. These consequences highlight what the volume introduction describes as the "unprecedented scale of threats" facing Myanmar's citizens since the coup.

To evade asset seizure, victims may have to legally disassociate themselves from their properties, which can lead to estrangement from their families. The victims that manage to avoid arrest are typically forced into exile or hiding, while being charged under Sections 50(a) and/or 50(j) of the Counter-Terrorism Law.

Sections 50(a) and 50(j) of Myanmar's Counter-Terrorism Law are provisions frequently used by the junta to target those suspected of supporting resistance movements. Section 52 criminalizes involvement with an organization designated as a "terrorist group" by the regime (such as the NUG, People's Defence Forces [PDFs], or Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw [CRPH]), Section 50(a) covers acts of terrorism against the public, and Section 50(j) prohibits financing of such organizations or their activities. These provisions carry severe penalties, including imprisonment for terms ranging from 10 years to life, and possible confiscation of all assets. The junta has broadly applied these sections, particularly 50(j), to anyone suspected of financial transactions supporting the NUG or other resistance organizations, using transaction history as direct evidence. The ambiguous wording of these provisions allows for wide interpretation, enabling the junta to target individuals with minimal evidence of actual support for resistance activities.

The aftermath of these actions severely limits the freedom of movement for the wanted victims, especially for those who are forced underground. This is due to their voided identity documents, such as National Registration Identity Cards (NRIC), which are required for local and international travel since all of these data are associated and verified with the Mobile Wallet Account along with phone numbers due to "know your customer" (KYC) mandates and mandatory SIM registration.

In some instances, the junta freezes or closes mobile money accounts as a means of persecuting dissenters. Those targeted, like journalists, find their mobile money and banking accounts suspended under the guise of the anti-money laundering law.

In one case, a journalist found all his accounts (KBZPay, Wave Money, and others) suddenly suspended, preventing him from logging in.

He believes he was targeted due to his profession. "I was framed! Everyone knows that I'm a journalist. My colleagues and I were not alone. Everyone in our office had their assets seized" (KII-04).

Now in exile, he faces charges under Section 50(j) of the Counter-Terrorism Law. He believed the action against him was directed from Naypyidaw and was linked to his journalism rather than to his mobile money activity alone. In 2022, his colleagues at the major media house where he worked also experienced similar persecution, with their assets being frozen.

Another journalist, KII-02, reflected on a similar experience during 2023. She noted that everyone in her office had their accounts suspended. She suspects this was due to her employment at a specific media house. "I think it's because I work at [omitted]. Everyone at the office got their accounts suspended" (KII-02).

Unfortunately, victims in some cases were deprived of their identities and nationalities or faced harsh sentences. The junta is known for making extreme threats. During a press conference on September 20, 2022, a junta spokesperson threatened potential death sentences for those providing financial assistance to resistance movements.

NO NOTIFICATION, NO REDEMPTION

The direst consequences for users normally come from sudden, unannounced account freezes, along with service providers not resolving inquiries and issues through their customer support channels. This institutional behavior represents what assemblage theory would identify as a deliberate strategy to maintain uncertainty and fear, reinforcing the effectiveness of the surveillance apparatus. This practice of "silent abandonment" functions as a tactic amplifying the repressive effect, maximizing the psychological impact by denying users information and recourse, instilling fear and a sense of powerlessness.

One of the major mobile money service providers, KBZPay, within their privacy policy, reserves the right to terminate service with or without notice to the customer. Keeping true to their policy, users are not informed about the suspension of the account through SMS, email

or the mobile banking application. Users reported that account freezing is discreet in nature and that many of the features such as checking balance and login functions are still available after being suspended.

> You cannot know exactly when your account is frozen, because you can still sign in/log in with your username and password, check balance and everything. Only when you try to complete a transaction will the app notify through a pop-up box that your account has been suspended. At first (when this happened), they replied to my emails, but after a while, I was altogether neglected. (KII-03)

Users are only informed and become aware of the account suspension when attempting to make a transaction using the application, even though adequate minimum support from the bank such as proper notification would still be in compliance with their privacy policy.

The bank call centers responded to users about the account suspensions in accordance with the directives issued by the Central Bank of Myanmar. The usual response from the banks was to tell users to contact the Central Bank of Myanmar; there was no support from the banks in terms of these referrals. "Well, so I called the next day asking them how to contact the Central Bank, and they said they don't know how" (KII-02).

This systematic lack of transparency and accountability represents what the volume introduction describes as "active obstruction of essential aid and a disregard for civilian welfare," making the development of community self-reliance critically necessary.

UNILATERAL AMENDMENT OF LEGAL PROVISIONS

The junta has unilaterally rewritten laws, bylaws, and regulations to give itself unfettered access to user data. This legal assemblage forms the foundation for the broader surveillance system, providing formal justification for what is essentially political repression.

The digital rights expert interviewed for this study said:

> We had (surveillance) infrastructure even before the coup, like social media monitoring team and AI CCTV under the guise of smart city projects, but back then we had legal protections like privacy laws, and we could use these for some level of protection. (KII-09)

Prior to the coup, therefore, strengthening the surveillance framework was already in motion. Some regulations, such as mandatory SIM registration, were initiated by the civilian government in 2019 (Myanmar Now, 2020). Social media monitoring teams also were budgeted with opaque transparency (RFA, 2018). The junta inherited and significantly intensified the enforcement of this existing SIM registration framework, repurposing a tool initially developed for digital governance into one enabling widespread political repression.

Moreover, the 2014 Anti-Money Laundering Law and Counter-Terrorism Law set a framework for policy making in the financial sector—defining KYC requirements, the formation of the Central Body, Financial Investigation Unit and the Central Committee (later known as CCCT), along with their duties and functions in scrutinizing, compiling, maintaining, and disseminating data, and in seizing, obstructing, controlling, freezing, and searching properties and assets. These legislative and policy frameworks took on a sudden and drastically stepped-up momentum after the February 2021 coup.

In less than three weeks, two existing laws were amended. On February 13, 2021, the Law Protecting the Privacy and Security of Citizens (2017) was altered, suspending key sections (5, 7, and 8) which removed requirements for civilian witnesses during searches, safeguards against indefinite detention, and prohibitions against warrantless surveillance, communication interception, and demanding data from telecom operators (Tilleke & Gibbins, 2021). This dismantled fundamental rights and privacy protections. Subsequently, an amendment to the Electronic Transaction Law on February 15, 2021, allowed broad exceptions for the regime's interception of personal data and restrictions on various types of online information (Free Expression Myanmar, 2021; MCRB, 2021). These rapid changes laid the legal groundwork for arbitrary surveillance and repression.

Moreover, in addition to legislative amendments, the junta has progressively tightened its grip on communication channels. Mandatory SIM card registration has been a key strategy in this endeavor. SIM card registration began in 2019 during the civilian government tenure and it became even more rigorous following the sale of the telecom company Telenor to the Lebanon-owned M1 Group (partnered with military-linked local conglomerate Shwe Byain Phyu) in March 2022, subsequently rebranded as Atom (Mizzima, 2022; Freedom House, 2024). Similarly, Ooredoo completed its sale to Nine Communications, also reportedly linked to the military, in May 2024 (Freedom House, 2024). These sales consolidated the junta's control over critical communications infrastructure, removing operators potentially constrained by international norms. In September 2022, the Ministry of Transport and Communication announced the termination of unregistered SIM cards and verification with an e-ID system (RFA, 2022). SIM registration is still an ongoing effort by the junta, with multiple announcements and threats of imprisonment continuing through the end of 2023 (Ayeyarwaddy Times, 2023).

Other significant actions included the introduction of further restrictions on KYC requirements in August 2022 by the Central Bank of Myanmar (RFA Burmese, 2022). Alongside mandatory registration with an ID (including photos of the NRIC), the directive included instructions for mobile money agents to record personal information of the customer (including name, NRIC details, address, phone number, reason for transaction) and to install a CCTV system or take photos of transacting individuals (Lincoln Legal Services, 2022). Crucially, these rules mandated the collection of biometric data in the form of live facial photos (Face ID) (Lincoln Legal Services, 2022). On September 9, 2022, the Central Bank of Myanmar announced the verification of KYC information with the existing e-ID database and SIM registration database and the permanent termination of unverified Mobile Wallet accounts (Ayeyarwaddy Times, 2022).

A significant development was the enhancement of interception capabilities through various post-coup regulations. In March 2023 the CCCT promulgated lawful-interception provisions as Chapter 14 (articles 79–85) of the Counter-Terrorism Law by-laws, which, together with the regulations on obtaining communications (2022), significantly

expanded the junta's powers (Myint, 2023). These allow various security bodies to intercept, block, and restrict mobile communications and demand extensive user data based on broad criteria, potentially enabling triangulation of users (Article 19, 2024; Myint, 2023). Telecom providers were ordered to install intercept spyware (Article 19, 2024).

POST-PANOPTIC SURVEILLANCE

The changes amplify and help further enable mass surveillance and the systemic repression of users. The broad provisions of these laws, coupled with the absence of data and legal protection frameworks, have enabled a pervasive system of state surveillance. From a contemporary surveillance theory perspective, the convergence of previously separate surveillance systems and a significant increase in surveillance capacity, involving coordination between state and private actors, are key characteristics of a post-panopticon strategy (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022).

Unlike the traditional panopticon model (Bentham/Foucault) focused on centralized observation, the junta's approach embodies a post-panoptic model characterized by decentralized, multi-nodal monitoring. This system functions through numerous interconnected points and "centers of calculation" (Deleuze & Guattari as cited in Galič, et al., 2017) rather than a single, visible watchtower. In Myanmar's context, this involves the integration of previously separate surveillance systems—including biometric data centers, electronic ID databases, SIM registration records, mobile money transaction logs, communication intercepts, and even physical CCTV at agent locations—allowing both government and private actors (like banks and telecoms acting under duress or complicity) to monitor citizens from multiple angles simultaneously. This creates a more pervasive surveillance ecosystem that is harder to evade, as it relies on distributed, networked monitoring that can share and cross-reference information, blending low-tech methods like checkpoints with sophisticated digital controls.

This strategy extends beyond policing mobile money to include initiatives like the mandatory change of national IDs to Smart Cards, further indicating a broader strategy to increase surveillance capability through data integration.

MONEY TRAILS

Policing mobile money is part of the junta's broader surveillance framework. As usage data is usually the result of interactions on the given platforms, traditional institutions such as banks retain and verify data more intensively to prevent abuse, fraud, tax evasion, criminal activity, and money laundering. Verification and authentication processes with the banking and financial services are critically supported by a form of verification known as KYC or Know Your Customer/Client. Moreover, usage data with financial services are usually retained.

Since the coup, KYC requirements have become more stringent and scrutinized. An unnamed source told RFA that banks submit their online and offline submissions daily and monthly (RFA, 2023a). Transactions are monitored and scrutinized based on the amount and frequency, with an escalation procedure framework in place, such as automatic flagging. It is reported that this scrutiny and monitoring of transactions began as early as February 2021 (Nyane & Lipes, 2021; RFA, 2021).

The KYC process for Mobile Wallets requires national identification documents or passports, biometric data like in-app photographs of the user (and now mandatory live facial photos), and a phone number linked via mandatory SIM registration. This strengthens user verification and provides access to potentially sensitive data such as call records, communication content, online activities, and approximate real-time location through SIM triangulation enabled by enhanced interception capabilities.

According to a 2023 report from Radio Free Asia, banks operating within Myanmar are required to submit detailed transaction data to the Central Bank of Myanmar on both a daily and monthly basis. The junta has implemented an escalation procedure framework with automatic flagging systems for transactions deemed suspicious based on amount and frequency. Bank insiders reported that accounts engaging in 10 or more daily transactions or those involved in transfers exceeding 2 million kyats (MMK) were automatically flagged for separate scrutiny (RFA, 2023a). These internal monitoring triggers operate alongside official transaction limits imposed by the CBM, which have been subject to change; regulations updated in June 2024, for instance, capped daily

person-to-person transfers via mobile platforms at 5 million kyats and person-to-merchant payments at 10 million kyats, with mobile money account balances capped at 10 million kyats (DFDL, 2024). The potential discrepancy between internal monitoring triggers and publicly stated limits, coupled with frequent regulatory adjustments, fosters an environment of significant uncertainty for users. Users have noted that the frequency and pattern of transactions are often seen as suspicious. "If you do a certain number of repetitive transactions, let's say, at the start of each month, then surely they'll take notice." —KII-01

The junta closely monitors sender and receiver data. Some interviewees reported security incidents like the arrest of payee account holders, followed by their own accounts being frozen.

Fundraising organizers use basic operational security tactics such as keeping their mobile money account off publicly available social media posts. In these situations, the junta has identified mobile money accounts by approaching fundraising organizers, donating small amounts of money, and using the transaction as evidence. One interviewee who coordinates crowdfunding programs for political detainees reported a similar case before their bank account was frozen. "That one account contacted our page, and I gave them my account number. They donated 1,000 MMK, and soon after, my account was frozen." —KII-01

The system also monitors and scrutinizes transaction record descriptions. User complaints suggest keyword flagging of description records, but our interviewees could not confirm if having a plausible description or a lack thereof significantly impacted account freezes.

CASH RESURGENCE

> I'm not sure about freezing bank accounts and their procedures, but there's already a lack of trust in financial institutions because of a lot of factors (KII-08).

Prior to the 2013-14 telecom liberalization, Myanmar's entire economy functioned on a cash basis. However, with the rapid spread of the internet and mobile phones after 2014, Myanmar bypassed the traditional evolution of money markets. The country skipped the credit

and debit card phase and transitioned from using banknotes directly to digital money (Loughnane, 2017). Mobile money became an accessible financial service, playing a pivotal role in addressing the challenges faced by those unserved by traditional financial institutions, particularly in rural areas. People started using their mobile payment wallets to manage their finances instead of going to traditional banks. As a result, Myanmar's mobile money wallet market saw considerable growth from a very low base after 2016 (Kyaw, 2022).

However, following the junta's seizure of power in February 2021, public trust in the government and banking sectors was severely damaged. Fearful for their savings, people began withdrawing money from ATMs. This panic triggered cash shortages and led to mobile wallet agents charging additional fees for cash withdrawals (The Irrawaddy, 2021). According to one interviewee: "The cash shortage problem was challenging. I used to pay salaries to my staff through a bank payroll, but people couldn't withdraw cash from ATMs." —KII-10

Despite the rapid advancement of digital technology and the global trend toward establishing cashless societies, Myanmar's economy has reverted partially to being cash-based due to the failure of the banking system. This regression was exacerbated by several countrywide internet shutdowns, interoperability limitations, and a lack of accountability from private banks.

This return to cash represents what assemblage theory would call a "line of flight"—a pathway of escape and transformation that allows communities to evade digital surveillance. By reverting to physical currency, users create spaces outside the digital surveillance apparatus, demonstrating the adaptability that the volume introduction identifies as characteristic of post-coup assemblages.

PARALLEL FINANCIAL SYSTEMS

The military junta is imposing disproportionate penalties on those who refuse to participate in their state surveillance system. Citizens are resisting and finding ways to circumvent these measures through what the volume introduction describes as "adaptive practices" that create alternative assemblages. The abrupt restrictions on mobile money

usage and suspensions of mobile wallets and bank accounts have led to the exploration of alternative solutions that blend professional financial knowledge with community networks and digital tools.

To evade the junta's surveillance, diaspora populations are resorting to *Hundi* services to transfer money into the country (informal moneylenders operating across borders). However, this is increasingly risky, as the CBM and junta authorities actively crack down on Hundi operators, investigating transactions, freezing accounts, and prosecuting individuals involved (The Irrawaddy, 2024; GNLM, 2024). Other alternatives include crypto-based platforms like NUG Pay and centralized exchanges like Binance. However, these come with their own set of challenges related to financial precarity and technical limitations.

NUG Pay is an alternative payment platform launched by the National Unity Government (NUG). The platform utilizes a digital form of the Myanmar kyat and incorporates blockchain technology to provide a secure and harder-to-trace means for receiving funds, effectively bypassing the junta's pervasive surveillance network. Transactions on NUG Pay are facilitated through QR codes, eliminating the need for users to disclose sensitive personal information such as phone or account numbers, thereby enhancing privacy and security. The NUG also established the Spring Development Bank (SDB), a blockchain-based neobank utilizing stablecoins (USDT), as part of a more comprehensive alternative financial infrastructure aimed at circumventing the military-controlled banking sector (RFA, 2023b; Binance Square, 2023). However, the military junta has outlawed the use of NUG Pay, classifying it as an illegal platform, and individuals found with the application on their phones risk arrest and severe penalties (Frontier Myanmar, 2023). NUG Pay, although a viable alternative, requires users to know an agent before they can use the services, raising trust issues, and its adoption remains limited (KII-04; Nasdaq, 2024). The SDB, while ambitious, faces significant hurdles regarding user trust, adoption, cybersecurity against junta attacks, and the complexities of converting digital assets into usable local currency (PeaceRep, 2024).

As one interviewee (KII-04) stated,

> NUGPay is a safe alternative, particularly for donors. But for fundraisers, and for normal use, it's very limited. For

example, should I need, say, 500,000 MMK, they would only be able to do 300,000 MMK in some cases.

Cryptocurrency usage (e.g., Bitcoin, USDT via exchanges like Binance) offers another potential bypass. However, adoption is hindered by high volatility, the need for technical understanding, scam risks, KYC requirements on major exchanges, and the challenge of cashing out crypto into kyat, which often relies back on local person-to-person agents or mobile money services, reintroducing friction and surveillance points (Nasdaq, 2024).

Furthermore, these circumstances have led to an increased investment risk, prompting the transfer of assets to other countries. The pervasive environment of financial crime, sophisticated cybercrime operations linked to conflict zones, predatory loan apps stealing data, and fraudulent depletion of legitimate accounts also pose significant threats, eroding trust and potentially hindering legitimate alternative finance efforts by making users wary (UNODC, 2024; Frontier Myanmar, 2022; DVB English, 2023).

The increasing surveillance and account freezes have also led to the emergence of a black market for fake mobile money accounts in Myanmar. These accounts are typically created using fraudulently obtained or stolen identity documents, combined with SIM cards registered under different names. Individuals seeking to avoid junta surveillance may purchase these accounts from underground brokers who specialize in creating and selling such fraudulent financial identities. The process often involves collaboration between corrupt mobile money agents and black market operators who can register accounts without proper verification. These accounts are then sold to users seeking to conduct financial transactions without revealing their true identity to the junta's surveillance apparatus. Prices for these accounts reportedly vary based on the level of verification they can pass and the amount of transaction history established to make them appear legitimate.

Using any fraudulent means carries severe risks, including discovery, scams by sellers, potential informant activity leading to arrest, and harsh legal penalties under financial and counter-terrorism laws.

Setting the complications of fraud aside for a moment, these parallel financial systems demonstrate how communities have transformed rather than abandoned professional standards and expertise in the financial sector, creating hybrid assemblages that combine formal financial knowledge with informal community networks and digital tools to survive under authoritarian pressure.

DIGITAL BATTLEGROUND

Our research reveals several critical findings about mobile money surveillance in post-coup Myanmar. First, the junta has rapidly established an extensive surveillance system by leveraging previously existing financial infrastructure and expanding its monitoring capabilities through legislative amendments and cooperation with private financial institutions. Second, the consequences for individuals whose accounts are frozen extend far beyond mere financial inconvenience, often resulting in raids, asset seizures, loss of legal identity, and in some cases, imprisonment. Third, despite these severe risks, citizens continue to seek alternative financial channels, demonstrating remarkable resilience and adaptability in the face of digital repression. These findings highlight the complex interplay between state surveillance power and citizen resistance in an increasingly digitalized conflict. Now, we turn to examining the broader theoretical implications of these developments for understanding techno-authoritarianism in Myanmar.

Our research has uncovered the characteristics of early techno-authoritarian states. The scenarios, events, and discourses discussed above revealed the conflict between techno-authoritarianism and techno-democracy in Myanmar. According to the Gerda Henkel Stiftung (n.d.), Myanmar is the first Southeast Asian country where circumvention technologies, encryption, and social media play a crucial role in shaping a new form of civil war. In other words, the failing military junta is attempting to justify its failures by asserting superiority in cyberspace.

"Techno-authoritarianism" refers to a governance model that leverages digital technologies, surveillance systems, and control over information infrastructure to maintain and extend authoritarian rule. In this system, technologies that could potentially democratize access to information and communication are instead weaponized to monitor citizens,

suppress dissent, and consolidate state power. In Myanmar's case, the military junta has transformed mobile banking and financial technologies from tools of inclusion into instruments of surveillance and control.

In contrast, "techno-democracy" represents the use of these same technologies to enhance democratic participation, transparency, and resistance against authoritarian rule. This includes encrypted communication platforms, alternative financial networks like NUG Pay and SDB, and circumvention tools that help citizens evade censorship and surveillance. The conflict between these opposing technological approaches—one seeking to control and monitor, the other striving to evade and resist—characterizes the current struggle in Myanmar's digital landscape.

Moreover, the military's surveillance strategy represents a shift toward what this chapter has called post-panoptic surveillance. As discussed previously, this involves the convergence of previously separate surveillance systems (financial, telecom, biometric, physical) and a significant increase in surveillance capacity through coordination between the junta and companies such as telecoms and banks (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022; McMullan, 2015). This networked, multi-nodal approach emphasizes the omnipresence of the surveillance system through extensive data collection, integration, and analysis via distributed "centers of calculation," moving beyond traditional centralized models.

Alternative technologies like cryptocurrency offer opt-out possibilities, despite early-stage limitations. Promoting innovation platforms focused on privacy and security enables communities to develop technologies that bypass state surveillance. Collaborative spaces facilitate adoption of circumvention tools for secure communication. Donor support for these initiatives within Myanmar peace efforts would strengthen digital ecosystem resilience.

Establishing resilient, decentralized internet infrastructures is crucial to counter the junta's surveillance. Community-based initiatives can maintain internet access despite censorship attempts. Local ownership of digital infrastructure enables Myanmar's people to reclaim digital sovereignty and protect expression and information rights.

BUILDING DIGITAL RESISTANCE

This research has demonstrated how Myanmar's military junta has systematically transformed mobile money platforms from tools of financial inclusion into instruments of surveillance and repression. Following the February 2021 coup, what was once a rapidly growing digital financial ecosystem has become a mechanism for monitoring citizens, suppressing resistance funding, and targeting dissidents. Our findings reveal a disturbing pattern of legal amendments, institutional co-option, and technological adaptation aimed at establishing pervasive financial surveillance.

The consequences for Myanmar's citizens have been severe and multifaceted. Account freezes frequently lead to raids, asset seizures, family separation, and loss of legal identity documents, effectively creating a class of financial refugees within their own country. The loss of trust in formal financial systems has forced a partial return to cash-based transactions, reversing years of progress toward financial inclusion. Meanwhile, the emergence of alternative systems like NUG Pay and SDB, alongside informal networks like Hundi, demonstrates citizens' resilience and determination to maintain financial autonomy despite significant risks.

Theoretically, this case illustrates the evolution towards pervasive post-panoptic monitoring systems that leverage multiple data sources and private-public partnerships under authoritarian pressure. The junta's approach exemplifies techno-authoritarianism in practice—using digital infrastructure designed for development to instead monitor, control, and suppress the population. This highlights the dual-use nature of financial technologies, which can either empower citizens or enhance state control depending on the political context.

The Myanmar case also offers important lessons for understanding digital repression globally. As authoritarian regimes increasingly target financial systems for surveillance and control, the experiences of Myanmar's citizens provide valuable insights into resistance strategies and the importance of developing truly secure, decentralized financial alternatives that can withstand state interference. International responses, including targeted sanctions on key state financial institutions

like Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB), Myanma Investment and Commercial Bank (MICB), and potentially Myanma Economic Bank (MEB) or the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) itself, aim to constrain the junta's resources but must be carefully calibrated to avoid further harming the general population (Lowy Institute, 2023; Burma Campaign UK, 2023).

INNOVATION PATHWAYS

The junta's efforts to dominate cyberspace are effectively counteracted by the emergence of what assemblage theory calls "lines of flight"—pathways of escape, change, and transformation that communities develop to evade surveillance and control. In Myanmar's financial landscape, these include alternative payment systems, encryption techniques, and community-based verification networks that operate outside the formal banking system.

These innovations represent both resistance to surveillance and the creation of new possibilities for financial autonomy. As the volume introduction notes, these lines of flight embody both "the risk of falling apart" (due to factors like funding gaps or burnout) and "the spark for innovation" (creating new practices and community connections). The financial assemblages that have emerged since the coup demonstrate remarkable creativity in the face of repression, often transforming professional financial practices rather than abandoning them entirely.

For example, community-based verification systems have in places replaced formal KYC procedures, with trusted networks of individuals reportedly vouching for transactions that would previously have required institutional approval. These innovations suggest that state failure can spark organizational creativity rather than merely breakdown, with communities developing adaptive practices that may prove more resilient than traditional banking structures.

SUSTAINABLE ALTERNATIVES

Based on our research findings, we offer recommendations for different stakeholders addressing the challenges of digital financial repression in Myanmar. The international community should consider implementing

targeted sanctions on key financial institutions controlled by the military junta, including the Central Bank of Myanmar and the Myanma Economic Bank, to restrict their access to international financial systems. Alongside sanctions, providing funding and technical support for secure alternative payment systems that prioritize user privacy would help maintain financial lifelines for citizens under repression.

Financial technology organizations and digital rights groups should focus on developing and deploying user-friendly, secure alternatives to state-controlled payment systems. These solutions should balance security features with accessibility for users with limited digital literacy. Education initiatives on digital security practices and the use of encryption tools could help citizens better protect their financial privacy. Documenting patterns of financial surveillance and repression is also essential for building future accountability mechanisms.

For Myanmar's citizens navigating this dangerous landscape, we recommend adopting strong operational security practices, such as compartmentalizing financial activities across multiple platforms when possible and minimizing the personal information shared through mobile money services. Using encryption and secure communication channels when discussing financial matters, and building trusted networks for exchanging information about secure payment methods can also help mitigate surveillance risks.

CONCLUSION

The struggle between techno-authoritarianism and techno-democracy in Myanmar's financial sector represents a critical battleground in the broader conflict since the 2021 coup. The post-panoptic financial surveillance assemblage constructed by the military junta demonstrates how quickly authoritarian regimes can weaponize digital infrastructure originally designed for inclusion and development. However, the creative responses from communities—developing alternative financial assemblages that blend professional expertise, community networks, and adaptive practices—show that state failure can generate organizational innovation rather than merely breakdown.

These financial assemblages are part of what the volume introduction describes as "post-coup assemblages" that are "constantly evolving through processes of assembling and reassembling" as communities adapt to survive the breakdown of government institutions. They may yet prove more resilient than traditional financial institutions.

The financial assemblages we have documented operate under severe financial precarity and exact a significant psychological toll on participants. Yet for many, participation is not just about survival but also an act of political resistance. By creating alternative financial networks that bypass state surveillance, communities are asserting their autonomy and challenging the junta's authority in ways that go beyond traditional forms of opposition.

As Myanmar continues to navigate the aftermath of the coup, the resilience and adaptability of these financial assemblages will be crucial for maintaining community resilience. Their experiences offer valuable lessons for understanding how communities worldwide might respond to digital repression, highlighting the importance of flexible, adaptable approaches rather than rigid institutional structures. In this way, Myanmar's post-coup financial assemblages may point toward future models of community organization that can withstand authoritarian pressure while maintaining essential services.

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CHAPTER 3

HEALTHCARE REIMAGINED AND REASSEMBLED: THE MAKING OF MOBILE HEALTH IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

Chun Lean Lim & Noom Hseng Nang

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the history and nature of mobile health in Myanmar, particularly in response to the sociopolitical upheaval following the military coup in 2021. Mobile health refers to a flexible, organic, spontaneous, community-based health system that delivers medical services and other humanitarian needs directly to the people. This chapter traces the historical development of the health system from the British colonial era, through successive military regimes, to the current crisis characterized by infrastructure damage, manpower shortages, financial difficulty, and a fragmented health system among the military state, the government in exile, and local communities. Amid this turmoil, mobile health has developed, addressing the urgent needs of the population, particularly in conflict zones and remote areas. Applying assemblage theory, this chapter conceptualizes mobile health not merely as an alternative to institutional health but as a dynamic, bottom-up system that adapts to the specific conditions of various localities. It functions both as a response to the collapsing institutional healthcare and as a grassroots activism against oppressive state control. Furthermore, this chapter proposes a change in health consciousness to lay a foundation for democratizing and decentralizing the health system in post-coup Myanmar, aiming to integrate mobile health into health practices as a parallel system with limited state control. These reforms attempt to create a health system that is not only more accessible but also resilient and adaptable to ongoing and future sociopolitical turmoil.

Keywords: mobile health, institutional health, healthcare in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), community-driven health reforms, post-coup Myanmar

This chapter examines how healthcare assemblages have emerged in Myanmar following the 2021 coup, directly engaging with this volume's framework of dynamic assemblages that challenge conventional understandings of responses to authoritarianism. Mobile health represents a powerful example of how professional expertise (medical knowledge), community networks (CDM volunteers), digital technologies (secure messaging), and adaptive practices (streamlined examination procedures) interconnect to form resilient systems outside state control. As one of the three patterns identified in this volume—the transformation of professional networks—mobile health demonstrates how assemblages undergo continuous processes of territorialization and deterritorialization, generating innovative solutions rather than simply breaking down under pressure. This chapter maps the conditions under which these healthcare assemblages emerge, the ecosystem in which they exist, and their potential to transform health consciousness in Myanmar.

In February 2021, Myanmar's Tatmadaw, led by Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup, claiming election fraud by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD). This coup ended the NLD's administration and the country's decade-long quasi-democratic governance. In response, the National Unity Government of Myanmar (NUG) was formed, including NLD members, other political factions, and representatives from various ethnic groups, armed forces, and civilians. Amid widespread clashes, the health system and other public services have been severely compromised. Hospitals face manpower shortages and resource deficits, with daily increases in injuries and fatalities. In conflict zones, healthcare facilities have become targets, deterring injured soldiers and civilians from seeking hospital care. Mobile health services, set up by Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) medics in community areas, war zones, and remote locations, have emerged as a vital alternative. Despite limited equipment, these temporary facilities offer flexible, tailored medical services, providing crucial support as the institutional health system collapses.

Mobile health is crucial for saving the lives of combatants and civilians within the CDM, meeting essential medical needs as the state-run health system fails. These operations often go undocumented to avoid state surveillance and protect medics and patients from political assaults. We examine mobile health by studying its history, current development, and relationship with institutional health. The study addresses three questions: (a) under what conditions does mobile health emerge; (b) within what ecosystem does it exist; and (c) how could it potentially transform health consciousness in Myanmar?

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter employs complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze mobile health in Myanmar. Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) assemblage theory helps us understand mobile health as an emergent, spontaneous network formed through component interactions rather than a fixed structure. They argue that a network is not fixed but functions as emergent and spontaneous assemblages formed by interactions among its components. Applying this theory, the post-coup Myanmar social order can be seen as a project of diverse initiatives by many stakeholders, rather than being dominated solely by state power or anti-state forces. This connects to their concept of nomadism, which explains how mobile health disrupts and deterritorializes institutional health modalities, challenging rigid boundaries through non-linear, context-specific operations. Foucault's (1978) concept of biopolitics further illuminates how institutional health disciplines bodies according to regime will, while mobile health enables communities to regain autonomy. Together, these frameworks reveal mobile health as both a practical response to healthcare collapse and a form of resistance against state biopower.

Thus, this chapter argues that mobile health transforms institutional health and fosters a new form of imagined community. Unlike Benedict Anderson's concept of a community bound by media and language (2016), this "community of lives" is united by health. This concept builds upon but differs from Anderson's "imagined community" by emphasizing embodied, health-based connections rather than primarily mediated or abstract nationalist bonds. Few scholars have looked into expanding Anderson's concept of imagined community to other scopes that cross-influence society, such as Burton's idea of an imagined genetic

community. He argues, "whereas Benedict Anderson conceptualized the nation as an imagined community produced by language and print capitalism, new scholarship argues that genetic science has refocused national imaginations toward biological kinship" (Burton, 2021, p. 8).

We conceptualize mobile health not merely as an extension of traditional services but as a dynamic network mobilizing medics, patients, and supplies to provide accessible and responsive care. It encompasses medical and humanitarian aspects, offering treatment, supplies, consultations, and health information directly to locals. It also provides essential resources like water and food, tailored to regional needs. Here, "mobile" signifies its flexibility, adaptability, temporality, spontaneity, and mobility, while "healthcare" includes facilities, medicine, personnel, patients, communities, equipment, environments, food, water, and other elements forming the health ecosystem. Accordingly, healthcare is not a fixed institution based solely on the state's blueprint; it is a bottom-up structure rooted in communities, constantly reshaped and transformed by the people's needs at specific times and places. This adaptable, community-empowering system is particularly crucial in Myanmar due to political instability, geographical barriers, and cultural and linguistic diversity.

Methodologically, this chapter analyzes mobile health in Myanmar from three perspectives: the dialectics between institutional and mobile health, the ontological and phenomenological aspects of mobile health, and its prospects. First, we map the history of both institutional and mobile health using sources such as scholarly articles, INGO reports, news articles, interviews, social media, and government websites due to the scarcity of academic work on Myanmar's healthcare history. Interviews were conducted virtually using secure messaging platforms in Burmese and English languages. Interviewees were selected based on their direct involvement in mobile health initiatives across different regions of Myanmar, ensuring geographical and operational diversity in our case studies.

The methodological approach of this study itself represents what the volume's introduction terms "methodological assemblages that prioritized participant safety and ethical knowledge production over procedural purity." When one interviewee from the Loyalty Mobile Team

faced enhanced surveillance, we developed a multi-level secure communication protocol involving intermediaries and encrypted messaging applications, similar to the adaptive research practices described by other contributors to this volume. Our interviews were intentionally limited in scope and duration when security concerns arose, embodying the volume's observation that "Sometimes the most ethically sound research is left intentionally incomplete and circumspect." This methodological adaptation mirrors the very healthcare assemblages we sought to study, demonstrating how research itself must become flexible under authoritarian conditions.

Next, we outline three characteristics of mobile health through case studies, involving interviews with three mobile health frontliners: a CDM volunteer in Taunggyi, Southern Shan State; a leader of mobile clinics in Kayah State; and an exiled doctor in Chin State. Finally, we outline a future where mobile health becomes an essential part of Myanmar's healthcare system.

THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL HEALTH

The following section provides the historical context necessary to understand how institutional healthcare developed in Myanmar and its limitations, which directly addresses research question (a) about the conditions under which mobile health emerges.

Public healthcare in Myanmar is managed by the Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS), which oversees hospitals, medical supplies, research, training, traditional medicine, epidemic control, health information, and manpower. Despite the MOHS's vision of affordable healthcare for all, specialist hospitals are mostly in major cities like Yangon and Mandalay, while peripheral and conflict zones only have primary-level facilities (Latt et al., 2016, p. 126). MOHS was restructured in 2021 following the coup, with some functions redistributed to military-controlled entities. Prior to this, it oversaw 1,134 public hospitals and 9,186 primary and secondary health centers nationwide.

To improve state-level health provision, the government has recruited community health workers and local auxiliary midwives for emergencies (Becker, 2018). However, corruption, political instability,

and geographic segregation challenge national healthcare services. Historically, the state has not prioritized public health, often favoring military hospitals. This preference for military hospitals is evidenced by the disproportionate allocation of healthcare resources, with military hospitals receiving modern equipment and adequate staffing while public facilities struggled with basic supplies.

For example, during the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) era (1997-2011), military facilities were consistently favored in budgets and supplies over the civilian system that served the great majority of the population. Consequently, the government relies on private healthcare facilities set up by health companies, foreign aid, local communities, or religious organizations (IPSOS, 2013). After the coup, public healthcare split into two systems: the MOHS run by the military junta and a separate entity established by the NUG to deliver healthcare to those affected by or involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF HEALTHCARE IN MYANMAR

The following subsection presents a chronological history of healthcare development in Myanmar, providing essential context for understanding the emergence of mobile health.

Modern healthcare in Myanmar dates to the 1890s during British rule in Lower Burma. During the early colonial period, Burma had high mortality rates, especially among infants, due to malnutrition, poor food security, and malaria (Richell, 2006). In response, the colonial state built hospitals in major cities, starting with Rangoon General Hospital, which featured the latest medical technologies like operation theaters, vaccination programs, and sanitation units. Traditional medicine, however, was sidelined (Cohen et al., 2022) by the state.

Following Burma's independence in 1948, there was a severe shortage of medical staff as most foreign experts left with the British, leading to the suspension of many healthcare units. The damage from World War II and the Japanese invasion had already crippled healthcare structures, worsening the situation. Prime Minister U Nu attempted to address these issues with the Pyidawthar Plan, aimed at strengthening

infrastructure and attracting investment. The Pyidawthar Plan included specific healthcare initiatives such as establishing rural health centers, training local medical personnel to replace departed colonial doctors, implementing nationwide vaccination campaigns, and integrating traditional medicine practitioners into the formal healthcare system. These ambitious goals faced severe implementation challenges due to limited resources and political instability. The U Nu government struggled to administer large parts of the country during this turbulent period.

POLITICAL SHIFTS AND HEALTHCARE DEVELOPMENT

The following subsection explores how political changes directly impacted healthcare development in Myanmar, establishing the connection between politics and healthcare that is central to understanding mobile health's emergence.

Healthcare, as part of state machinery, is deeply affected by political changes. The 1962 military coup brought General Ne Win's Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) to power, prompting many medical professionals to flee the totalitarian regime. Ne Win's administration then nationalized healthcare, integrating private hospitals into the state system. It aimed to decentralize authority by appointing medical officers and establishing rural health centers.

The health system was structured along administrative lines, with services distributed across townships, districts, and regions. However, disparities persisted, with peripheral and conflict-affected areas receiving the least attention. Despite aiming for universal healthcare, the regime allocated as little as one percent of GDP to healthcare, resulting in inadequate resources and poor service delivery.

Following the 1988 Uprising, the military regime transitioned to the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and later to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997. Under SPDC rule, policies largely remained unchanged, but the regime increased out-of-pocket payments and introduced a community cost-sharing scheme to reduce its healthcare expenditure. This period saw more healthcare privatization, with private clinics and hospitals becoming more prominent in urban areas, while rural and remote areas continued to rely on

underfunded public healthcare. Resource distribution remained uneven, worsening health inequalities between urban and rural or ethnic minority regions (Sein et al., 2014, pp. 33-35).

TRANSITION TO QUASI-DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND HEALTHCARE REFORM

The following subsection provides important context for understanding the transition period that preceded the 2021 coup, showing how brief democratic reforms attempted to address healthcare challenges.

Democratic awakening in 1988 and worsening livelihoods led to civil unrest, challenging national leadership. In areas of state weakness, civil society began to provide alternative structures and support where the government failed (Lorch, 2008, p. 154). Following the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007 and Cyclone Nargis, the regime agreed to a roadmap toward democracy, leading to the 2011 handover to reformist military leader Thein Sein, marking the start of Myanmar's liberalization.

The quasi-civilian government aimed to democratize ministries, policymaking bodies, businesses, and electoral practices, though it operated under the unchanged 2008 constitution. Initiatives included increasing health expenditure, offering coverage for the poor through hospital trust funds and a community cost-sharing scheme, and reestablishing international connections to attract funds and investment (Risso-Gill et al., 2014).

Thein Sein handed power to the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, with Htin Kyaw as president, in 2016. Health system reform became more policy-driven, aiming to create a healthcare-friendly environment and universal health coverage (Ergo et al., 2019). The Myanmar National Health Plan 2017-2021 (Ministry of Health and Sports, 2017) represented the most comprehensive attempt to advance toward universal health coverage.

Though this transitional period opened a policy window for building a structural health system in Myanmar (Campbell et al., 2023), reforms halted when Htin Kyaw resigned as president due to health reasons in 2018 and was succeeded by Win Myint, an ally of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The civilian leadership continued until February 2021, when the military seized power, as described in the introduction. This abrupt political change had profound consequences for healthcare delivery in Myanmar.

Following the coup, Myanmar's health system nearly collapsed, with infrastructure, manpower, and supplies severely disrupted (Paddock, 2022). An estimated half or more of the public-sector health workforce left state-run hospitals, joining NUG facilities, becoming independent medics, or fleeing abroad. Health facilities were targeted by both state and non-state actors, with 1,127 reported incidents of violence (Insecurity Insight, 2024)[1], aiming to disrupt medical services for opposition supporters and instill fear in civilians. The regime targeted healthcare to weaken resistance support networks, while non-state actors occasionally attacked military-affiliated facilities. The State Administration Council (SAC) blocked medical aid and food from reaching conflict zones and opposition-controlled areas, worsening the humanitarian crisis.[2] Foreign humanitarian aid was often misappropriated or blocked by the SAC.[3] In response, the NUG, CDM, and communal health workers developed a parallel health system based on mobile health services to address medical needs by operating through underground networks, mobile clinics, and telehealth services, with an estimated 60-70 percent of CDM medical professionals contributing to its operations.

THE RISE OF MOBILE HEALTH

Having established the historical context and limitations of institutional healthcare, we now transition to examining the emergence and development of mobile health as a response to these limitations.

As set out above, we conceptualize mobile health not merely as an extension of traditional services but as a dynamic network mobilizing medics, patients, and supplies to provide accessible and responsive care. Mobile health represents a movement in two complementary senses: physically, it is more flexible and accessible, providing tailored healthcare interventions depending on community needs and circumstances; ideologically, it operates outside state and corporate healthcare structures, offering medical care on more affordable terms, both politically and financially. This adaptable, community-empowering system is crucial in Myanmar due to political instability, geographical

barriers, and cultural and linguistic diversity. This study argues that mobile health in Myanmar is not merely convenient but a community-empowering system that supports people on the move, in conflict zones, or at the margins of proper care.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF MOBILE HEALTH IN MYANMAR

While institutional healthcare developed along the trajectory outlined earlier, mobile health in Myanmar has parallel historical roots. Traditional Ayurvedic practitioners and midwives have long provided community-based care that embodies many characteristics of modern mobile health, though not formally labeled as such. These traditional practices focused on holistic approaches and maintained close community ties unlike modern medicine's institutional emphasis.

Ayurvedic medical practices were introduced to Burma as early as the ninth century through Indian cultural influence, becoming integrated with indigenous healing traditions over centuries. By the 18th century, these hybrid practices formed the foundation of Burmese traditional medicine, characterized by holistic approaches that considered physical, spiritual, and environmental factors in healing. This historical foundation of community-oriented care has significantly influenced contemporary mobile health initiatives.

Traditional medicine remains popular in rural and urban areas, leading the government to establish a department in 1989 to monitor these practices and conduct related research (DTM; Awale et al., 2006). It was expanded significantly during 2011-2021, including the development of integrated traditional medicine units in 14 major hospitals.

Alongside the prevalence of traditional medicines, Western medical knowledge was promoted by the British following the establishment of Rangoon General Hospital. The British trained many local medics through their medical programs. However, many of these trained professionals left after independence in 1948 or following the military takeover in 1962 (Rao, 1968). Those who remained pursued various paths: some worked in government or private hospitals, others in clinics, and some ran home-based services. These medics often combined modern and traditional medical knowledge, offering flexible locations,

prices, and treatments. Their services have become increasingly popular as healthcare costs rise and remain a crucial option for people in remote or conflict areas.

OPERATIONAL STRUCTURE OF MOBILE HEALTH

The following subsections examine the operational and political aspects of contemporary mobile health in Myanmar, addressing research question (b) about the ecosystem in which mobile health exists.

Logistically, mobile health in Myanmar, unlike the rigid MOHS system, operates with flexible and varied structures shaped by connections with local providers. While some services have an online presence, most information about providers is undocumented and spread through word of mouth due to their small scale, side-project nature, or desire to avoid state attention.

Funding typically comes from the NUG, NGOs, overseas Burmese communities, local businesses, religious organizations, and private hospitals. Based on interview data and NUG reports, funding proportions for mobile health initiatives vary by region, but generally follow this pattern: a mix of NUG allocations, diaspora contributions, local community support, international NGOs (when access is possible), and private healthcare entities, with NUG allocations reported by interviewees as the largest single share. These proportions fluctuate based on conflict intensity and geographical accessibility.

Mobile health comprises mobile clinics, health stations, pharmacies, telemedicine, community health workers, midwives, nomad medics, traditional healers, emergency services, and medical supplies deliverers. Notable international providers include Japan-based Daiichi Sankyo in Nyaung-U,[4] and in Karen State, Jungle Health Clinics funded by Global Angels[5] and also a mobile health unit supported by Première Urgence Internationale.[6]

POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF MOBILE HEALTH

Politically, mobile health in Myanmar has become a battleground for the resistance and a safety net for war-affected individuals. After the

coup, many healthcare workers fled, while others turned to private hospitals, became CDM medical volunteers, or joined the medical teams of the People's Defense Forces (PDF) and Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) (Physicians for Human Rights, 2022, pp. 15-20).

Past experiences with the military junta had prepared the civilian army and volunteers to quickly integrate medics into their movement. The CDM support network includes individuals from various sectors, helping medics acquire supplies and connect patients with private hospitals to maintain basic health services. Meanwhile, the NUG established a parallel Ministry of Health to provide medical support and information to resistance members. The NUG's funding mechanisms pool donations to finance private healthcare, emergency services, medical supplies, and logistics.

Medics, CDM networks, and NUG support create an ecosystem for mobile health, aiding those affected by war, poverty, and resistance movements. This ecosystem involves a coordinated effort among various actors and resources. Medics, including doctors, nurses, and volunteers, form the core of mobile health teams, often working in makeshift clinics set up in community centers, schools, private homes, or on trucks. These professionals are supported by extensive CDM networks, which include local volunteers handling logistics, transportation, and communication. They ensure the distribution of medical supplies, equipment, and necessities like food and water. The NUG provides financial assistance, strategic planning, and political backing to sustain and expand healthcare efforts. This decentralized, flexible arrangement allows mobile health to respond rapidly to changing needs, delivering timely medical services where institutional health has collapsed or is inaccessible.

THE NATURE OF MOBILE HEALTH

Having established the historical context and operational aspects of mobile health, we now transition to a theoretical analysis of its nature, addressing research question (b) in greater depth.

Mobile health is not merely an alternative to institutional health; it embodies non-conformity and is inherently unstructured and unorganizable. Rather than viewing it as a static network that stabilizes

over time, it should be seen as an assemblage that continually integrates and disintegrates, adapting to each new moment and locale. According to Manuel DeLanda (2016), an assemblage comprises various components and their interactions.

This section examines the nature of mobile health in Myanmar through its ontological, phenomenological, and epistemological aspects. The analysis is supported by three case studies: a CDM network around mobile health in Shan State, a mobile clinic team in Kayah State, and a CDM medic working in Chin State. These three cases were selected to represent diverse geographic regions, operational models, and political contexts within Myanmar. The Shan State case illustrates networked community support in an area with mixed control; the Kayah State case demonstrates operation in active conflict zones with ethnic dimensions; and the Chin State case highlights individual agency in remote, historically underserved regions. Together, they provide a comprehensive view of mobile health's adaptability across Myanmar's complex landscape.

MOBILE HEALTH AS A NETWORK

Institutional health functions within a top-down, policy-oriented framework, heavily influenced by corporate culture, financial providers, donors, and shareholders. It operates as a business model that strictly adheres to the MOHS's terms and conditions. In contrast, mobile health functions as a dynamic, adaptable network, following a bottom-up, community-oriented approach rooted in local cultures. It operates without standard procedures and often exists outside or even against the institutional system. This organic network highlights social cohesion through interdependent efforts and mutual support, emphasizing the importance of understanding local and rural connections over cosmopolitan and urban areas.

The Taunggyi CDM network exemplifies the assemblage characteristics of mobile health through its dynamic, unstructured formation. This CDM community network in Taunggyi, Southern Shan State, provides insights into the ecosystem connecting mobile health with the local population. Information comes from an anonymous CDM volunteer in Taunggyi, whose main role involves transporting messages, medicine, essentials, and patients to mobile health facilities or private

hospitals.[7] These CDM networks are unstructured and unidentifiable, so they can avoid state surveillance, with their operations known only through word of mouth. Despite this, they are comprehensive and cohesive, involving runners, volunteers, advertisers, donors, medics, hospitals, businesses, and officials from NUG, PDF, and EAOs. They work together to deliver medical supplies, set up mobile clinics, and provide care in conflict zones and remote areas.

The Taunggyi CDM network exemplifies what the volume's introduction describes as assemblages that are "deliberately flexible, adapting rapidly under pressure rather than building permanent structures." The network's unstructured, word-of-mouth operation with rotating volunteers and shifting clinic locations illustrates how healthcare networks simultaneously face vulnerability to disruption while maintaining remarkable capacity for rapid adaptation (what assemblage theory calls "lines of flight"). When military raids targeted CDM health workers in Taunggyi, the network responded by dispersing medical supplies across multiple storage locations and implementing a rotating treatment schedule, demonstrating how deterritorialization processes enable continued healthcare delivery despite surveillance and repression.

For example, when a civilian with shrapnel wounds from artillery fire in Taunggyi needed urgent medical attention but feared visiting military-controlled hospitals, the network activated. A trusted neighbor contacted a CDM volunteer via secure messaging app, who then coordinated with a local pharmacist for initial supplies and pain management. The volunteer arranged discreet transportation to a hidden location where a former surgeon, now part of the CDM, performed the necessary procedure. Throughout recovery, network members rotated providing antibiotics, wound care, and monitoring, successfully treating the patient without exposure to military scrutiny.

This CDM network supporting mobile health operates at multiple levels, from volunteers and medical practitioners to businesses and policymakers. Initially, these networks did not receive NUG assistance due to bureaucratic delays. NUG support began formally in June 2021, approximately four months after the coup, when its Ministry of Health established coordination mechanisms and funding channels. This support transformed these grassroots networks by providing

structured training programs, standardized medical supplies, secure communication channels, and regular financial stipends. It enabled more consistent and expanded service delivery while maintaining their adaptive, community-based character. Before that support arrived, local communities, volunteers, and grassroots organizations had mobilized their own resources, allowing the network to form organically and adapt quickly to urgent needs.

In Taunggyi, mobile health has transformed local perspectives on health services. Traditionally, people sought treatment at hospitals and clinics, following a structured process. However, with government facilities halted, this system was disrupted. Initially, accessing medical care was challenging. During this desperate time, individuals, organizations, and community representatives stepped forward to provide low-cost or free healthcare services. This community-driven health system is fueled by the urgent political and economic situation in Myanmar and a humanitarian mission to meet basic medical needs. The NUG later joined these initiatives, using these networks to disseminate health information and roll out programs like COVID-19 vaccination. This mobile health network has continued to function under extreme pressure, serving as a practical model for healthcare in precarious times.

MOBILE HEALTH AS NOMADISM

Building on our established definition of mobile health as a dynamic, adaptable network, this section examines how it functions as a nomadic force in contrast to stationary institutional health. While institutional health is stationary, occupying a permanent physical space with an address and managed within a rigid, top-down system involving multiple staff and collaborations with pharmaceutical companies and universities, all operating under state regulation, mobile health is always on the move, set up temporarily under urgent circumstances for short-term purposes. Its mobility and adaptability reduce operational costs, bureaucracy, and procedural work, allowing it to serve various locations as needed. This flexibility, however, often comes with constraints regarding manpower, funding, and supplies.

The Loyalty Mobile Team demonstrates the nomadic qualities of mobile health through its constant movement and adaptation. This

mobile clinic founded by the CDM operates in Demoso Township and along the borders of Hpruso and Bawlakhe townships in Kayah State.[8] This clinic treats around 30,000 internally displaced persons across 30 camps (Frontier Myanmar, 2022). In an online interview, team leader Ko Thitsar shared that the team was established after the CDM began, composed of doctors and nurses who left the Ministry of Health shortly after the military coup.

The Loyalty Mobile Team embodies what this volume identifies as assemblages that "maintain stability precisely through their capacity to change." Their fixed timetable combined with mobile delivery points creates a hybrid organizational form that transcends traditional divisions between state collaboration and resistance. When military forces established checkpoints along their usual routes in early 2023, the team quickly developed alternative pathways. It modified its treatment protocols, compressing the standard 12-step examination procedures into seven essential steps that could be completed within 8-10 minutes. This exemplifies how healthcare professionals transform rather than abandon their expertise under pressure, creating assemblages that function as coherent wholes while remaining adaptable to changing conditions.

The team faces challenges such as a lack of medical supplies, petrol, electricity, funding, and manpower.[9] These resource limitations directly impact patient care in numerous ways: surgeries must often be performed with limited anesthesia; antibiotics are rationed, with priority given to the most severe infections; diagnostic capabilities are restricted to basic tests; treatment plans are modified based on available medications rather than optimal therapies; and follow-up care is compromised by unpredictable travel schedules dictated by security concerns. Besides their medical mission, they organize campaigns to raise money and collect essential resources (Aung Aung, 2023). Unlike other mobile health services, the team operates on a fixed timetable, ensuring patients receive timely treatment and medication. They also distribute food, water, and daily supplies.

The Loyalty Mobile Team exemplifies Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 2010) nomadism concept by deliberately rejecting fixed territorial boundaries. By constantly relocating their medical facilities—sometimes daily to avoid military detection—the team operates in what

Deleuze calls "smooth space" (open-ended, fluid, and non-hierarchical) rather than "striated space" (organized, hierarchical, and structured space that is characterized by boundaries, metrics, and defined interval). Their practice of adapting medical protocols based on available resources rather than institutional standards represents the nomadic resistance to codification that Deleuze and Guattari describe. Furthermore, their fixed timetable paradoxically enables greater mobility by creating predictable moments of connection within an unpredictable landscape, demonstrating the nomadic principle of finding consistency within movement rather than through fixed structures.

These doctors and nurses, formerly part of the institutional health system, were thrust into a precarious journey as medical nomads by the coup, shifting from traditional career paths to engaging in the CDM with a significant humanitarian mission. Their movement now aligns with the trajectory of wars, social instability, and civil upheaval, traveling across 30 locations in Kayah State and adhering to a tight schedule to save lives. This shift reimagines the movements of not just facilities but also medical practitioners themselves.

During times of conflict, Myanmar's health system is increasingly seen not as a rigid structure but as a dynamic movement, a local service, and a communal empowerment system. This new perspective allows civilians more leverage over healthcare. Medical nomads now represent a new form of health personnel, delivering services as part of community-driven projects or individual commitments to public health. These medical nomads and facilities may develop into a parallel health system alongside state and corporate institutions, although they still need to collaborate with hospitals for complex operations. Consequently, they form a connectivity network that complements the overall health system, enhancing accessibility in Myanmar's post-coup landscape.

MOBILE HEALTH AS ACTIVISM

Aye Nyein Thu's practice illustrates mobile health as resistance to biopolitical control by creating autonomous healthcare spaces. This section examines mobile health as a form of anti-establishment activism through the case of this exiled medical professional who continues her practice in Mindat Township, Chin State.[10] By focusing on her efforts,

this section demonstrates how mobile health challenges state power and offers an alternative system rooted in civil society.

Aye Nyein Thu graduated from medical school in 2020 and began practicing in Mandalay. Following the coup, she treated injured protesters involved in the CDM and witnessed the military's brutality, including shootings of protesters and prohibitions on treating gunshot wounds (Gallo, 2021; Rubenstein & Mon, 2021). This spurred her to leave her family and relocate to Chin State, where she raised funds to start a hospital in Mindat Township and set up mobile clinics in remote areas on weekends.

Aye Nyein Thu's hospital in Mindat Township operates with six staff members and serves approximately 150 patients weekly. The facility provides emergency trauma care, basic surgical procedures, maternal healthcare, pediatric services, and treatment for common infectious diseases. It functions as both a stationary clinic and a coordination hub for five mobile units that reach surrounding villages on a rotating schedule. Chin State, in western Myanmar, has one of the most defective health systems due to limited economic development, challenging geography, and poor transportation infrastructure, making basic healthcare inaccessible.

Comparative health statistics demonstrate Chin State's severe healthcare deficiencies: maternal mortality rates are 2.3 times the national average; only 21 percent of births are attended by skilled health personnel compared to 60 percent nationally; child immunization coverage is 38 percent versus 86 percent in Yangon Region; and the doctor-to-patient ratio is reportedly as poor as 1:45,000, far below the national level (UNICEF Myanmar, 2020). Many residents rely on traditional remedies and seek hospital care only in critical conditions. Health indicators in Chin State are dire, with low rates of antenatal care, tetanus vaccination, skilled birth attendance, and birth registration.[11]

Establishing a health facility in this context is difficult, but Aye Nyein Thu's initiative brought medical care to the town and remote areas through her flexible mobile health system. Despite being on the junta's wanted list, facing seizures of medical equipment, and having team members arrested (BBC News, 2022), she rebuilt hospitals, reacquired supplies, and continued her services, demonstrating resilience and

commitment amid conflict. Aye Nyein Thu has created a new health model to cope with the limitations of traditional hospitals and clinics, which are primarily available only in towns and often have limited capacities. Her mobile health initiative brings essential care directly to those in remote areas. Though her influence is currently limited, her efforts highlight the health system issues many other regions face. Her approach challenges conventional healthcare methods and establishes an alternate, resilient system tailored to locals' needs. She makes a statement against governmental inadequacies and demonstrates that civil society can create independent support systems.

This case illustrates that healthcare in Myanmar has become a site where state power is wielded through ministries, national health committees, policies, and plans. Foucault (1995) argues that institutions, like hospitals, serve as machinery for state control, and his account of biopower (Foucault, 1978) shows how a health system can be used to regulate the population. Althusser (1970) suggests these institutions impose state ideologies, making institutional health a tool for dominance. In contrast, mobile health represents resistance against state control, emerging due to inadequate public health facilities. It creates an independent system within civil society, offering refuge to political dissidents and support to the poor by reducing medical costs and introducing payment flexibility. This aligns with Gramsci's (1971) concept of bottom-up activism, empowering civil society. Medics in the mobile health network actively resist the authoritarian state and address humanitarian crises. As Williams (1977) argues, emergent ideologies challenge dominant ones. Mobile health disrupts state control, fostering autonomy for civil society and becoming a battleground for power struggles between the state and civilian forces.

POSSIBLE RESTRUCTURING OF HEALTH SYSTEM IN POST-COUP ERA

Having examined the nature of mobile health through theoretical perspectives and case studies, we now turn to the prospects of mobile health in Myanmar, addressing research question (c) about how it could transform health consciousness.

More than three years since the coup, Myanmar's national health system has been heavily damaged. Hospitals face a mass departure of staff, shortages of medical supplies, and worsening finances due to international sanctions on the military government. Reporting through 2024 describes the continued deterioration of Myanmar's healthcare system, with public hospitals operating far below capacity, widespread shortages of essential medicines, and a resurgence of preventable disease, with surges in malaria, dengue fever, and tuberculosis across conflict-affected regions.

With rising injuries and deaths from conflicts, many medical emergencies remain unmet, leading to increased fatality rates. Communities are establishing their own health systems marked by mobility, flexibility, and affordability, driven by humanitarian responsibilities. Although these mobile networks lack sufficient facilities and supplies, they have gained popularity and trust and are likely to continue developing post-coup. We argue that these emergent healthcare approaches could fundamentally reshape Myanmar's health landscape, evolving alongside political developments to create a system where healthcare is no longer monopolized by state control but instead allows for meaningful autonomy within civil society.

The future development of mobile health assemblages represents what the introduction describes as "a multiplicity of possible futures, some more desirable than others, influenced by attractors that guide their development." The proposed framework of democratization and communalization aims to navigate toward more desirable configurations by recognizing the interplay of human actors (healthcare workers, community volunteers) and non-human elements (digital technologies, medicines, physical environments). Like other assemblages examined in this volume, mobile health seeks to navigate the delicate balance between structure and flexibility, specialist knowledge and common practice, and local autonomy and broader connection. This echoes this volume's finding that in Myanmar's case organizational innovation rather than breakdown is emerging from state failure.

FRAMEWORKS FOR HEALTHCARE REFORM

The following subsection outlines a specific framework for healthcare reform in post-coup Myanmar, proposing how mobile health could be integrated into a restructured system.

Two pillars of reform in post-coup Myanmar could reshape the health system: democratization and communalization, building on mobile health networks expanded by the CDM movement. Democratization involves efforts from both institutional and mobile health. The MOHS should recognize and legitimize mobile health without institutionalizing it, allowing it to act as a check and balance on the national health ministry. Allocating funding to mobile health would enable it to scale up and collaborate with national healthcare. On the other hand, mobile health providers should build comprehensive networks that compete with institutional systems in technology, service, and pricing while maintaining community roots. They should prioritize a community-based approach, ensuring the focus remains on community needs rather than corporate interests.

Communalization involves decentralizing health operations, policy-making, decision-making, and management from the state or towns to local communities. Despite government efforts to establish ethnic health organizations and rural centers, their capacity is limited due to lack of resources. Reports have shown that only six percent of such work is funded by the community and 22 percent by patients, with no funding support from the health ministry (Sommanustweechai et al., 2016). The government should strengthen connections with local health organizations, ensuring they have financial support and tools. It should also fund mobile health networks, consulting local leaders to ensure these facilities are within reach of all community members. On the other hand, mobile health providers should understand local contexts, including culture, history, language, and common illnesses, to better serve locals. They should build networks with hospitals, traditional healers, community health workers, and other stakeholders to ensure accessible medical treatment and communication of health information.

Similar reforms have shown success in other post-conflict contexts: in Timor-Leste after independence, the integration of community-based

health workers with formal institutions accompanied a fall in maternal mortality of roughly 70 percent between 2000 and 2015; in Rwanda following the genocide, decentralized "health posts" in rural areas combined with national coordination improved access while maintaining local accountability; and in Nepal after civil conflict, the recognition and integration of parallel health systems operated by former rebel groups facilitated successful healthcare reconstruction while preserving community trust and participation.

Liberating the health system in post-coup Myanmar involves three key aspects. Geographical liberation extends mobile health beyond cities and towns to remote areas, shifting the center from urbanity to community. Ideological liberation lets public health operate outside governmental frameworks, not entirely subject to national health plans. Philosophical liberation challenges the traditional view of health professionals and facilities, as some health professionals become nomads, breaking away from career stability. This radical reterritorialization creates a new community of lives, where individuals tailor health services to community needs and bond over the shared experience of using community-based mobile health.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the emergence and evolution of mobile health in Myanmar as both a practical response to institutional healthcare collapse and a form of resistance against state control. By applying assemblage theory to analyze mobile health networks, we've demonstrated how this dynamic, bottom-up system adapts to specific conditions across various localities, providing essential services where state institutions fail.

Our analysis reveals that mobile health emerges under conditions arising from state failure, political oppression, and humanitarian crises, particularly when institutional healthcare becomes weaponized or inaccessible. It operates within a complex ecosystem of resistance networks, civil society organizations, community support structures, and parallel governance systems, forming an adaptive assemblage outside state control. Significantly, mobile health transforms health consciousness by

decentralizing healthcare authority, democratizing access, and reframing healthcare as a community right rather than a state service.

The future of healthcare in post-coup Myanmar requires both democratization and communalization. Mobile health should be recognized and supported without being institutionalized or politicized, allowing it to function as a check on the national health ministry while maintaining its community roots. This approach would create a resilient, accessible health system capable of withstanding ongoing and future sociopolitical turmoil while ensuring healthcare reaches those most in need.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

This chapter is a substantially revised version of a longer earlier conference presentation available in the proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies: Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State, August 2-4, 2024, Chiang Mai University, Thailand. https://www.burmaconference.com/. We credit conference mentor Dr. Stéphen Huard for his detailed comments. We use both "Myanmar" and "Burma" depending on historical context. The country was officially known as "Burma" during the colonial period until 1989, when the military government changed the name to "Myanmar." This change remains politically contested, with some opposition groups and countries continuing to use "Burma" as a form of resistance to military rule. In academic contexts, "Burma/Myanmar" often acknowledges this complex political history and the contested nature of the country's official name.

NOTES

[1] Data compiled by Physicians for Human Rights and Insecurity Insight documents targeted violence against healthcare facilities, with patterns suggesting deliberate strategy rather than collateral damage.

[2] There were incidents where the military fired on citizens transporting and queuing for oxygen tanks in Mandalay and Yangon during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. See the report here: https://phr.org/news/at-least-252-reported-attacks-and-threats-to-healthcare-in-myanmar-during-sixmonths-of-militarys-crackdown/.

[3] The blocking of humanitarian aid has been documented by multiple international organizations, including the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar.

[4] The Daiichi Sankyo mobile field-clinic project in rural Nyaung-U began in April 2019.

[5] Global Angels has funded mobile health clinics in Karen State since 2012, and transformed its operations from fixed clinics to mobile health services in 2021, now reaching 22 remote villages.

[6] Première Urgence Internationale established its first mobile health unit in Karen State in 2017, expanding to three units by 2022 despite increasing security challenges.

[7] Interview conducted via secure messaging application on December 12, 2023. The volunteer requested anonymity due to security concerns.

[8] Interview with Ko Thitsar (pseudonym), team leader of the Loyalty Mobile Team for Karenni, conducted via encrypted communication channel on January 15, 2024.

[9] Ko Thitsar briefly talked about the philosophy, missions, operations, challenges, and sources of funding of the Loyalty Mobile Team for Karenni.

[10] Interview with Dr. Aye Nyein Thu conducted via secure video call on February 2, 2024, supplemented by publicly available information from verified media sources.

[11] According to UNICEF Myanmar's 2020 report, Chin State recorded only 38 percent birth registration (compared to national average of 72 percent), 21 percent skilled birth attendance (national 60 percent), and 42 percent antenatal care coverage (national 81 percent).

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CHAPTER 4

REPORTING AGAINST THE ODDS: JOURNALISTIC ASSEMBLAGES IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

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ABSTRACT

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar reignited a climate of pervasive fear, especially among journalists—a problem compounded by an environment where media freedom is already fragile. This chapter examines how journalists have developed adaptive assemblages that combine professional expertise, technological tools, community networks, and embodied practices to continue reporting despite intensifying repression. Applying assemblage theory to analyze the security practices of journalists working within and outside Myanmar, we find that most threats come from low-tech surveillance rather than sophisticated digital authoritarianism. The study reveals that journalists have created flexible, resilient assemblages that transform professional standards rather than abandoning them. We argue that a universal "one-size-fits-all" approach to security fails to address these complex realities and that a holistic security framework is essential. Beyond improving digital skills, security training must incorporate physical and psychological well-being, organizational security protocols, and most importantly, actively involve journalists in designing security practices that respond to their rapidly changing context.

Keywords: surveillance, digital security, digital safety, holistic security, digital risks

INTRODUCTION

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military launched a coup against the democratically elected quasi-civilian government. A state of emergency was declared as the country entered a period of great social upheaval. Mass demonstrations erupted as civilians took to the streets to protest the coup. Violent backlash occurred. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, as of January 10, 2024, the junta and pro-military groups had killed 4,331 pro-democracy activists and civilians and arrested around 25,791.

In a context where simply carrying a notebook can invite arrest or worse, Myanmar's journalists have developed extraordinary assemblages of professional practice, technological adaptation, and community protection. Their work transcends conventional notions of press freedom advocacy—rather than merely asserting rights or following security protocols, they have fundamentally reimagined journalism itself. This evolution is not just about survival but represents an inspiring example of how truth-telling persists even when conventional paths are blocked. Unlike journalists operating in environments with functioning legal protections, these reporters navigate a landscape where the state itself is the primary threat, requiring courage of an entirely different magnitude—not just to publish controversial stories, but to exist at all as journalists.

Journalists continue to report in this volatile, heightened security situation. Their work is crucial, but reporting negative news about the military in a broken media landscape comes with severe risks. In its 2023 Q4 Report, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Athan documented the arrest of 202 journalists and news workers since the 2021 coup, with 67 facing convictions.

With digital platforms and technologies now essential to news reporting, journalists must remain vigilant of potential surveillance and control afforded through the internet. Networked control in Myanmar is not a recent development; since its introduction in 2000, the internet has been under government control. However, the recent expansion of internet usage among the public has broadened the possibility of decentralizing surveillance, moving away from a top-down model and including threats from fellow citizens.

The military regularly employs internet shutdowns as a control tactic, cutting off entire regions from communication to suppress information flow during operations against resistance forces. Journalists must create alternative reporting networks when these blackouts occur and set up backup plans for moving information when digital connections go down. One journalist noted: "We always have to be ready for the internet to disappear with no warning. We have established backup communication chains through trusted people who can physically move information when digital channels are blocked."

This chapter examines journalists' security practices within and outside Myanmar. The central research question we address is: How do journalists maintain digital security in military-controlled Myanmar? What security practices do they employ to address both digital and physical threats? How effective are current digital security training approaches in meeting journalists' actual needs?

We broadly define "journalist" as any individual gathering, reporting, photographing, publishing, or presenting news related to Myanmar's current situation. We categorize journalists by their primary activities. Writing/text journalists typically work remotely, contacting sources via phone or online, collecting data from social media, and monitoring press releases. Video journalists capture footage of incidents or interviews, producing and editing news videos. Photojournalists capture images on the ground for news stories, editing and publishing photos individually or with articles. Multimedia journalists combine text, photos, and video while covering news on the ground.

Journalists must adhere to digital safety practices to continue reporting without drawing the military's attention. However, with military checkpoints abundant across the country, frequent night raids, and crowdsourced surveillance networks of pro-military informers present in most neighborhoods, following standard digital security practices alone is insufficient. Our research proposes that a universal "one-size-fits-all" approach to security does not exist. Security is contextual and highly dependent on locally determined social and cultural factors. Additionally, in the case of Myanmar, the concept of secure practice is constantly evolving. A digital application that allows journalists to connect with a source today safely can be their downfall tomorrow when a soldier discovers it on their phone.

Our study tackles these questions by investigating the lived experiences of journalists in post-coup Myanmar. By looking at their daily security practices and challenges, we aim to identify better approaches to keeping journalists safe in highly restrictive environments. The following sections outline our research methodology and theoretical framework.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND MEDIA CONTEXT

This research began as an effort to understand gaps between the current digital security needs of journalists in Myanmar and the training and knowledge available in digital security programs. The authors work with EngageMedia's digital security programs, a position that provided access to participants and inevitably shapes our perspective. Based on what we have seen through that work, journalists are still being detained and arrested despite security training. While journalists know more about digital safety than before, we kept asking: do existing training approaches actually meet what journalists need on the ground?

Our research was led by Yin Maung, a former digital security trainer with experience in Myanmar's civil society who focuses on producing resources on safe online spaces. We collaborated with Myat, a journalist with five years of experience reporting in Myanmar, who now works as a freelance media consultant for digital safety projects for media and journalists. Their direct experience with Myanmar's digital rights landscape provided crucial insights into informal knowledge networks and their operations within the current repressive environment.

Many organizations have conducted digital security training in Myanmar over the years. Yet, journalists continue to face detention and arrest. While more journalists know about digital safety basics, are the training programs addressing what they truly need?

The research initially aimed to investigate how the military junta's digital repression tactics affected journalists' digital security. However, as our work progressed, it became evident that digital threats are just one facet of a multi-layered security situation. Rather than focusing solely on technology, we paid attention to social and bodily techniques that journalists use—networks of peers, circulated rumors, and makeshift knowledge built through experiences with military inspections.

We steered away from an in-depth analysis of legal frameworks, as their deployment is highly arbitrary—new regulations can be introduced ad hoc, and prior rules ignored, to justify repression.

This reflects what Rebecca Tapscott (2021) termed "institutionalized arbitrariness" in her study of Museveni's Uganda: the "unpredictable assertions and denials of authority that fragment and weaken civil society and local public authorities."

Throughout this research, we are cautious about claims of the military junta's sophisticated "digital authoritarianism." While not discounting the junta's potential use of surveillance technologies, we observed that journalists frequently face low-tech surveillance and related threats.

To understand better the security challenges journalists face we first need to sketch Myanmar's media environment. The media industry has endured restricted freedom since the initial military takeover in 1962, continuing through the brief period of quasi-civilian governance (2011-2021). The restrictions after the 1988 Uprising led to the emergence of alternative media in the 1990s, including independent and ethnic media stationed along Myanmar's borders with neighboring countries.

Following the 1962 coup, Myanmar established the Press Scrutiny Board (later renamed Press Scrutiny and Registration Division), which enforced strict censorship of all media production. Pre-publication censorship was officially repealed in August 2012, and the censorship board was dissolved in January 2013. The telecommunications sector liberalization of 2013-14 sparked a significant rise in internet usage, transforming how people accessed news, with online platforms like Facebook becoming leading channels for news dissemination. However, the brief period of media liberalization ended abruptly with the February 2021 coup. The military immediately restricted internet access and blocked social media platforms starting February 4, and by March 9, it had revoked licenses for five major independent media outlets (Mizzima, Myanmar Now, Democratic Voice of Burma [DVB], 7 Day News, and Khit Thit Media). Since then, 10 more news outlets have had their licenses revoked, while at least 202 journalists have been arrested (Athan, 2024).

State-sponsored media thrived under substantial subsidies, while privately owned mainstream outlets came under military control, limited to disseminating approved content. These now operate as what we term "state-controlled media." Media outlets continuing to report on Myanmar's political situation have transitioned into what we categorize as "independent media" (non-state-controlled). Most of these have gone underground, relocated to border regions, or gone into exile. Their financial models have been significantly disrupted, requiring business operation reassessments.

The post-coup media landscape in Myanmar can be understood through several distinct categories. State-controlled media includes legally recognized outlets with national viewership under military control, encompassing state-sponsored media, mainstream outlets now controlled by the military, and entertainment media (e.g., Myanmar Ratio Television [MRTV], Eleven Media Group). National independent media refers to outlets previously considered mainstream but now operating outside military control, often underground or from abroad, with nationwide readership and relatively larger capital (e.g., Frontier Myanmar, DVB). Small-scale independent media operates with limited funding, often utilizing social media platforms like Facebook; these outlets mostly emerged post-coup, founded by individuals formerly with mainstream media (e.g., People Spring, Burma Associated Press). Ethnic media serves Myanmar's ethnic minorities, such as those in Karenni or Shan states, reporting in Burmese or ethnic languages (e.g., Shan Herald Agency for News, Shwe Phee Myay News Agency). International media comprises foreign organizations covering Myanmar news (e.g., Reuters, Voice of America). Lastly, citizen journalism involves individuals without professional affiliation who report on conflict or human rights violations within their own communities.

Ethnic media networks merit special attention within this landscape. Having operated under military pressure for decades before the 2021 coup, these outlets have developed resilient practices and strong community connections, particularly in border regions. Their established presence in ethnic minority areas—often controlled by Ethnic Armed Organizations rather than the military—provides them with relative safety compared to national media. As one ethnic media journalist explained: "We've been dealing with the military's repression since before

the democratic opening. We already had networks to protect our reporters and sources when the coup happened." This historical experience means ethnic media often serves as a knowledge repository for security practices that newly underground national outlets are now adopting.

The coup has significantly disrupted media financial models. Commercial advertising revenue—already limited—has virtually disappeared for independent outlets, forcing reliance on international donor support, subscriptions, and community funding. This economic precarity directly impacts security; journalists with irregular incomes cannot invest in secure equipment, safe transportation, or emergency relocation when threats emerge. One media director told the research team: "We constantly have to choose between paying for operations or security needs. Sometimes we're deciding between buying more secure servers or paying our staff that month. These tough choices come up all the time."

As the threat of military actions prevented Myanmar journalists from using their real names or reporting on-site, the post-coup period saw many citizen journalists emerge who document situations on the ground. These citizen journalists, operating without professional affiliations but with deep community connections, have become essential nodes in the emerging journalistic assemblages.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

Employing qualitative methods, our research primarily focuses on interviews, complemented by two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). We interviewed 10 journalists and five digital security trainers between July and November 2023, and involved a mix of digital security trainers, journalists, and media support officers in the FGDs.

Due to significant security risks within Myanmar, we could not use ethnographic fieldwork to observe journalists in their working environments directly. The first FGD brought together six digital security trainers in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on May 24, 2023, as part of EngageMedia's Digital Rights in the Asia-Pacific public engagement event. Except for one based in Thailand, the trainers who participated are based in Myanmar and gathered through the networks of the Myanmar Internet

Project with whom EngageMedia worked previously. This FGD, intended to explore trainers' assumptions and see whether there is a contrast to the on-the-ground experiences of journalists, informed our research direction, including informant selection and thematic focus. The second FGD, conducted online on 1 November 2023 with four participants, included digital security trainers, a journalist, and a media support officer. This served as a follow-up to the initial FGD.

We interviewed ten journalists—eight professionals affiliated with media companies and two citizen journalists—from diverse backgrounds and settings between July and November 2023. Seven were based in Myanmar at the time of the interviews. The group included three women and seven men of varied ages: three were 25-29, three were 30-34, and four were 35-39. Their media associations included national media (3), international media (3), small-scale media (1), ethnic media (1), and citizen journalism (2). Regarding journalistic type, four were text journalists, four were multimedia journalists, one was a video journalist, and one focused on text for both international and national media. Their areas of operation spanned Yangon (4), Karenni (1), Shan (1), Mandalay/Yangon (1), Thailand (2), and India (1). The semi-structured interviews aimed to explore journalists' experiences and perceptions of security situations in Myanmar, starting with higher-risk individuals reporting from conflict zones like Sagaing and Karenni and snowballing from there. These interviews focused on experiences from the February 2021 coup up to the interview date, acknowledging that the situation may have evolved since.

While these efforts aim to bridge the gap in understanding journalists' realities in Myanmar, our researchers' "insider" status brought both strengths and potential limitations. Given our prior collaborations with international development agencies in Myanmar, our access to Myanmar journalists has been predominantly drawn from these networks, possibly overlooking the security situations of those beyond those circles. The journalists who opted to work for state-controlled media are also outside the scope of this research. Our research team's language capabilities present strengths and challenges: half of our four-member team are Burmese, while the others do not speak the language. We count on our Burmese staff's translation and interpretive expertise to provide an accurate report of the findings.

JOURNALISTIC ASSEMBLAGES UNDER REPRESSION

Our analysis of journalists' practices in post-coup Myanmar reveals not simply a collection of isolated survival tactics but rather what can be understood as complex, adaptive assemblages. These assemblages (DeLanda, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987)—interconnecting professional expertise, technological tools, community networks, and bodily practices—form the backbone of resilience in Myanmar's journalism sector. Like other adaptive systems that have emerged since the 2021 coup, these journalistic assemblages are neither fully formal nor informal but represent flexible combinations of diverse elements that function as coherent wholes while remaining adaptable to rapidly changing conditions.

What makes these journalistic assemblages particularly effective is their dynamic nature. When military checkpoints increase on major roads, journalists do not simply abandon reporting but transform their verification practices from centralized to distributed systems. When digital communication becomes risky during travel, they do not cease communication; instead, they shift fluidly between digital and analog methods. This continuous process of assembling and reassembling practices in response to repression allows journalism to persist despite intensifying pressures.

The security practices we saw show how journalists have transformed their profession rather than abandoned it. Instead of dropping journalistic ethics and verification standards under pressure, reporters have reimagined these professional practices through innovations like the "3-2-1 system" described below. This is not a breakdown of journalism but an evolution into forms more resilient against repression.

A good example of this professional change is the "3-2-1 system" these journalists created to maintain verification standards while working under pressure. This approach requires three independent sources, two voice verifications (typically phone calls to confirm information), and one piece of documentary evidence before publishing a story—adapting traditional journalistic verification to the constraints of the post-coup environment.

These journalism networks operate simultaneously at different scales—from hyperlocal citizen reporters documenting village-level events to exiled journalists distributing information globally. The interplay of human and non-human elements—journalistic expertise, digital technologies, community spaces, and encrypted communication tools—produces stable media assemblages, stable enough to maintain ethical reporting standards and fluid enough to evade detection.

This theoretical perspective helps explain why conventional digital security approaches often fail in Myanmar's context. Standard security training typically treats technology as isolated from social contexts. In contrast, our findings demonstrate that effective security emerges from the complex interrelationships between technical systems, social practices, and embodied knowledge. Understanding journalism in post-coup Myanmar as an assemblage highlights the need for holistic approaches that acknowledge these interdependencies.

THREATS AND RISKS

Journalists in Myanmar live under a cloud of fear due to the military's severe repression and tight grip. This fear comes from not knowing when they might face arrest during work or personal time and what might happen to their families and sources.

One journalist (#5), a middle-aged woman, was checked simply for walking in her neighborhood:

> When they asked for my password to unlock it, I had to [comply]. One soldier checked my phone while the other looked around, holding his gun. Luckily, they only checked the gallery, then asked me to open my Facebook app, which I did. It was my personal account. They scrolled through my newsfeed, checked the photos, and that was all. I was very shocked. There were protests near my neighborhood then; I think that's why they were patrolling, saw me, and decided to check.

Everyone knows journalists face harsh punishment. "We could get arrested at any time," as one informant (#8) put it. Another journalist (#6)

explained that every car passing after 8 p.m. caused fear: "We had curfew […] It was 8 p.m. So whenever a car came to my street [after then], I had concerns. The only cars that drive after curfew are military."

The "dreaded knock on the door" has returned (Myanmar Now, 2021), with security forces conducting warrantless raids. One female journalist (#5) maintains two separate houses and isolates herself socially, fearing that contact with neighbors might expose her profession.

A citizen journalist (#9) explained:

> When villagers inform us about the junta army's raids and killings and we post them to the media, those soldiers threaten the villagers to follow them anywhere and hurt them until the news is taken down. So, my primary concern is for my sources and people.

Journalists also reported fear regarding potential consequences for their family members (#3, #5), their sources, and the communities they contact. A citizen journalist shared that local communities face military threats if stories of aggression are shared.

The 2021 coup turned the pursuit of a career in journalism into a serious security risk. The Myanmar government demands its citizens state their profession or occupation on their official IDs. For our interviewees, who have been practicing journalism since the 2010s, this requirement has flagged them as potential targets.

This situation leads to increased fear of dealing with any administrative body and the threat of identity papers and/or passports losing their validity. The office of one journalist (#4) was raided, and several others (#1, #5, #6, #8) reported hearing of possible lists with their names on them. One journalist (#6) feared that being on the guest list for a press conference of the former democratic government could lead to an arrest. He also expressed his fear of getting doxed on pro-military Telegram channels if his status as a journalist became publicly known.

In general, journalists in State Administration Council (SAC)-controlled areas live in constant fear. Those residing abroad or in regions controlled by ethnic armed forces experience less fear. Military

checkpoints along roads, borders, and intersections are most feared, as the threat of arrest at these points is perceived as high.

MILITARY SURVEILLANCE AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

Despite reports about sophisticated "digital authoritarianism," our research shows the military mainly uses low-tech surveillance methods. While they have purchased digital intelligence tools (Justice for Myanmar, 2021), these technologies seem limited to specific areas or high-profile targets.

Central to this system is Myanmar's long-standing network of pro-military informers (*dalan*), which has been embedded in communities for decades. This community-based surveillance, which Selth (2021) describes as the mark of an enduring "intelligence state," means journalists must watch out at checkpoints and in everyday interactions with neighbors and community members who might report suspicious activities.

Journalist #2 explains:

> No one is using advanced devices like Cellebrite or software to inspect everyone's phones at the airport. However, they do maintain a list of individuals they intend to apprehend at airport immigration. If they identify such a person, they will detain them and escort them to a room for interrogation and device inspection. The list of types of people that can be detained at the airport includes CDMers [Civil Disobedience Movement], medical staff [like] doctors [and] nurses, and teachers.

Similarly, journalist #6 noted:

> They do have the technology, they probably bought it from Israel or Iran. […] I think they probably have the technology, but they can only station it at certain important locations. I don't think they have many technicians who can use those complex technologies. I also think

> they target revolutionists instead of journalists, but journalists will also get caught.

Ironically, using secure applications poses a significant risk during travel. Journalists report delayed responses when using secure but less mainstream apps as colleagues and informants rarely check these platforms regularly. Rather than completely migrating to secure apps (impractical as it would sever essential networks), journalists tactically use different platforms for different purposes. While communication with family remained unchanged, they switched to Signal and ProtonMail for organizational communication.

When confronted unexpectedly, journalists rely on improvised tactics. Journalist #2 described hastily hiding equipment in a biscuit package when suddenly stopped at a checkpoint. Others developed technological strategies like hidden phone partitions, disguising sensitive apps as standard utilities, or storing critical information in cloud services that leave no traces on devices.

Appearing inconspicuous is crucial to avoid drawing attention from military or citizens. This involves three interconnected layers: physical, digital, and emotional normalcy. Physically, journalists avoid activist stereotypes, as the military relies heavily on perception and intuition during inspections. As journalist #1 explained:

> Since the military [checkpoints] inspect everyone every day, they cannot thoroughly inspect everyone. So, make sure you don't look suspicious or like someone important, especially don't look like a "character" [journalist, resistance force] that might worry them. Young male adults with brave looks and strong body structures are not okay. Especially with tanned skin.

Journalist #2 shared:

> If you are part of the revolution, you shouldn't look like a [stereotypical] rebellion archetype. […] [describing a friend who was arrested] he has long hair, sunburnt skin, and is slim. This is the archetype of a rebel.

Gender and age perceptions influence suspicion levels, with young men more frequently associated with dissent than women or older individuals. Journalist #5, a middle-aged woman, noted: "As I am a woman and a mother, people do not see me as threatening."

The psychological toll of maintaining this vigilance cannot be overstated. Nearly all interviewed journalists described experiences consistent with trauma and chronic stress, including sleep disturbances, hypervigilance, and difficulty concentrating. "I never really relax anymore," explained journalist #3. "Even when I'm with family, I'm scanning for threats, planning escape routes, thinking about what I would say if stopped." This psychological burden represents an often-overlooked security challenge—impaired judgment due to trauma can lead to mistakes in risk assessment. Several journalists mentioned that media organizations provide little or no mental health support, treating psychological well-being as a personal rather than organizational responsibility.

Digitally, journalists engage in obfuscation to camouflage professional activities. A woman journalist (#5) recounted how she disguised her WhatsApp group during an inspection:

> Two soldiers [were] on a motorbike, they stopped me and checked my phone. They asked me to unlock it, and notifications from a WhatsApp group appeared. They asked, "What was that?" Our group name was 'Burmese Salad.' I told them it was a food recipe group. Then they didn't look further into it and checked my gallery. Luckily, it only had photos of my kids, as it was my personal phone. If I had been carrying another phone [work phone], I would have been in trouble.

Emotionally, journalists must maintain composure under pressure and project confidence when interacting with military personnel. Journalist #6 emphasizes the importance of projecting confidence and adopting a congenial approach:

> In some places, if they check bags and make us walk, we also need to be extremely polite, addressing them as "big bro"… or "sir" (*sayar*), even if we don't mean it. We

> engage in small talk, asking, "How are you?" and tell them where we come from and where we are going, to get familiar with them. Then they don't check as much.

The same journalist noted that when attempts to blend in fail:

> Sometimes when they go around and they check […] the important thing is that I cannot give them the impression that I am scared before they even start checking. If they detect something is wrong, then they will check. They [the checkpoint officials] are just ground personnel. So, sometimes I pretend that I am connected to this or that senior official and say that I have just come back from a meeting. Then they get scared and just say, "Yes, yes."

Journalists face additional risks from inadequate organizational risk management. After the 2021 coup, many independent and ethnic media outlets resumed operations in exile, while those lacking sufficient capital faced resource challenges. According to the Media Development Investment Fund (2022) report, 30 of 32 senior media executives reported significant revenue loss following the coup.

Media houses often lack clear security protocols despite imposing tight publication deadlines. Journalist #7, detained during travel, was arrested while trying to meet a deadline. The absence of security protocols to disconnect him from office communication endangered his entire team.

This situation has led some journalists to take a fatalistic stance toward risks. Journalist (#5) reported declining risky assignments adversely affected her job performance: "I do not have any salary increase as my performance is not satisfactory."

Salary disparity compounds these issues, with higher-risk journalists operating within Myanmar and producing content in Burmese generally earning less than counterparts abroad writing in English. This is particularly severe for small-scale and ethnic media outlets, where salaries can be up to five times lower.

The financial situation of journalists directly impacts their security practices. Those earning less cannot afford multiple devices, secure

cloud storage subscriptions, or regular replacement of compromised equipment. This creates a security gap between better-funded, often English-language journalists, and local-language reporters who typically face higher risks with fewer resources.

The challenges of hardware security deserve special attention. While software can be deleted or hidden, physical equipment like cameras, recording devices, and even laptops with certain stickers or markings can immediately identify someone as a journalist. "We've completely redesigned our reporting kits," explained journalist #2. "No professional cameras, no branded equipment, nothing that looks like journalism gear." Several journalists mentioned using everyday consumer devices like entry-level smartphones rather than professional equipment, accepting lower quality output in exchange for greater security. This hardware challenge is rarely addressed in digital security training, which tends to focus on software solutions.

Journalists have also developed dual communication systems based on the audience. "I communicate one way with local sources and completely differently with international organizations," explained journalist #6. "With locals, we use coded language on regular platforms they're comfortable with. With internationals, we use secure apps but have to be much more explicit because they don't understand our context." This strategic adaptation challenges the notion that all communications should follow the same security protocols.

SECURITY PRACTICES AND ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

Digital security practices offer indispensable value for protecting against digital threats like hacking and data breaches. However, journalists perceive the training they receive as misaligned with the particular conditions they face. Interviews indicate that training often uses standard templates focusing on basic digital hygiene and tool operations, some of which journalists learned before formal training.

Journalists have built up a range of adaptive security practices that show they see security as a whole system, not just a technical issue. These practices come from their lived experiences and are shared through informal networks, creating a collective knowledge base that changes in response to new threats.

When contacting sources inside Myanmar from abroad, especially in areas affected by internet shutdowns, journalists employ creative obfuscation methods to make international calls appear as though they originate domestically. This reduces suspicion while maintaining vital communication channels with sources who lack internet access. Alongside these technical approaches, journalists strategically use local languages and dialects that military personnel cannot easily understand, creating linguistically safe spaces for sensitive conversations.

Identity management forms a crucial part of journalists' security practices. Most avoid using their real names in the field, instead adopting pseudonyms that they regularly change to prevent identification patterns from emerging. This extends to official documentation, with several journalists changing their professional identification on ID cards and acquiring alternative documentation to reduce the risk of being identified during military checkpoints.

The spatial dimension of security is evident in journalists' frequent relocations. Many maintain multiple residences or regularly change locations, recognizing that establishing consistent patterns increases vulnerability. This physical mobility is complemented by strategic approaches to source protection, with journalists often employing local fixers as intermediaries and engaging in collaborative reporting across national and provincial borders to minimize their own exposure while maintaining information flows.

Digital compartmentalization serves as another layer of protection. Journalists typically keep strict separation between their professional and personal digital lives through separate SIM cards, Facebook accounts, smartphones, and internet browsers. While most use secure, open-source applications despite the risks such apps might pose during inspections, they deliberately avoid group chats where possible, recognizing that information shared collectively is only as secure as its weakest link. This careful digital segregation, coupled with point-to-point communication methods, helps manage the complex balance between security requirements and practical reporting needs.

A fundamental issue is that most digital security training frameworks originate from Western contexts where legal protections exist. "Many

trainers come with assumptions about how authorities operate," explained journalist #4. "They teach us to assert our rights when confronted—but in our context, claiming legal rights could provoke violence. The military doesn't follow the law; they are the law." This disconnect means security training often focuses on protecting against sophisticated digital surveillance while underemphasizing the immediate physical risks journalists face when equipment is discovered during searches.

This results in technically capable journalists refusing to use security tools they deem impractical: "Password protection will just make the arrested person get hit more. As you know, one cannot be stubborn and refuse to open" (#6). Journalist #7 recounted: "I was arrested at the airport. They took my phones and computers. They asked me to open the password for the phone and laptop."

Two journalists (#2, #4) also noted the ineffectiveness of standard security training in sudden high-risk situations. If military personnel approach with only minutes to prepare, digital security tools may prove inadequate. Digital security experts need to adjust training for Myanmar's context, incorporating physical mitigation measures like those described by digital security trainer #2: journalists "mainly use a physical approach," such as destroying USB ports without damaging data or hiding phones.

One journalist (#8), stopped on their way to the Thai border, observed:

> The inspector knew that Signal app is an application for secure communication. […] There were inspectors who inspected more thoroughly if they found the Signal app. That's what I have noticed. When they found Signal app, they asked, "Are you going to Mae Sot?" They took more time to inspect young people. Even though they let us go, they knew what we were going for.

While Facebook poses security risks, it remains necessary for news distribution and maintaining normalcy. Journalists must keep active Facebook profiles to avoid suspicion, as not having a social media presence would look unusual to authorities. This practical reality requires security approaches that acknowledge the platform's necessity rather than insisting on its complete abandonment.

The strategic importance of everyday apps is often overlooked in security training. "Having Facebook, TikTok, and casual games on my phone is actually part of my security strategy," explained journalist #2. "When my phone is checked, these normal apps make me look like an average person, not someone doing sensitive work." Several journalists mentioned they purposely stay active on non-secure platforms to create digital normalcy patterns that help them blend in. This challenges standard digital security advice that recommends minimizing one's digital footprint on commercial platforms.

Navigating checkpoint interactions involves culturally specific knowledge that goes beyond technical security practices. Several journalists mentioned strategically using local cultural norms of hierarchy and respect. "I always carry small gifts like cigarettes or betel nuts," said journalist #3. Offering these to soldiers establishes a social connection that makes rigorous inspection less likely." Women journalists reported leveraging gendered expectations by appearing maternal or deferential to male officers. Such cultural navigation represents a form of security knowledge rarely captured in formal training but extensively shared through peer networks.

Journalists have also developed inventive individual security protocols such as renting rooms for sensitive stories, traveling with resistance groups to avoid checkpoints, and using handwritten notebooks instead of digital contact storage.

SUPPORT INFRASTRUCTURE AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to security concerns, digital security training shifted from predominantly in-person to online formats. Support groups are developing self-paced online courses, but they're only shared within trusted networks. Even publicly available courses share only basic safety information to prevent potential exploitation by the military junta. This reflects the careful balance between providing necessary security knowledge and preventing that knowledge from being used against journalists.

Digital Security Clinics have emerged, providing tailored consultation via Telegram hotlines, email scheduling, and chatbots. These clinics serve as responsive and dynamic resources, adapting to the changing needs of journalists in the field.

International media support organizations play a complex role in this security ecosystem. While they provide crucial funding, training, and emergency assistance, their approaches sometimes reflect Western assumptions about media environments that do not match Myanmar's reality. "International organizations want us to follow the same security protocols used in places with functioning legal systems," noted journalist #6. "They don't understand that we operate in a context where laws are weapons, not protections." Several journalists mentioned that international support tends to flow to better-connected, often English-speaking media organizations, missing smaller outlets and citizen journalists who typically face the highest risks.

Informal networks of peers and activists also significantly help normalize security practices through shared experiences. Journalist #1 noted that her company has

> a [Messenger] group of editors and journalists. I think it shouldn't exist. Each editor and journalist can communicate directly. What if one of them gets arrested? They don't even acknowledge such a risk. So, the idea of [the company being capable of] providing digital security training is far-fetched. They don't have digital security knowledge either.

Support groups offer infrastructure assistance, including VPN vouchers, secure phones, and eSIMs, to high-risk journalists, although this support reaches only a limited number of individuals.

Despite these supports, journalists face significant challenges including resource limitations as secure services cost money, and small media houses rarely receive funding specific to digital security; ineffective protection against physical threats as digital security becomes irrelevant during direct military confrontations; identity document risks as expired passports and occupation records on national IDs create additional exposure; and training-practice mismatch as current curricula don't adequately address the low-tech, physical security risks journalists frequently encounter.

Training should incorporate the practical approaches journalists have already developed rather than repeating technical solutions that do not work well in the field.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on our findings, we propose several recommendations for improving security training and support for journalists in Myanmar:

Digital security training should involve journalists as co-designers rather than passive recipients. Since security needs are highly personalized, journalists should help determine relevant aspects, with trainers serving as facilitators. Training should include stress management alongside technical security practices. This collaborative approach addresses the limitations of current training models identified earlier—moving beyond basic digital hygiene and tool operations to develop context-specific security practices that integrate digital, physical, and psychosocial components.

Training should acknowledge the "tricks of the trade" circulating informally within journalist networks. These peer-shared techniques, developed through direct experience with military inspections and surveillance, often prove more relevant than standardized approaches imported from different contexts. Practical security training should formalize and enhance these emerging practices rather than replace them.

These accounts show how digital security practices cannot be isolated from the broader media environment and sustainability context within which journalists work. Looking at the Myanmar media landscape, it's clear that media outlets are struggling to survive operationally, with financial resources mostly going to larger organizations. This situation shows the importance of organizational security and highlights organizational readiness and strategic response, underscoring the need for a more holistic approach to protecting journalists.

Interactive approaches using simulations and role-play of emergency scenarios like military checkpoints would be more effective than traditional awareness-raising. Given journalists' time constraints, self-directed learning through interactive formats like digital comics or mobile games could supplement formal training.

Security practices must adapt to real-world realities rather than imposing idealized solutions that overlook journalists' need to maintain normal-looking online presences. Rapid-response emergency assistance should be made more accessible through platforms that journalists actually use, potentially via Telegram channels rather than relying solely on email communication.

A more thorough assessment of the military junta's actual surveillance capabilities is necessary to effectively address journalists' needs. This should combine journalists' encounter reports with broader studies of Myanmar's intelligence apparatus.

Security practices are always tied to cultural specificities. Training must understand ground realities and recognize that journalists' needs exist within specific cultural contexts and relational networks encompassing both professional and personal lives. Rather than treating digital security as purely a technical issue, a holistic approach that incorporates mental health, stress management, and physical security is essential.

CONCLUSION

The journalistic assemblages that have emerged in post-coup Myanmar represent not merely adaptations to authoritarian control but a fundamentally different conception of journalism itself. Western models of journalism, with their emphasis on institutional protections, legal recourse, and technological solutions, simply cannot function in a context where the state actively criminalizes truth-telling. When a military checkpoint or a neighbor's suspicion presents a greater threat than digital surveillance, the very meaning of security transcends conventional digital safety protocols.

The adaptive strategies employed by journalists like #6, who disarms military checkpoints through casual conversation, and #5, who encodes professional communications within recipe exchanges, reveal not isolated survival tactics but components of a sophisticated responsive system. Their persistence represents something profound beyond individual bravery—it embodies journalism's transformation under fire, organically reshaping to survive despite authoritarian constraints while maintaining its essential function of bearing witness.

What remains invisible to global audiences consuming news about Myanmar is the complex network of local journalists who serve as the unnamed sources, fixers, and verification agents for international media outlets. Foreign news agencies rely heavily on these journalists' embodied knowledge and community connections, often without fully understanding the extraordinary risks they face or compensating them adequately for their expertise. When international outlets report on Myanmar, they may depend on verification systems like the "3-2-1 approach" developed by local journalists without acknowledging the physical dangers involved in obtaining each piece of evidence.

In this context, ethical frameworks take on radically different dimensions. Western notions of journalistic ethics centered on objectivity, transparency, and clear disclosure of sources cannot be directly applied when naming a source might lead to their imprisonment or death. Security is not merely a matter of protecting digital communications but extends to community trust, bodily safety, and psychological well-being. The ethics of survival necessitate practices that might seem unorthodox in Western newsrooms—using coded language, maintaining multiple identities, or deliberately blending into crowds—yet these practices represent not a compromise of journalistic integrity but its essential preservation under impossible conditions.

Our research emphasizes the need for a comprehensive security framework that recognizes these realities—one that integrates digital, physical, and psychosocial components while acknowledging Myanmar's specific cultural context. When standard digital security approaches fail to address the "low-tech" threats journalists face daily, we must fundamentally rethink how security training and support are conceptualized and delivered.

By reframing security as a holistic, contextually specific practice rather than a purely technical problem, we can better support journalists who continue to report against the odds in Myanmar's challenging media landscape. Their continuing efforts to document events despite severe personal risk demonstrate the resilience of journalistic practice and the human commitment to truth that persists even when conventional journalistic institutions falter. This transformation of professional practice under authoritarian pressure may ultimately offer insights

into how journalism itself can evolve to meet the challenges of an increasingly hostile global environment for press freedom.

NOTES

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CHAPTER 5

VOICES FROM EXILE: THE SAFETY NEEDS OF MYANMAR WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Yucca Wai and Joseph Andersson

ABSTRACT

The survival of exiled Myanmar media relies on the survival of media professionals who have created resilient networks functioning as adaptive assemblages—flexible combinations of professional practices, support networks, and digital technologies that allow journalism to continue under extreme pressure. This chapter examines how women journalists, following the 2021 military coup, have developed innovative organizational forms that transcend traditional boundaries between formal and informal media practices. Working conditions for Myanmar journalists significantly deteriorated after the coup, with women journalists facing specific and severe gendered challenges, which, unless addressed, could cause an exodus of women from the profession. Drawing on surveys and focus group discussions with exiled women journalists in Thailand, this research documents the emergence of journalistic assemblages that combine professional expertise, community networks, and technological adaptations, generating innovative solutions to challenges of physical safety, legal insecurity, and professional continuity. These assemblages are neither completely formal nor informal but represent flexible combinations of diverse elements functioning as coherent wholes while remaining adaptable to changing repressive conditions. The chapter contributes to understanding how professional communities adapt under authoritarian pressure, demonstrating that media organizational failure can paradoxically generate innovation rather than simply breakdown.

Keywords: women journalists, exile, safety, gendered risk, press freedom, media assemblages

INTRODUCTION

Journalism plays a critical role during times of conflict and authoritarianism, serving as a vital tool for communication, activism, and the pursuit of democratic ideals. Yet, since the February 2021 military coup, the situation for journalists in Myanmar has drastically worsened. By late 2024, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) confirmed that the number of journalists killed since the coup, where impunity prevails, had doubled to eight, with other monitoring groups like Athan reporting ten deaths (CPJ, 2024; Athan, 2025). Furthermore, over 170 journalists have been arrested since the coup, and recent estimates (mid-to-late 2024) consistently indicate that over 50 journalists remain imprisoned or detained (ICNL, 2024; Athan, 2025; IMJA, 2024; DJIM, 2024). This wave of repression effectively dismantled the once-vibrant network of developing media that had flourished over the preceding decade.

Reflecting this dire situation, Myanmar remains one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists. In 2022, the CPJ designated Myanmar as the eighth worst country globally in terms of impunity for crimes committed against journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022). While its rank shifted slightly to 10th in the 2024 Global Impunity Index, this masked a worsening reality, as the number of unsolved journalist murders considered in the index actually increased (CPJ, 2024). Similarly, according to the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), Myanmar ranked 171st out of 180 nations in 2024, a marginal improvement from 173rd in 2023. However, RSF noted that Myanmar's underlying press freedom score actually declined, indicating a deterioration in conditions despite the slight rank change (RSF, 2024). These reports serve as a stark reminder of the contrast between the nation's previous aspirations for media freedom and the grim reality faced by journalists in Myanmar today.

The experiences of exiled women journalists documented in this chapter reflect broader patterns of community adaptation identified throughout this volume. Like the healthcare and education networks described in other chapters, exiled media professionals have developed assemblages that challenge assumptions that state failure inevitably leads to societal collapse. These journalistic assemblages combine

professional knowledge, digital technologies, community trust networks, and adaptive practices into new organizational forms that are simultaneously stable enough to maintain consistent reporting and fluid enough to evade detection and suppression. Rather than merely surviving, these journalists have transformed professional practices in ways that generate what the introduction to this volume describes as "a multiplicity of possible futures."

The networks formed by exiled women journalists exemplify what Deleuze and Guattari call "rhizomatic" structures—non-hierarchical, heterogeneous connections that adapt through constant becoming rather than fixed being. Unlike traditional media organizations with centralized authority and stable structures, these journalistic assemblages operate through distributed agency, where power, knowledge, and resources flow through multiple channels simultaneously, enabling resilience precisely through their fluid composition.

Women journalists[1] must contend with specific gendered challenges, which, unless addressed, could cause an exodus of women from the profession. This research focuses on these conditions for several reasons. First, we acknowledge the persistent gender disparities and unique challenges that women in journalism often encounter, which can impact their career opportunities, safety, and overall well-being. Furthermore, women remain underrepresented in key decision-making roles within media organizations, resulting in a lack of diversity in news reporting and content creation.

Women journalists often confront gender-based violence, harassment, and threats while fulfilling their professional responsibilities. Examining these challenges is crucial not only for the safety and well-being of women in the field but also for a comprehensive understanding of gender-based violence within journalism. Our research includes diverse perspectives, contributing to the promotion of equitable rights for journalists. Our findings and analysis, while tailored for the community of exiled Myanmar women journalists in Thailand, also aim to address these challenges and advance gender equality in the global media industry.

Our research focuses on women journalists in exile rather than those working within Myanmar for several crucial factors. The environment

for women journalists in Myanmar is fraught with danger and extreme precarity, necessitating journalists to work as covertly as possible, often refraining from identifying as journalists at all.[2] Consequently, women journalists in exile have greater freedom to openly engage in discussions and share their experiences, allowing us to gain a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and needs.

METHODOLOGY

We gathered data through interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), surveys, and desk research on existing literature. Our research design responded to principles of inclusive analysis, considering power dynamics, intersectional identities, context, and challenging existing knowledge about labor rights and gender perspectives within Myanmar media.

Using community-based participatory action research (CBPAR), Exile Hub worked in partnership with exiled Myanmar women journalists in Thailand throughout the research process. An advisory board of local, regional, and international members involved in women journalists' rights verified our methodology and reviewed our research report. We followed the ethical guidelines of the Murad Code for research with survivors of conflict-related violence, emphasizing transparency, integrity, and ethical behavior throughout the research.

We organized four Focus Group Discussions across Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, both locations with a longstanding history of housing exiled Myanmar media organizations. The 25 participants were categorized into three groups: women journalists without prior safety training experience, editors-in-chief, and experts specializing in journalist safety (including professionals in psychology, law, and human rights advocacy).

The survey questions, drafted by Exile Hub's research team and reviewed by Myanmar women journalists, were distributed to 79 exiled Myanmar women journalists in Thailand. Respondents ranged from founders and managing directors to journalists and freelancers. We analyzed survey findings, FGDs, and interview responses using validation measures such as data triangulation and member checking.

Interviews were conducted with media house owners, experts, and representatives from media development organizations, with some interviewees giving consent to be named while others remained anonymous. These findings were synthesized with other research data to inform our analysis.

JOURNALISTIC ASSEMBLAGES IN EXILE

The women journalists in this study have created what can be understood as professional assemblages—dynamic combinations of human actors (journalists, sources, community supporters), technologies (secure communication tools, digital verification systems), and practices (adapted verification protocols, information-sharing strategies) that constantly reconfigure themselves under pressure. These assemblages undergo what assemblage theory describes as continuous processes of territorialization, establishing certain connections while simultaneously deterritorializing, breaking down existing structures to adapt to new challenges.

These assemblages generate capabilities that exceed what their individual components could achieve in isolation. For example, the use of secure communication tools combined with community trust networks enables information gathering and verification capacities more resilient to surveillance than any individual journalist's isolated efforts. The integration of professional verification methods with community information-sharing networks enables reporting to continue under conditions where neither formal journalism nor informal documentation alone could persist. These emergent properties demonstrate how assemblages produce what DeLanda calls "relations of exteriority," where components maintain their autonomy while generating new collective capacities through their interaction (DeLanda, 2016).

The financial and legal insecurity described by participants has catalyzed new forms of journalistic practice. Faced with heightened surveillance and the breakdown of traditional verification systems, journalists adapt by employing strategies such as using secure communication platforms like Signal and Telegram, and potentially compartmentalizing information where feasible, though the specifics and prevalence of such systems require further investigation. These adaptations demonstrate how

assemblages reconfigure under pressure, creating innovative solutions through what assemblage theory calls "lines of flight."

Similarly, the adaptation of digital security practices represents a transformation rather than abandonment of professional expertise, as journalists redesign communication systems and security protocols to function in fragmented and high-risk information landscapes.

Respondents averaged 30 years of age, with half married or in relationships, and one-quarter having children. Notably, 41 percent of those with children reported their children were not attending school due to instability in exile. Employment status varied: 59.5 percent worked full-time, 27.8 percent part-time, and 12.7 percent were unemployed.

Geographically, most resided in Tak Province (50.7 percent) or Chiang Mai Province (40 percent), with the remainder in Mae Hong Son and Bangkok.

The coup in Myanmar compelled 84.8 percent of respondents to leave the country due to safety concerns related to their journalistic work. They relocated between July 2021 and July 2023, with significant exoduses in December 2021, May 2022, and October 2022, periods that coincided with increased crackdowns and Tatmadaw airstrikes. Of 73 respondents who provided arrival dates, 26 percent arrived in Thailand in 2021, over half throughout 2022, and the remainder in 2023.

WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN EXILE

When asked about their main safety concerns, most journalists cited difficulty collecting stories (64 respondents), poor mental well-being (62), uncertain legal status (62), concern for family safety (55), and lack of job security (52).

Many journalists now operate either under pseudonyms or without bylines for safety reasons. Our survey found only 20.3 percent used their real names in published work, while 31.6 percent used pen names and 22.8 percent received no byline credit. While this practice enhances safety, it erodes trust with sources and hinders journalists' ability to build professional reputations and portfolios.

Journalists in exile face additional challenges including difficulty contacting sources, concerns about source safety, and securing safe communication. Despite journalists' understanding of digital security basics, sources on the ground often lack such knowledge, potentially endangering both parties. Journalists frequently compromise digital security to reach sources, or invest significant uncovered time teaching sources digital safety tools.

As one survey respondent noted: "In secure interviews, it is difficult to build trust when you can't introduce yourself because you can't know the other person for sure." Another explained: "Since I have to follow the news of my local people from outside the country, it is a challenge to communicate by phone. I want to make a video report, but it is difficult to get a video interview."

FINANCIAL, HOUSING, AND LEGAL INSECURITY

Adaptive financial practices have emerged, with journalists utilizing informal community-based trust-based transfer systems like *hundi* alongside digital tools where possible, demonstrating how assemblages combine formal technical systems with informal community networks to create resilient economic pathways.

Journalists in both Chiang Mai and Mae Sot face significant financial instability, often working long hours in dangerous conditions for meager pay. Media houses frequently lack stable funding for livable wages, with smaller organizations operating entirely on short-term emergency funds since the coup. This precarity is exacerbated by reports of dwindling donor funding for Myanmar media, leading to layoffs, salary reductions, and increased job insecurity across the sector (DVB English, 2025; DVB, 2024). Freelancers, stringers, and citizen journalists[3] often lack support beyond what individual stories provide.

Our survey revealed that 35.5 percent of respondents earned between THB 5,000 and 10,000 monthly, and 15 percent earned less than THB 5,000—below Thailand's established minimum wage at the time of the survey (THB 8,160 in Chiang Mai and THB 7,968 in Mae Sot, based on 2022 rates).[4] The cost of living for undocumented migrants is often

higher than for locals, and the exchange rate disparity between the falling Myanmar Kyat and Thai Baht creates additional financial disadvantages.

Over half (57 percent) of surveyed journalists lack adequate legal documentation to reside safely in Thailand, relying instead on precarious forms such as migrant worker cards, Certificates of Identity, or short-term visas. This insecure legal status exposes them to constant risks of arrest, detention, or forced repatriation. This danger has been amplified by recent reports of Thai authorities deporting Myanmar nationals directly into the hands of the junta, where they may face forced conscription (The New Humanitarian, 2025; The Irrawaddy, 2025). Although these documents enable basic residence, employment, and access to essential services, obtaining them places significant financial burdens on already limited incomes.

Though safer than Myanmar, exiled journalists still face physical risks, especially along the Thai-Myanmar border. When asked about their most significant challenges, personal safety topped the list. Those without documentation risk arrest and possible handover to the State Administration Council, and they are less familiar with addressing addressing security concerns in their host country.

Media houses struggle to help employees obtain legal status due to inexperience with Thai bureaucracy. As one representative from The Irrawaddy stated: "I have no idea how to legalize these people. I myself stayed semi-legal in the past. Now I am finally legal, but this has taken me decades." Other organizations like Frontier, Mizzima, and DVB attempted to secure documentation for their staff but struggled with the financial burden.

Nearly one-third (32.9 percent) reported feeling unsafe in provided housing arrangements, citing overcrowding, inadequate privacy, and gendered expectations, such as obligatory domestic chores imposed on women journalists. Many media organizations attempt to mitigate low wages by providing shared housing or relocation assistance, but budgetary constraints often leave journalists to secure their own accommodations at personal expense.

Women journalists in shared facilities sometimes face expectations to perform domestic tasks, with refusal potentially resulting in job loss. Focus group participants compared their situation to those still in Myanmar, noting that exile presents different but equally challenging dangers. As one participant explained: "Women face more challenges outside of Myanmar. Media houses are not respecting the women journalists… Emotional abuse is one of the issues I've encountered, which includes a significant income disparity between men and women colleagues."

Nearly half (48.6 percent) of respondents indicated that while their safety situation changed after moving to Thailand, it did not improve. Many noted that while physical dangers differed, new concerns arose regarding legal documentation, police extortion, discrimination, and unfamiliarity with local safety protocols. However, 37.8 percent felt safer in Thailand, particularly regarding mental health and physical security.

Industry leaders expressed concern that inadequate pay and insecurity could drive women journalists from the profession. While the exact percentage is difficult to ascertain, a massive exodus of journalists from Myanmar into exile has occurred since the 2021 coup, with estimates suggesting over a thousand are now working from abroad (GIJN, n.d.; BTI Project, 2024; HRM, 2024). The challenging conditions detailed here risk reducing women's representation within this exiled media sector and potentially perpetuating exploitative working environments.

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

The adaptive strategies employed by women journalists occur within a context marked by significant gender-based challenges. While contributing to the resilience of journalistic assemblages, women simultaneously navigate specific risks and discrimination.

Focus group participants highlighted gender-based harassment and discrimination as primary safety concerns. Six participants specifically identified newsroom harassment, with others mentioning sexual and verbal harassment. Many of these conditions predated the coup; a 2016 Fojo Media Institute report found that over 50 percent of women journalists in the regional areas surveyed experienced verbal or sexual

harassment within media organizations, without access to reporting mechanisms when incidents occurred (Fojo Media Institute, 2016). Recent research focusing on the exile context confirms these are pervasive and severe issues, with reports detailing regular gender-based discrimination, violence, and harassment, including specific accounts of senior male colleagues pressuring junior women for sex in exchange for career advancement or retaliating if refused (Frontier Myanmar, 2024; HRM, 2024). Some reports document extreme cases, including rape by a colleague in Thailand (HRM, 2024).

One participant emphasized that for women journalists,

> safety risks permeate both personal and professional lives. It is already a danger to be a woman, and even more to be a woman journalist living in exile. Many people do not even dare to harass male colleagues, but when it comes to women journalists, we receive the brunt of it.

Our discussions revealed that women journalists face greater vulnerability to job loss when raising concerns about compensation or workplace issues. As another participant noted, "If women complain about their salaries or anything that is happening inside their media houses, their contract will be terminated." This vulnerability is amplified in exile where journalists depend on employers not just for income but potentially for housing and legal status.

Organizational policies to address these issues are lacking. Only 16.5 percent of surveyed women reported that their workplace had a harassment policy, with 43 percent unsure whether such policies existed. Similarly, when asked about human resources policies, 13.9 percent reported none existed, and 43 percent were uncertain. The absence of clear policies leaves women journalists without protections or recourse when facing discrimination or harassment.

MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

The interconnection between material conditions and psychological well-being highlights how these assemblages must address multiple dimensions simultaneously, with journalists creating work practices

that function as both professional outputs and psychological coping mechanisms.

Women journalists have faced mounting mental health challenges beginning with COVID-19 and significantly worsening after the coup. Before recovering from pandemic stresses, many found themselves fugitives in imminent danger, resulting in profound psychological impacts. Nearly 80 percent of survey respondents (62 out of 79) reported poor mental well-being affecting their work in exile.

Focus group participants noted improved sleep after relocating to Thailand, with one respondent stating, "I have been able to enjoy peaceful, uninterrupted sleep since coming to Thailand." Another explained: "Previously, I couldn't sleep at night. I was constantly on edge whenever I heard the sounds of cars and motorbikes, and I suffered from insomnia. There is a much greater sense of security after arriving in Thailand."

Nevertheless, the precarious nature of exile continues to affect well-being. Six respondents reported persistent mental health decline related to fear of arrest and stress from precarious living conditions. These anxieties likely began in Myanmar but became noticeable only after reaching relative physical safety. Recent reports confirm that mental health challenges are ongoing and potentially compounded by the specific stresses of exile, including precarious immigration status, financial difficulties, and survivor guilt, with limited support systems available (HRM, 2024; Athan, 2025).

While most respondents recognized their declining mental health, many prioritized working through their trauma. As one participant explained:

> I no longer want to talk about how I feel when asked if I want mental health support… I try to talk to myself by saying that I will fight the regime until the end. I heal that way and forget about what I'm really feeling.

Mental health concerns often stem directly from material circumstances, suggesting that addressing basic needs for security, documentation, and financial stability may significantly improve psychological well-being. Though most respondents acknowledged mental health

challenges, many turned to work as a coping mechanism, making harassment-free workplaces particularly important.

EXISTING SUPPORT MECHANISMS

The average cost of relocating from Myanmar to Thailand was approximately THB 25,000, yet nearly half (49.4 percent) of surveyed journalists received no relocation assistance. Of those receiving help, only nine got support from employers, ranging from national outlets to ethnic media. Twelve received assistance from media support organizations, while others relied on personal networks.

Focus group discussions revealed that support organizations and media houses typically covered only partial relocation costs or the journalist alone rather than accompanying family members. Only 35.4 percent of journalists in our survey reported having legal documentation to live in Thailand; the survey's two documentation questions thus yield differing estimates, and the true share without secure status likely lies between them. Visa costs consume over 30 percent of annual income for many. This creates an unsustainable financial burden that neither media houses nor support organizations can fully address.

Digital security remains a critical concern. Participants emphasized the need for practical implementation, equipment (laptops and devices), secure cloud storage, and licensed software. They called for cultural shifts to create safer, more equitable environments for women journalists both inside Myanmar and in exile.

Despite 69.6 percent of respondents experiencing security breaches while working in Myanmar, their security concerns persisted after relocation, merely transforming from arrest threats to deportation fears. Only 7.6 percent of participants expressed high confidence in managing these risks, highlighting the need for enhanced security training.

Most women journalists (55.7 percent) had never received safety training tailored for journalists. Among those who had, 80 percent received it only after the coup, indicating a significant gap in pre-crisis preparedness. Furthermore, 72.2 percent reported that their media

organizations provided no safety training whatsoever, placing the responsibility on media support organizations to fill this critical gap.

Our research found that existing programs fall short of providing the holistic support journalists need—addressing physical, emotional, social, and professional well-being in an integrated approach that ensures overall health, resilience, and success.

THE ROLE OF MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

In conflict settings, journalism has historically been male-dominated, skewing narratives and limiting perspective diversity. Our interviews revealed mixed awareness of the importance of gender representation in newsrooms.

Some organizations reported gender imbalances worsening since the coup. As a Frontier Myanmar representative noted: "We always look into female journalists because it is very important to have a balance in our newsroom. But since the coup, it's very much unbalanced again… male-dominant again, because some of the women journalists are still in Myanmar." This aligns with broader concerns about a potential backslide in gender representation due to the specific challenges women face in exile, a concern the authors have raised in presenting this research (EngageMedia, 2024).

Other organizations like DVB and The Irrawaddy reported 30-40 percent women's representation, aligning with the International Women's Media Foundation's older (2011) finding that women comprised approximately one-third of the journalism workforce in the 522 companies it surveyed (IWMF, 2011). However, the current challenging reality and lack of comprehensive recent data mean these figures may not fully capture the precarious situation for women's participation in exiled media.

Media organizations struggle to meet journalists' needs beyond basic salaries. Some provide additional support like housing allowances, documentation assistance, or medical insurance, but these expenses strain organizational budgets and are rarely covered by donor funding.

With collapsed revenue models domestically, media organizations now depend heavily on donor funding, which restricts spending flexibility and creates vulnerability due to funding instability and shifting geopolitical priorities (Athan, 2025; DVB, 2024). Larger, established organizations maintain salaries at or above Thai minimum wage, while smaller outlets often pay below standard rates, compensating with shared housing and meals.

As Thin Lei Win, co-founder of Myanmar Now, observed: "Many policy manuals have had to be rewritten because newsroom management and structure have completely changed. Now, they are just so focused on survival that they have not had a chance to organize and build up these structures."

Despite these challenges, some organizations maintain commitments to gender equity. The Irrawaddy provides three months of paid maternity leave, while DVB offers child-friendly office spaces. As an Irrawaddy representative stated: "We need to push for gender safety sensitivity not because donors said we have to. This is a moral obligation, which comes with having responsibility."

Support typically focuses on full-time staff, leaving fixers, stringers, and citizen journalists without institutional protection. Survey respondents frequently expressed concern for colleagues and sources on the ground who lack necessary security resources. This highlights the need for comprehensive protection measures for the entire journalism ecosystem.

All interviewed media institutions noted the instability of donor funding, which shifts based on external geopolitical factors. With Myanmar media heavily dependent on international support post-coup, journalists remain vulnerable to sudden changes in donor priorities and policies.

SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

Media development organizations have collaborated to provide support to exiled outlets and individual journalists, including newsroom development, financial assistance, emergency aid, mental health support, capacity-building, safety training, media literacy campaigns,

research, and advocacy. However, limited institutional funding has sometimes diverted emergency support funds intended for individuals to sustain struggling media outlets. Organizations with budgets established before the coup had to quickly reallocate resources to address urgent evacuation and relocation needs.

Current support levels inadequately meet the material requirements of Myanmar media in exile. As international funding shifts to other regions with evolving geopolitical priorities, support organizations face increasing resource constraints. These challenges threaten the sustainability of independent media houses and, consequently, journalists' ability to inform the public effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUPPORTERS OF EXILED MEDIA

Donors must provide flexible and sustainable funding mechanisms that specifically address documentation needs, comprehensive safety training, and mental health support. Media organizations should implement explicit anti-harassment policies, equitable housing practices, and extend protections to all journalistic contributors, including freelancers and citizen journalists.

For funders supporting Myanmar media, several approaches could significantly improve conditions for women journalists. Recognizing the importance of providing benefits and livelihood support through both media organizations and independent mechanisms for freelancers is essential. Making concessions for media organizations in their overheads, particularly for services that ensure journalists' well-being, is fundamental. Flexibility in funding is crucial to adapting to rapidly changing situations on the ground. Funders should also incentivize media organizations to implement policies that foster equality, address harassment concerns, and provide support tailored to the specific needs of women journalists. Integrating gender-specific budgeting and programming into fund allocation to local partners would ensure targeted support. Finally, funders should consider supporting organizations that provide holistic support not only to institutions but also to individual journalists.

Media organizations themselves must take proactive measures to address journalists' safety with particular focus on the distinct challenges faced by women. Unfair gendered expectations in the workplace, including biases that hinder professional growth or lead to discriminatory treatment, must be clearly defined and recognized to prevent abuses and ensure equitable working conditions. Regular updates to personnel handbooks and policies to align with both local and international standards are crucial. Essential employment documents should be available in both Burmese and English, with verification that all staff members read, comprehend, and sign these documents. Additionally, media organizations must extend support beyond staff journalists to media professionals working as stringers, citizen journalists, and sources on the ground, with special emphasis on digital and informational security.

For media support groups, the traditional focus on professional development must expand to include comprehensive support for journalists' livelihoods and well-being. The factors impacting their professional outputs—displacement, precarity, lack of material resources—are often humanitarian in nature and require more extensive support than current media development institutions typically provide. Additional protections are needed for sources and citizen journalists, with increased resources directed to journalists in exile to ensure safety across the board. Support groups should implement courses to help exiled journalists integrate into host communities through local language learning and understanding of local laws and policing systems. Gender-sensitive tailored safety training must account for the unique experiences of exiled women journalists, while including male colleagues in sexual harassment training promotes a more inclusive approach. Supporting independent mechanisms to assist women journalists outside of media organizations and providing resources for addressing sexual harassment are crucial steps. Finally, conducting audits of employers and media organizations would help ensure that no gendered abuses occur within these groups.

CONCLUSION

The survival of exiled Myanmar media relies fundamentally on the survival of media professionals themselves, emphasizing the critical importance of protecting journalists' rights to practice their profession

securely. This research has revealed that women journalists in exile have created assemblages that navigate between state and anti-state paths, breaking free from classical modes of representation through either state collaboration or opposition.

These findings complicate assumptions in Southeast Asian studies and broader scholarship on authoritarian resilience. Rather than producing either collapsed institutions or state-sheltered opposition, state failure in Myanmar has given rise to hybrid organizational forms. While existing research often emphasizes how technology either assists protest or enables surveillance, our findings, alongside the other chapters of this volume, show communities creating sophisticated socio-technical systems that sustain essential public functions without replicating state control structures.

The assemblages created by women journalists mirror patterns seen across other sectors in post-coup Myanmar—they maintain stability precisely through their capacity to change, they transform rather than abandon professional expertise, and they operate simultaneously at different geographic and social scales. As journalists navigate what the introduction describes as the 'delicate balance between structure and flexibility, specialist knowledge and common practice,' they demonstrate how assemblage thinking provides not just analytical insights but practical strategies for survival under authoritarian conditions.

This study makes several significant contributions to understanding the gendered dimensions of journalism in crisis contexts. It documents the specific vulnerabilities and resilience strategies of women journalists following a major political upheaval, adding to scholarly understanding of gender in media during conflict. It provides evidence-based insights into how professional assemblages emerge that combine material conditions, legal status, and psychological well-being. And it identifies how these emergent forms contribute to a more just and inclusive journalism landscape while remaining attentive to issues of power, inclusion, and gender equality.

The future of Myanmar journalism depends on how these dynamic professional networks continue to evolve and adapt. These journalists navigate between creative escape routes (what Deleuze and Guattari call

"lines of flight") and stabilizing forces ("attractors") to build resilience and maintain independence. Rather than simply becoming victims of state collapse or forming conventional opposition movements, journalists have created flexible organizational structures that combine diverse elements—people, technologies, and practices—in ways that may ultimately prove more durable than traditional media institutions.

However, this adaptation does not come without significant costs, which fall disproportionately on women journalists. As our research demonstrates, women journalists bear substantial material burdens (financial precarity, housing insecurity, lack of legal documentation), emotional costs (trauma, anxiety, sleep disruption), and professional sacrifices (loss of bylines, career recognition, and workplace protections). They also face severe gender-specific challenges including workplace harassment, discrimination, domestic labor expectations in shared housing, and heightened vulnerability to job loss when raising concerns. Despite these heavy personal tolls that specifically impact women in the profession, their approach has opened multiple potential pathways for journalism to survive and even innovate under authoritarian pressure, demonstrating how professional communities can transform rather than merely endure in crisis situations.

NOTES

[1] This chapter revises a longer paper presented at the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies: Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State (August 2-4, 2024, Chiang Mai University, Thailand, https://www.burmaconference.com/). The research was led by Exile Hub, which supports media professionals and human rights defenders working inside and outside Myanmar. Our analysis draws on data through 2023. We thank Theingi Htun, Eaint Thiri Thu, Tin Zar Aung, and Shoon Naing for their contributions, William Peter for translation, and Noisy & Yucca Wai for design. A "journalist" is someone who professionally gathers, researches, reports, and presents news to the public through various media. This includes traditional reporters as well as contributors like stringers and fixers, acknowledging journalism's collaborative nature. We use "women journalists" rather than "female journalists" as it is more inclusive, respectful of gender

identity, and avoids objectification. Some may use "womxn" to be even more inclusive, though this term is not universally accepted.

[2] "CJ" (citizen journalist) now describes Myanmar journalists working in-country or along the Thai-Myanmar border. Our interviews revealed this term extends beyond traditional citizen journalists to include media house employees. The designation serves as a security measure, protecting individuals by avoiding explicit media outlet affiliations while shielding media organizations by redistributing responsibility if incidents occur.

[3] Stringers are freelance correspondents who contribute stories on a per-assignment basis, offering unique local perspectives. Fixers assist foreign journalists by providing local knowledge, language skills, and cultural context. They arrange interviews, translate, and secure access to locations, ensuring accurate and culturally sensitive reporting. Both roles contribute to comprehensive news coverage: stringers as reporters and fixers as essential behind-the-scenes support.

[4] Thailand's minimum wage averages THB 340 daily in Chiang Mai province and THB 332 in Tak province (Mae Sot), according to rates effective October 2022, cited in the original survey period. With journalists typically working six days weekly (Monday to Saturday), fair compensation should be at least THB 8,160 monthly in Chiang Mai and THB 7,968 in Mae Sot based on those rates. Subsequent rate increases occurred in 2024 and 2025, highlighting extreme financial hardship (MOL, 2024; MOL, 2025; Expatica, 2025)

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CHAPTER 6

EDUCATIONAL ASSEMBLAGES UNDER PRESSURE: ACCESSIBILITY OF VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS IN POST-COUP MYANMAR

Tauk

ABSTRACT

This research examines how education students have developed flexible assemblages to ensure access to virtual instruction following Myanmar's 2021 military coup. Through mixed-method research combining surveys and interviews, this study documents how these educational assemblages—combining professional expertise, community networks, digital technologies, and adaptive practices—enable learning continuity despite systematic repression. Unlike traditional educational institutions that rely on fixed structures, these educational assemblages demonstrate remarkable adaptability through processes of territorialization and deterritorialization in response to state surveillance and infrastructure disruption. The research detected no significant differences in reported experiences across age groups, regions, or institutional platforms, suggesting broadly similar adaptive responses among the students surveyed. Thematic analysis shows how these assemblages produce novel solutions by transforming professional knowledge rather than abandoning it, with students developing innovative security protocols, resource-sharing networks, and technological workarounds that transcend traditional educational boundaries. This research contributes to understanding how educational assemblages maintain stability precisely through their capacity

to change—adding to broader knowledge about community resilience following state failure.

Keywords: accessibility, virtual education, educational assemblages, adaptive learning networks

INTRODUCTION

When Myanmar's military seized power in February 2021, it shattered an already fragile educational ecosystem still reeling from nearly a year of pandemic-related university closures. Rather than submitting to military control, thousands of students and educators joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), refusing to work under illegitimate authority. Universities became sites of protest and resistance, leading to widespread arrests, military occupation of campuses, and the systematic targeting of academic communities. By mid-2021, the formal higher education system had effectively collapsed across much of the country, with physical university attendance becoming untenable in many regions due to both political repression and escalating armed conflict.

This convergence of crises—military coup, pandemic aftermath, and civil resistance—might have completely severed tertiary education pathways for an entire generation of Myanmar's students. However, instead of total educational collapse, something remarkable emerged from these overlapping disruptions—fluid networks of learning that adapted precisely when rigid institutions could not.

Education systems did not simply dissolve but reassembled in more flexible forms capable of functioning despite state surveillance, infrastructure disruption, and direct targeting. The Ministry of Education under the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) launched an Interim Advanced Education initiative in June 2021 (University World News, 2021), while alternative platforms like Spring University Myanmar (SUM) emerged to provide higher education options for youth determined to continue learning outside military control. Virtual universities including Spring Normal University for teacher education and the National University of the Union of Myanmar (NUUM) brought together diverse academic, ethnic, and professional backgrounds to create educational continuity where traditional institutions failed.

These initiatives operate in a precarious environment where internet access is deliberately restricted in conflict zones, electricity supply is unreliable, and participation in CDM-affiliated activities carries significant personal risk. Students face not only logistical challenges in accessing virtual education but also security concerns that transform seemingly ordinary acts—joining an online class, using a real name, or activating a webcam—into potentially dangerous exposures. Yet despite these formidable obstacles, large numbers of students continue their education through these alternative pathways, developing sophisticated strategies to overcome both technical and security barriers.

This research explores how students navigate these virtual alternatives, examining both the significant challenges they face and the innovative strategies they develop to maintain their education under extraordinary pressure. Through the lens of assemblage theory, we investigate how students, educators, digital tools, and adaptive practices combine to create resilient learning systems capable of evolving under repressive conditions. This theoretical framework helps us understand education not as a fixed institution but as a dynamic process of becoming—constantly reconfiguring in response to changing threats and opportunities.

The study focuses specifically on the accessibility of virtual education for tertiary students specializing in education fields across Myanmar, whether enrolled in private virtual universities, NUG-affiliated institutions, or as freelance learners. This focus on education students is particularly significant, as they represent the future of Myanmar's teaching profession and will ultimately shape how knowledge is transmitted to the next generation. Their experiences illustrate not just individual resilience but the potential for systemic transformation of educational approaches under pressure.

By examining these educational assemblages, we aim to identify challenges and opportunities, compare adaptive strategies across demographics, and develop recommendations to enhance virtual learning accessibility in this high-pressure context. The research contributes to broader understanding of how communities maintain critical social functions like education when formal institutions collapse, offering insights relevant beyond Myanmar to other contexts of state failure and authoritarian repression.

EDUCATIONAL ASSEMBLAGES

To understand how educational networks function in post-coup Myanmar, we apply assemblage theory—a framework particularly suited to analyzing emergent systems under pressure. First developed by Deleuze and Guattari and later elaborated by DeLanda (2006), assemblage theory examines how heterogeneous elements come together to form functional wholes that are more than the sum of their parts. Unlike systems theory, which often presumes relatively stable structures, assemblage theory emphasizes continuous processes of formation and reformation, making it especially appropriate for studying education in crisis conditions.

Educational assemblages in Myanmar combine diverse components: teaching expertise displaced from formal institutions, digital platforms ranging from sophisticated learning management systems to simple messaging apps, student communities organized around both academic interests and security concerns, and adaptive practices that transform conventional educational approaches to fit restrictive conditions. These elements don't merely connect—they transform each other through their interaction, creating emergent properties that transcend what any single component could achieve independently.

These assemblages undergo continuous processes of territorialization (establishing new connections and solidifying boundaries) and deterritorialization (breaking down existing structures and crossing boundaries) as they respond to regime surveillance and infrastructure disruption. For example, when military authorities block specific communication platforms, educational assemblages rapidly deterritorialize by abandoning these channels and reterritorialize by establishing new communication pathways—sometimes within days. This constant flux, rather than representing a weakness, becomes the source of their resilience.

Throughout these educational assemblages run what Deleuze and Guattari call "lines of flight"—trajectories that escape established patterns and create new possibilities. These lines represent both vulnerabilities and opportunities for innovation. When military authorities target conventional university credentials, students respond by seeking international recognition for their alternative education—transforming a vulnerability into expanded educational horizons that

potentially exceed what was available before the coup. Similarly, when internet disruptions prevent synchronous learning, assemblages develop sophisticated asynchronous alternatives that provide unexpected benefits like repeated access to recorded lectures.

The combination of professional teaching expertise with student-led security protocols produces learning environments that are simultaneously academically rigorous and resistant to surveillance—a capability neither teachers nor students could achieve independently. Teachers contribute disciplinary knowledge and pedagogical experience, while students develop innovative workarounds for connectivity problems and security concerns. Together, they create educational spaces that maintain academic integrity while adapting to extraordinary constraints.

Unlike traditional educational institutions that rely on fixed infrastructure, stable funding, and predictable regulatory environments, these assemblages maintain coherence precisely through their capacity to change. Rather than establishing permanent structures that would create vulnerability to targeting, they remain deliberately fluid—reconfiguring rapidly in response to evolving threats while maintaining essential educational functions. This theoretical lens helps us understand how Myanmar's students have created educational resilience not despite but because of their ability to adapt to repression.

LEARNING IN CRISIS

Myanmar's educational assemblages exist at the intersection of several research domains: learning theory, virtual education modalities, rights-based accessibility frameworks, and crisis pedagogy. While each provides valuable insights, their combination in post-coup Myanmar represents a unique context that tests the boundaries of existing educational literature.

Learning theories emphasize that meaningful materials and tasks are learned more readily than those not understood by learners (Hilgard, 1986), suggesting that even in crisis, the quality of educational design matters significantly. Contemporary constructivist approaches highlight the importance of active engagement and critical thinking in developing lasting understanding (Khin Zaw, 2001). These principles

remain relevant in virtual education but must be adapted to environments where traditional engagement indicators—raised hands, facial expressions, real-time discussion—may be compromised by connectivity limitations and security concerns.

The field of online learning is relatively young compared to traditional distance education, sitting at the junction of distance education, human-computer interaction, instructional technology, and cognitive science—a multidisciplinary field still evolving rapidly (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Despite pre-pandemic online infrastructure development in many countries, empirical studies suggest students often have better experiences in physical classrooms than online environments (Bojović et al., 2020). Students particularly miss peer assistance, classroom interactions, and library access (Aguilera-Hermida, 2020)—precisely the resources cut off by both pandemic measures and military repression in Myanmar.

Virtual education typically manifests in three distinct forms, each with different implications for accessibility in unstable contexts. Asynchronous courses do not occur in real-time, allowing students to work independently within flexible timeframes—an approach particularly valuable in regions with unpredictable electricity and internet access. Synchronous courses require simultaneous online interaction between instructors and students, creating more immediate engagement but also greater vulnerability to connectivity disruptions. Hybrid approaches combine elements of both, potentially offering the greatest flexibility in crisis conditions by allowing students to participate synchronously when possible while providing asynchronous alternatives when necessary (Dung, 2020).

Understanding educational access requires examining what the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999) defines as three dimensions of accessibility: non-discrimination, physical accessibility, and economic accessibility. In Myanmar's context, these dimensions take on unique characteristics. Physical accessibility becomes not just about geographic reach but physical safety, as students may risk arrest when accessing education from certain locations. Economic accessibility extends beyond tuition fees to encompass costs of electricity, internet data, and backup technologies needed for

reliable connection. Non-discrimination faces new challenges when certain regions experience targeted internet shutdowns or when security concerns prevent some students from fully participating with cameras and microphones activated.

The quality of communication between students and instructors proves critical to successful virtual learning under any circumstances (Howland & Moore, 2002), while response immediacy significantly affects learner experiences (Petrides, 2002). Both factors face severe challenges in Myanmar's context of infrastructure disruption and security concerns. When students cannot reliably communicate in real-time or must limit their participation for security reasons, new approaches to meaningful interaction must be developed—approaches rarely discussed in existing literature on optimal virtual learning environments.

Research on education in conflict zones provides some relevant insights, highlighting how learning continues in refugee camps, during civil wars, and under occupation. However, Myanmar presents a distinctive case where digital education has become the primary alternative precisely when digital infrastructure is most vulnerable to disruption and surveillance. This unique combination of digital dependency and digital vulnerability creates challenges and adaptive responses not fully captured in existing literature on either virtual education or education in conflict.

The current study extends these intersecting research domains by examining how students adapt when optimal conditions for virtual learning are systematically undermined by political repression. It contributes to emerging scholarship on educational resilience by documenting how assemblages of people, technologies, and practices create educational continuity when formal institutions collapse.

RESEARCH UNDER PRESSURE

This study employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys (n=111) and qualitative interviews (n=10) with education students across Myanmar. The research methodology itself became an assemblage under pressure—adapting to the same repressive conditions

it sought to study. Traditional research protocols emphasizing institutional approvals, signed consent forms, and documented identities would have created unacceptable risks for participants. Instead, security considerations shaped every methodological decision from participant recruitment to data storage.

To protect participants, secure communication channels, pseudonyms, and encrypted platforms were employed throughout the research process. Consent was obtained verbally rather than in writing to avoid creating documentary evidence of participation. Interviews were conducted through encrypted messaging applications, with cameras disabled and real names never used or recorded. Data was immediately anonymized and stored on secure servers outside Myanmar to prevent potential seizure by authorities. These precautions weren't merely ethical safeguards but essential conditions for research viability—without them, few students would have risked participation.

Data collection occurred from October to December 2023, a period marked by intensifying conflict in multiple regions including Sagaing, Magway, and parts of Kachin and Shan states. The deteriorating security situation created additional challenges for participant recruitment and survey distribution. We employed convenience sampling for surveys, utilizing secure digital channels and existing networks to reach students across different virtual universities. For the qualitative component, snowball sampling identified ten interview participants distributed across three categories of educational institutions: private virtual universities, virtual universities under the NUG, and freelance students with discontinued formal education.

Participants came from 12 regions and states across Myanmar, with the largest concentrations in Yangon (33), Mandalay (18), and Kachin (12). Sagaing, Bago, and Magway each contributed approximately 10 participants, while smaller numbers joined from Ayeyarwady (6), Shan (5), Nay Pyi Taw (3), Mon (2), Kayah (2), and Karen (1). This distribution reflects both population patterns and varying levels of internet connectivity across the country, with conflict-affected regions like Rakhine and Chin states significantly underrepresented due to severe connectivity limitations and security concerns.

The quantitative component measured student experiences across four dimensions: teaching and learning quality, internet connection and accessibility, communication between teachers and students, and understanding of educational rights. Survey questions used a four-point Likert scale to assess perceptions and experiences, supplemented by open-ended questions that allowed for more nuanced responses about challenges and opportunities. Statistical analysis examined differences across age groups, regions (states versus regions), and educational platforms.

The qualitative interviews explored these dimensions in greater depth, documenting specific challenges and adaptive strategies developed by students. Semi-structured interview protocols allowed flexibility to pursue emerging themes while maintaining focus on core research questions. Thematic analysis identified key patterns and strategies, with particular attention to how students created workarounds for seemingly insurmountable barriers.

This combination of breadth (surveys across multiple regions and institutions) and depth (detailed interviews with diverse participants) allowed for triangulation of findings across methods and participant groups. The mixed-method approach proved particularly valuable in this context, as quantitative data revealed broad patterns while qualitative insights illuminated the complex adaptations that statistics alone couldn't capture.

The methodology itself exemplifies the theoretical framework of assemblages—combining diverse elements (digital tools, research expertise, participant networks, security protocols) into a functional whole capable of producing knowledge under restrictive conditions. Like the educational assemblages it studied, the research methodology maintained coherence through adaptation rather than rigid adherence to conventional academic protocols.

QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Statistical analysis revealed a striking pattern across the survey data: no significant differences emerged between students of different ages, regions, or educational institutions regarding teaching and learning

experiences, internet connectivity challenges, communication patterns, or awareness of educational rights. All *p*-values across these comparative analyses exceeded .05, indicating that experiences were remarkably consistent regardless of demographic factors.

When comparing students above and below 20 years of age, t-tests showed no significant differences across all measured dimensions (*p*-values ranging from .251 to .800). Similarly, comparing students from Myanmar's states versus regions revealed no significant variations (*p*-values from .122 to .784). Perhaps most surprisingly, analysis of covariance found no meaningful differences between students enrolled in private virtual universities, NUG-affiliated institutions, or independent study arrangements (*p*-values from .059 to .909). Across all demographic variables, mean scores clustered consistently around the mid-3 range on our four-point scale, suggesting moderate satisfaction and similar experiences despite varied circumstances.

This finding contradicts what might be expected in a country with significant regional variation in infrastructure, conflict intensity, and internet penetration. In Chin State, for instance, internet connectivity reaches far less of the population than in Yangon (Khit Thit Media, 2023). Military operations have severely restricted movement and communication in Sagaing Region, while parts of Yangon maintain relatively stable internet access. Given these stark regional differences, the absence of statistically significant variations in student experiences suggests something remarkable about educational assemblages in Myanmar.

Rather than producing regionally distinctive educational experiences, the data indicates that the formation of educational assemblages appears as a strikingly consistent response to state repression among surveyed students—a finding with significant theoretical implications. Students across Myanmar, despite their different circumstances, have developed remarkably similar approaches to maintaining educational access. Whether in relatively stable urban centers or conflict-affected rural areas, they face comparable challenges and employ similar adaptive strategies.

The consistency extends across educational platforms as well. Students in private virtual universities, NUG-affiliated institutions, and those studying independently reported statistically similar experiences across

all measured dimensions. This uniformity suggests that the challenges of virtual education in post-coup Myanmar transcend institutional differences, creating shared experiences that cut across formal boundaries.

From an assemblage perspective, this finding indicates that the patterns of adaptation are shaped more by the common conditions of repression than by pre-existing institutional structures or regional differences. The educational assemblages that have emerged represent a systemic response to state failure rather than isolated or localized adaptations. This systemic quality suggests that these assemblages aren't merely temporary coping mechanisms but potentially represent an emerging alternative educational model adapted to Myanmar's specific conditions of repression and resistance.

The quantitative data also revealed the most significant challenges facing students. Electricity shortages and poor internet connectivity were the primary challenge for 50.5 percent of respondents, making infrastructure limitations the most pervasive obstacle to virtual education. Concentration difficulties (18 percent) and challenges with collaboration (16.2 percent) formed the second tier of challenges. Less frequently mentioned challenges included pedagogical adaptation (6.3 percent), limited technical skills (3.6 percent), support needs (3.6 percent), and security concerns (1.8 percent). This relatively low survey reporting likely reflects students' cautiousness about explicitly documenting security issues due to perceived risks.

While the quantitative findings provide a valuable overview of student experiences and challenges, they don't capture the complex adaptations that make educational continuity possible under such difficult conditions. For this deeper understanding, we turn to the qualitative data.

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS

Interview data revealed a more textured understanding of how students navigate the complex challenges of virtual education under repression. The qualitative findings illuminate the lived experiences behind the statistics, showing how students transform seemingly insurmountable barriers into negotiable obstacles through innovation, collaboration, and persistence.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

Electricity shortages and poor internet connectivity emerged as the most pervasive obstacles to virtual education, affecting students across all regions but with varying intensity. In major cities like Yangon and Mandalay, electricity typically follows scheduled rationing, allowing students to plan their study time around predictable outages. In conflict-affected areas, however, electricity might disappear for days or weeks without warning. A former mathematics student from an education university in Sagaing Region explained: "I do not attend any university at present due to lack of internet connection and the political situation. The fighting happens very often in our area, and sometimes we don't have electricity for many days."

The financial burden of connectivity creates additional barriers. Many students struggle to afford mobile data or Wi-Fi expenses, particularly given unstable family incomes during the economic crisis that has accompanied political turmoil. A private virtual university student observed: "The specific challenges are internet connection and the fees for the network. Most students cannot afford to buy internet data." These economic constraints particularly affect students involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement, many of whom have sacrificed stable incomes to resist military rule.

Regional disparities in connectivity create tiered access to virtual education. Students in Rakhine, Chin, and Kayah states face particularly severe connectivity problems, with some areas experiencing complete internet shutdowns during military operations. A student from Mon State described traveling between locations to maintain educational access: "When I have exams or important classes, I travel to my relative's house in a different township where the internet is better. Sometimes I stay there for days during exam periods."

EDUCATION UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Security concerns create a uniquely pressing challenge in Myanmar's political context, transforming ordinary educational practices into potential risks. Students involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement could face arrest for opposing the military government, forcing them

to develop sophisticated security protocols for educational participation. A former teacher now pursuing further education explained, "We never use our real names or show our faces in class."

These security measures fundamentally alter the educational experience. Cameras remain off during synchronous sessions, eliminating visual cues that typically facilitate learning. Students use pseudonyms and avoid sharing personal details, limiting the community-building that normally supports educational engagement. A former assistant lecturer observed:

> For safety, it is needed to systematically check for persons who are under State Administration Council (SAC) and pretend to be students in the virtual class. Some might join just to monitor who is participating and what is being taught.

The scheduling of classes carries security implications as well. Many courses occur in evenings when internet connectivity may be better, but this timing increases risks in areas with nighttime curfews. One student noted: "I want to suggest that more classes should be open during the whole day, not only at night," explaining that nighttime curfews and identity checks put students at particular risk: "They check guest lists at night, and if you're not registered at that address, you can be arrested. Many youth have been taken this way."

Perhaps most telling is the discrepancy between survey responses and interview discussions regarding security. While only 1.8 percent of survey respondents identified security as a primary concern, nearly all interviewees discussed detailed security protocols. This suggests that security considerations have become so embedded in daily practice that students no longer explicitly identify them as distinct "challenges"—they have become the background condition against which all educational activities occur.

LEARNING UNDER CONSTRAINT

The restrictive security environment creates cascading pedagogical challenges. Students struggle to maintain concentration (18 percent in

survey data) and collaborate effectively with peers (16.2 percent) when normal educational interactions are limited by security protocols. As one student explained: "It's hard to focus for hours when you can't see the teacher or other students, and when you're always worried about your connection dropping or someone discovering what you're doing."

Technical literacy presents another substantial barrier, particularly for students from regions with limited pre-coup internet access. Many lack familiarity with basic information technology skills—starting computers, navigating software applications, and troubleshooting technical issues. A student from Shan State described spending "more time figuring out how to use the platform than actually learning the content" during her first months of virtual education. Without these foundational skills, the virtual learning environment becomes stressful rather than enriching. For example, students described difficulties such as being unable to log into learning management systems, not understanding software navigation, or struggling to troubleshoot basic connectivity problems during classes.

The quality of pedagogy itself faces challenges in this constrained environment. Virtual education requires different approaches than traditional classroom teaching, yet many instructors have had little preparation for this transition. A fourth-year education student recommended: "Every teacher should study teaching pedagogy, IT and technological skills, and teachers should assess the students through a virtual quiz rather than traditional methods that don't work online." This suggestion highlights how educational assemblages must transform traditional teaching approaches rather than simply transferring them to digital platforms.

Course availability presents another limitation. A student from Shan State observed: "Some classes which we want to attend are cancelled because of the minimum student limit." Private virtual universities often require at least five enrolled students to offer specialty courses, restricting educational options particularly in specialized fields. This constraint reflects the economic realities facing alternative educational institutions, which must balance educational mission with financial sustainability in an uncertain environment.

EDUCATIONAL ASSEMBLAGES IN ACTION

In response to these interlocking challenges, students have developed remarkably adaptive strategies that demonstrate the processes of territorialization (establishing new connections) and deterritorialization (breaking down limiting structures) within educational assemblages. These strategies transform seemingly insurmountable barriers into negotiable challenges, creating educational continuity through continuous innovation.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADAPTATIONS

Students develop technological redundancy to address unpredictable infrastructure. Many utilize backup power sources, including uninterruptible power supply (UPS) units, generators, and power banks to maintain device operation during outages. They prepare multiple devices—laptops, tablets, smartphones—to ensure continued participation if a primary device fails or loses charge. One student described her elaborate preparation routine:

> I keep three devices ready—my laptop fully charged, my phone with data activated, and a tablet as backup. I also make sure I have enough money on my mobile account to buy emergency data if my home internet goes down.

Beyond hardware redundancy, students create software alternatives to maintain access. They install multiple virtual private network (VPN) applications, recognizing that authorities periodically block specific VPN services. They download critical course materials whenever connectivity is good, creating local copies of readings, lectures, and assignments that can be accessed offline during inevitable outages. As one student explained: "The first thing I do whenever I get good internet is download everything—all the PDFs, recorded lectures, everything. You never know when you'll have connection again."

When facing critical classes or examinations, many travel to locations with more reliable internet connectivity. This mobility strategy represents a significant commitment given transportation costs and security risks associated with movement, particularly in conflict-affected

regions. A student from Magway described traveling 15 kilometers to access reliable internet for final examinations: "I stayed at my aunt's house for two weeks during exams because the internet is more stable there. It costs money and time, but education is worth it."

COLLABORATIVE NETWORKS

The most innovative responses emerge through collaborative networks that distribute both resources and knowledge. Local study groups form organically, where students with better connectivity share resources with those experiencing difficulties. A student from Mandalay explained:

> We have a neighborhood study group. When one person can download materials, they share with everyone else. Sometimes we gather at the house with the best internet connection to join classes together, taking turns using the connection for our different courses.

These collaborative approaches extend to course engagement as well. Students develop tag-team participation strategies, where those with better connectivity actively participate in synchronous sessions while sharing notes with peers who cannot maintain stable connections. Some groups designate a member to record sessions, which are then transferred to others via flash drives—a method that avoids connectivity requirements altogether for content distribution.

Asynchronous adaptations transform connectivity limitations into unexpected advantages. As one student explained: "All virtual classes share a recorded classroom video so it's more convenient for students who attend the online virtual class." This allows students to "study the lessons of recorded videos repeatedly with eagerness at convenient times," transforming what might be seen as a limitation—inability to participate synchronously—into a pedagogical asset through repeated review of complex material.

PROTECTION THROUGH COMPARTMENTALIZATION

Security practices become sophisticated components of these educational assemblages, evolving continuously in response to perceived threats. Students develop compartmentalized information-sharing practices, where no single person possesses complete information about participants. They create privacy protocols specific to their vulnerabilities, using encrypted communication channels and establishing code systems to signal security threats.

These practices include detailed operational security measures that would be familiar to clandestine organizations. Students regularly change pseudonyms across different platforms, maintain separate devices for educational activities versus personal communication where possible, and develop cover stories to explain their activities to those who might report them. One student described her approach: "I never tell neighbors what I'm studying or where. I have a story ready about taking general English classes from a private teacher if anyone asks. Only my closest family knows the truth."

The most security-conscious students employ counter-surveillance techniques, such as monitoring their surroundings before joining classes and using noise-canceling headphones rather than speakers to prevent others from overhearing class content. These sophisticated measures illustrate how educational assemblages incorporate practices from resistance movements, transforming education into a form of political resilience.

TRANSFORMING EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

Rather than abandoning formal educational expertise, these assemblages transform pedagogical knowledge to fit crisis conditions. One student emphasized the need for interactive tools that function effectively under connectivity constraints:

> It is essential to integrate interactive tools into virtual education to stimulate students who are less active in asking questions or expressing concerns during live sessions,

> such as Padlet and other Q&A tools, as well as quizzes that don't require constant connection.

Teachers adapt course structures, breaking traditional 16-week courses into more concentrated modules that can be completed in shorter periods of good connectivity. Assessment methods shift from synchronous examinations to project-based evaluations that can be completed asynchronously, allowing students to work during periods of connectivity rather than at fixed times. A student described how one effective professor approaches this challenge:

> She gives us weekly projects rather than tests. We can download the instructions when we have connection and upload our work anytime before the deadline. If we can't upload, we can even send it through a friend who has better internet.

Interactive pedagogical approaches emerge that function effectively even with cameras off and minimal synchronous participation. A student highlighted a particularly effective strategy: "One teacher uses polling questions that we can answer with just a single letter response in the chat. This works even on very poor connections and keeps everyone engaged." These innovations demonstrate how educational assemblages reinterpret professional knowledge rather than discarding expertise in the face of crisis.

TRANSFORMING CHALLENGES INTO FUTURES

Perhaps most striking is how students transform crisis into potential pathways toward expanded futures. Rather than merely surviving educational disruption, many envision virtual education as opening doors previously closed to them. Survey responses revealed that 31 percent of students see virtual education as a pathway to becoming professional teachers, 21 percent value the technological skills they're developing, and 13 percent view their virtual education as preparation for international study opportunities.

This future orientation reflects not resignation to current conditions but strategic adaptation that identifies new possibilities within crisis. One student articulated this transformative vision:

> I want to study abroad and this virtual learning gives me an opportunity to prepare pedagogy, educational theory, educational psychology, and other skills that are needed to become a teacher […] I want to go to the US. I hope the National University of the Union of Myanmar can support me.

For this student, virtual education represents not merely a compromise but a bridge to possibilities that might exceed pre-coup opportunities.

The international dimension appears particularly significant. Another student noted how virtual education creates continuity where traditional paths have been blocked while simultaneously opening new horizons:

> As we are currently not able to attend class in person, virtual education is essential for me. I think virtual education will benefit the continuation of my education. We can even find degrees offered online…virtual learning helps me to pursue my Master's degree with scholarship.

This student sees virtual education not as a temporary measure but as connecting to global educational networks that transcend Myanmar's current crisis.

These pathways aren't without obstacles. Credential recognition remains a significant concern, as one former student expressed:

> I think virtual education has no great opportunities, and I have concerns to join my profession with a certificate from a virtual university because the certificate of virtual education needs to be recognized by government organizations and other organizations, due to the political situation in Myanmar.

This concern highlights how educational assemblages must negotiate legitimacy within broader systems of credentialing that remain largely controlled by state actors or international bodies.

The tension between current challenges and future possibilities creates a complex emotional landscape. Many students express both determination and uncertainty, pride in their resilience alongside anxiety about recognition. This duality appears when a student who previously expressed concerns adds: "But I'm proud to be continuing my education despite everything. The knowledge I'm gaining can't be taken away, even if the certification is complicated." This statement reflects how educational assemblages create not just academic continuity but psychological resilience—students find meaning in the act of learning even when its formal recognition remains uncertain.

For many students, participation in alternative education represents not just academic development but political commitment. By choosing virtual universities associated with the National Unity Government rather than institutions under military control, they express resistance through their educational choices. A student explicitly connected these dimensions: "By studying at [NUG-affiliated university], I'm not just getting education. I'm showing that we don't accept the military's authority over our learning. Every class I attend is a small act of resistance." This political dimension transforms education from merely private development to participation in collective resistance, adding motivational force that helps students persist despite extraordinary challenges.

EMERGENT PATTERNS AND IMPLICATIONS

Analyzing these educational assemblages reveals several emergent patterns with broader implications for understanding resilience under repression. These patterns demonstrate how assemblages navigate between structure and flexibility, professional expertise and grassroots innovation, security and connectivity.

Local solutions with global connections

Educational assemblages operate simultaneously at multiple scales, from local study groups sharing resources to international connections providing pathways to global opportunities. At the neighborhood

level, students create micro-communities of practice sharing devices, internet access, and technical knowledge. At regional levels, virtual universities coordinate faculty and curriculum across geographic barriers. Internationally, these educational assemblages establish connections with foreign universities and educational organizations that provide both legitimacy and future pathways.

This multi-scale operation enables educational assemblages to address immediate needs while building toward future possibilities beyond Myanmar's current crisis. Local solutions solve day-to-day access problems, while international connections create longer-term legitimacy and opportunity. The ability to operate across scales represents a significant advantage over traditional educational institutions, which typically function at fixed organizational levels.

Protection through adaptation

Each assemblage develops distinctive security protocols tailored to specific vulnerabilities. Rather than implementing standardized security measures that would create predictability, they maintain deliberately variable approaches that evolve continuously in response to perceived threats. This variability creates protection through adaptation—security practices change before they can be effectively targeted.

These security measures include technological protections (VPNs, encrypted communication), behavioral protocols (pseudonym use, camera restrictions), and social practices (information compartmentalization, cover stories). The combination creates layered security that doesn't rely on any single protection mechanism but instead generates safety through overlapping and evolving practices.

This approach to security differs fundamentally from traditional institutional models that typically establish standardized protocols and fixed infrastructure protections. The variability that might be seen as a weakness in conventional security thinking becomes a strength in these assemblages, as constantly changing practices present moving targets that resist systematic surveillance.

Expertise Adapted

Rather than abandoning educational expertise, these assemblages transform pedagogical knowledge to fit crisis conditions. Teachers adapt course structures, assessment methods, and instructional approaches while maintaining academic rigor. Students develop new learning strategies suited to asynchronous engagement and limited interaction. Together, they create educational experiences that preserve core academic values while accommodating extraordinary constraints.

This transformative approach challenges assumptions that quality education requires stable institutional conditions. The evidence suggests that professional knowledge becomes more adaptive rather than less relevant during crisis—teachers and students find creative ways to maintain educational integrity precisely when it's most threatened. Formal knowledge doesn't disappear but evolves, creating hybrid approaches that combine traditional academic values with innovative delivery mechanisms.

Flexibility as institutional design

Educational assemblages maintain variable structure across domains, with some aspects highly formalized (like assessment schedules and credential requirements) while others remain deliberately fluid (like connectivity solutions and security practices). This structural variability isn't a bug but a feature—a deliberate design choice that allows for stability in core educational functions while maintaining adaptability in vulnerable areas.

This approach challenges conventional educational design that typically seeks consistency across all organizational aspects. Instead, these assemblages demonstrate how intentional variability creates resilience by concentrating structure where it serves educational purposes while maintaining flexibility where rigidity would create vulnerability.

CONCLUSION: EDUCATION AS BECOMING

This research demonstrates how education in post-coup Myanmar exemplifies an unexpected paradox: state failure has generated organizational innovation rather than simply breakdown. Educational

assemblages have emerged as alternatives to military-controlled education, showing remarkable resilience through their capacity to change rather than despite it.

Unlike traditional educational systems that rely on fixed structures, these assemblages function not as institutions but as processes of constant becoming—adapting, connecting, and transforming in response to evolving threats and opportunities. Students develop sophisticated technological workarounds, security protocols, and resource-sharing networks that evolve continuously, maintaining educational continuity precisely because they refuse fixity.

The statistical uniformity of experiences across demographic categories reveals something profound about these educational assemblages. Despite variations in regional infrastructure and conflict intensity, surveyed students, among whom students from the worst-affected regions are underrepresented. This consistency suggests that these assemblages represent not isolated adaptations but a systemic response to repression—potentially the emergence of a distinctive educational model born from crisis.

This model challenges conventional educational thinking in several fundamental ways. First, it demonstrates that educational quality doesn't necessarily depend on institutional stability—adaptive networks can maintain rigorous learning even amid profound disruption. Second, it shows how education can function not just despite but through constant change, with adaptability becoming a core feature rather than an emergency response. Third, it reveals how student agency becomes central rather than peripheral to educational resilience, with learners actively co-creating educational systems rather than merely receiving them.

These educational assemblages also challenge broader assumptions about institution-building in contexts of state failure. Rather than attempting to replicate state functions through parallel bureaucracies, they operate through deliberately fluid networks that resist targeting precisely because they lack fixed structure. This approach suggests alternative pathways for maintaining crucial social functions during periods of repression that don't rely on conventional institutional models.

The emergence of these assemblages offers important insights for educational development beyond Myanmar's specific context. As climate change, political instability, and technological disruption create increasingly unpredictable conditions worldwide, educational systems everywhere face growing uncertainty. The adaptive capacities demonstrated by Myanmar's students and educators—technological redundancy, distributed expertise, flexible scheduling, asynchronous alternatives—may become increasingly relevant in diverse contexts far beyond current crisis zones.

The future of education in Myanmar hinges on the continued evolution of these dynamic assemblages as they navigate lines of flight toward resilience and self-determination. Their ability to maintain educational continuity under extraordinary pressure demonstrates the possibility of education beyond institutional dependency—a possibility with implications for how we understand learning systems globally. While they emerged as crisis responses, these educational assemblages may ultimately offer more sustainable alternatives to conventional educational structures—alternatives that generate multiple possible futures for students facing uncertainty in Myanmar and potentially beyond.

Education under repression becomes not merely a practice of preservation but a process of becoming—constantly evolving, connecting, and transforming to create new possibilities precisely when old structures fail. In this transformation lies not just resilience but the potential for reimagining education itself, not as a fixed institution but as an adaptive process capable of flourishing under even the most challenging conditions. The students of Myanmar, through their remarkable persistence and innovation, offer a powerful demonstration of education as a fundamentally adaptive human capacity—one that persists and even transforms when everything else has been taken away.

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NOTES

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CHAPTER 7

MANIFESTATIONS OF THE MYANMAR SPRING REVOLUTION IN POEMS (2021-2024)

Chaw Su Mar Win, Mar Lar, Myat Htoo Kywe

ABSTRACT

Myanmar has been plunged into darkness since the military coup on February 1, 2021. However, the Myanmar Spring Revolution period inspired poets and ordinary citizens to become revolutionary poets. Although the junta has killed some of them, their poems continue to live on in the hearts of Myanmar's revolutionaries. This research examines how the Myanmar Spring Revolution is depicted in poetry between 2021 and 2024. A collection of 106 poems by 22 poets, ranging in age from their 20s to over 70s, has been analyzed. While most of the poets are Bama, there are also contributions from Chin, Karen, and Mon ethnic groups. Thematic analysis reveals that the poems reflect five common themes: the people's revolution, strong determination, new leadership trends, diverse society, and community solidarity. All poems are written in Burmese, except for one bilingual poem in Burmese and English. Twenty-one poems were translated into English and are presented as examples of the respective themes.

Keywords: Myanmar Spring Revolution, military coup, youths, poems, leadership

INTRODUCTION

Myanmar people have felt hopeless, lifeless, and without a future due to the military coup on February 1, 2021. Most citizens strongly reject the

coup and passionately desire the return of a democratic government. The Myanmar Spring Revolution, involving all generations—X, Y, and Z—is more than a public movement aimed at overthrowing the military regime and reclaiming people's power. This revolution has transformed poets and ordinary individuals, including CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement) students, teachers, and actors, into revolutionary poets.

Their revolutionary poems reveal that the Myanmar Spring Revolution encompasses the people's revolution, strong determination, new leadership trends, societal diversity, and community solidarity. We collected over 100 poems by 22 poets from 2021 to 2024 and studied them for their realistic and artistic portrayal of the Myanmar Spring Revolution. These poets range from their 20s to over 70s, most between 20 and 40. While most are of Bama ethnicity, there are also contributions from Chin, Karen, and Mon ethnic groups. All poets are still writing except for two; one was killed by the military junta, and the other died of illness.

This analysis of revolutionary poetry contributes to understanding how Myanmar communities have responded to the 2021 coup. While focusing specifically on poetic expression, this research connects to broader patterns of adaptation seen throughout post-coup Myanmar. The poems reveal many of the same practical innovations, community connections, and resilience strategies documented elsewhere in this volume—from healthcare workers developing mobile clinics to journalists creating new verification methods. Poetry provides a unique window into how people make meaning of their experiences while participating in broader community networks of resistance and mutual support.

This study connects to the volume's broader exploration of post-coup assemblages in Myanmar. While focusing primarily on poetic expression and meaning-making, we recognize how revolutionary poetry forms part of the dynamic combinations of skills, networks, creative practices, and digital tools that communities have developed in response to state failure. Poems function within these flexible arrangements—circulating through trusted networks, preserving experiences that might otherwise be erased, and strengthening emotional bonds between diverse participants in the revolution. Without overtheorizing the lived experiences of Myanmar people, we observe how poetry contributes to the remarkable adaptive creativity documented throughout this volume.

This research has three objectives: to illustrate the Myanmar Spring Revolution through poems written between 2021 and 2024; to analyze the poetic imagination from philosophical, artistic, and aesthetic perspectives; and to highlight how these poems provide motivation and resilience to revolutionaries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The eighteenth-century Myanmar poet Latwaethundra (Letwe Thondara, 1736-c. 1824) composed two significant *pyo* poems (long Myanmar poems akin to epics). *Pyo* poems are verse renderings of Buddhist stories and teachings that translate original Pali text into a Burmese context and enrich them with imaginative details and homilies (Hla Pe, 1985). Latwaethundra's notable works, "Thaeningabyuhar Pyo" and "Nandithaena Pyo," detail the rules and regulations for military conduct and the disciplines of good soldiers (Latwaethundra, 1993, pp. 151-174).

Historically, the military of ancient Myanmar kings adhered to these guidelines to ensure peace and prosperity for their citizens. These principles are said still to be taught at the Defense Services Academy (DSA), Myanmar's premier military service academy, to instill national spirit and loyalty among the cadets. However, in stark contrast, the current Myanmar military has abandoned these guidelines and brutally oppresses the very citizens it is meant to protect.

Richard Furman (2007) articulated that poetry is a valuable tool in his research, effectively presenting people's lived experiences of complex existential principles and processes. He noted that revisiting poems years after they were written compelled him to reflect on their meanings at the time of their creation and in the present (Furman, 2007). His article explores existential principles through autoethnographic poetry, demonstrating how poems can mirror real-life experiences.

According to PEN America (2023), a collection of 10 short stories and 12 poems reflects the numerous acts of bravery and tragic losses following the 2021 military coup, paying tribute to the heroes of the Spring Revolution. These literary works showcase the relentless courage of Myanmar's people during the Spring Revolution. The same collection,

Myanmar Spring Diary, further illustrates how creative artists use poems and short stories as tools to depict the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

This study positions revolutionary poetry within the broader context of Myanmar's post-coup innovations. As other chapters in this volume demonstrate, communities across Myanmar have developed creative adaptations when faced with state failure—forming flexible networks that combine professional expertise, community trust, and practical innovation. Poetry represents one significant domain where this adaptive creativity manifests, with poems functioning not merely as reflections of revolutionary experience but as active components in sustaining resistance. The poems analyzed here circulate through many of the same networks that distribute medicine, spread news, and maintain educational continuity, contributing to the remarkable resilience Myanmar communities have demonstrated since 2021.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study explores using poetry as a tool in qualitative research, offering more profound insights into real-world situations. By examining poems written during this period, this paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of the Myanmar Spring Revolution. The thematic analysis identifies and classifies the common themes within these poems rather than focusing on exact facts and figures.

The analysis revealed five prevalent themes in the poems: the people's revolution, strong determination, new leadership trends, societal diversity, and community solidarity. All poems are written in Burmese, except for one bilingual poem in both Burmese and English. A total of 21 poems both bilingual and translated into English serve as examples to illustrate the respective themes.

Like other researchers studying post-coup Myanmar, we faced methodological challenges regarding security concerns and access limitations. The collection and analysis of revolutionary poetry required careful attention to both content and circulation. Many poems reached us through the same informal networks described elsewhere in this volume—trusted contacts sharing digital files, personal archives, and oral recitations. We approached these materials not just as texts but

as living artifacts of revolutionary experience, attentive to how they moved between urban and rural contexts, shared despite surveillance, and connected to other forms of resistance.

During the Myanmar Spring Revolution, poets and ordinary citizens emerged as revolutionary poets. Drawing from their experiences in the revolution, the poems written between 2021 and 2024 reflect the nature, tempo, and characteristics of the Myanmar Spring Revolution in various ways. The poets included in this research actively participated in protests and the Civil Disobedience Movement. Their poetry flourishes with enthusiasm, artistry, philosophy, and aesthetics.

The study and analysis of 106 poems, collected from various sources, reveal that the poems manifest the Myanmar Spring Revolution in five distinct themes: the people's revolution, strong determination, new leadership trends, diverse society, and community solidarity.

The data reveals that the poems depict the Myanmar Spring Revolution through these five major themes, each representing distinct aspects of the revolutionary experience. These themes form interconnected elements that together illustrate the revolution's complex nature.

The quantitative data of studied poems is summarized in Table 1 below:

Category	**Quantity**
Total poems analyzed	106
Number of poets	22
Age range of poets	20s to over 70s
Poems illustrating People's Revolution	16
Poems highlighting Strong Determination	45
Poems expressing New Leadership Trends	11
Poems describing Diverse Society	24
Poems reflecting Community Solidarity	10
Poems in Burmese	105
Bilingual poems (Burmese and English)	1
Poems translated to English for the study	**21**

Table 1: The quantitative data of studied poems

PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION

The Myanmar Spring Revolution is a people's revolution, with individuals sacrificing their lives and professional careers to end the military regime. According to The Diplomat (2022), the Myanmar Spring Revolution transcends a mere political movement aimed at regime change. The poems reflect this sentiment, portraying a people participating enthusiastically in the revolution.

Among the 106 poems analyzed, 16 specifically illustrate the revolution as a people's movement. Five poems were selected for a more detailed study to understand how the Myanmar Spring Revolution embodies the people's spirit.

The poems depicting the people's revolution reveal the same broad participation documented in healthcare and education networks examined elsewhere in this volume. Just as mobile clinics rely on village volunteers and professional doctors working together, these poems show Myanmar's revolution drawing strength from diverse participants across professions, ages, and regions. This inclusive participation reflects how communities across Myanmar have developed mutual support and resistance networks in response to state failure.

Min Ko Naing is one of the prominent political leaders who played a key role in the 1988 Democracy Revolution. Following the February 1, 2021 coup, he stood with the revolutionary people, going into hiding after a warrant was issued for his arrest and lending his voice to the resistance. The People's Defence Forces (PDFs) quickly emerged in the wake of the coup to protect civilians and combat the military regime. Min Ko Naing is well known as a poet and an artist, with his poems and paintings significantly supporting the revolution.

One of his poems, "We All Are the One," reflects the Myanmar Spring Revolution as a people's revolution. The poem powerfully embodies unity and collective action against the military regime in some excerpts as follows:

We All Are the One

The value of engineer himself,
That of sewing female worker herself,
The hands holding car steer,
The hands holding chalk,
One cartoon on the wall street of present era
One Stanza in the poem, a picture,
The keyboard fighter with hypodermic syringe, All are the engine drivers.

Now, on this revolutionary road At the school, even opposite ones call each other very friendly; "Brother in law (*york pha* in Burmese), elder son (*tharyi* in Burmese)" In front of Monastery, Church and Mosque, All together….

After eating the pieces of watermelon by the marched protests, "this is free of charge" was said by the young seller who is the first and till the last, We all are the one.

We who do not put our luck on the winner horse, As the winner horse himself or herself, We ourselves are galloping.

Min Ko Naing, *February 19, 2021*

This poem vividly illustrates the participation of the Myanmar people in the Spring Revolution, serving not just as poetry but also as a historical record of the movement. The revolution encompasses everyone, from street vendors and garment workers to educated professionals such as doctors, teachers, and engineers. Despite differing religious beliefs, the youth united on the same revolutionary platform, symbolized by the images of monasteries, churches, and mosques where they gathered and marched together.

The poet uses powerful imagery, such as the "engine driver" and the "galloping winner horse," to convey the people's strong revolutionary spirit. These metaphors represent the participants' unwavering and spontaneous resolve, reflecting their collective mental determination and resilience.

One of the revolutionary poets, Ko Beda (Chin Dwin), captures the aftermath of the military coup on February 1, 2021, in his poem. Using figurative language such as personification, he poignantly describes the consequences of that fateful day:

1st Day, 1st Day

1st February
The day that Beauty of our Nation disappeared.
The day that nation was in prison.
Stealing Throne of nation just beyond the group of human dogs' reach
The nation covered with ashes,
The youths brighten with strength.
Make revolution with strength and skill.
Eras changed,
The rivers flowed in reverse.
While the nation in darkness
When the educated persons are in jails
When non educated ones being the king
Rape the education
Real artists and educators are the absconders from law.
Hands holding chalk
Hands holding hypodermic syringe Behind the iron sticks in row.
Some passed away one by one.
Some run in a hurry. Some hands hold the guns instead of ball-pens.

Ko Beda (Chin Dwin), 2021

The poem features an exquisite example of personification, depicting the inanimate object "the Nation" as a human being imprisoned. Additionally, the military officers, called the military junta, are portrayed as a pack of human dogs, highlighting their worst traits. The phrase "rape the education" conveys the brutality of the military officers, illustrating the severe decline of Myanmar's education system under military rule.

The image of "absconders from law" represents the oppressed people living under the military regime. The lack of rules and regulations under the junta has placed everyone's lives at their mercy, leading people to unite in revolution. This collective uprising is powerfully highlighted in the poem.

Many of the poets actively participate in frontline demonstrations. Drawing from real-life experiences, the poem titled "Want to Remind" reflects the essence of the Myanmar Spring Revolution:

Want to Remind

Be like Bayinnaung,
The storm will come surely Do stop or go inside it?
For the stone pillar of revolution Are you a sand or a brick?
Time's due that sharpened like the knife ourselves,
The script has been written.
Actor?
Supporter?
Every scene has to be perfect that you involve.
Not going to the death pathway To future pathway.
Clearly, with strong determination
Wherever underground or city,
The most important is being the revolutionary pathway…

Htet Aung (Tet Kon), *September 4, 2021*

Htet Aung (Tet Kon) employs vivid metaphors and similes in his poem, such as the "stone pillar of revolution" and "sand or a brick," which serve as powerful metaphors. The simile "like a knife to be sharpened ourselves" further enhances the imagery. Through these images, the unwavering belief in and enthusiastic commitment to the Spring Revolution among the people become clear.

This poem also conveys that our place is less important than our decisions and actions. It emphasizes that we must stand united in the revolution no matter where we are. This idea shines brightly in the poem, highlighting the people's revolution.

Many poems from the early period of the Myanmar Spring Revolution depict the people's uprising. In the poem "Revolution Smile," the poet Min Nadi Kha uses vivid metaphors to express the essence of the people's revolution.

Revolution Smile

Coming out from the smoking bombs with smile Coming
from rubber bullets and real ones with smile Coming from
the loudly bombs with smile Coming from the ambulance, the
bloody wound with bandage carrying smile.

At today funeral cried sadly,
Tomorrow in the street with smile
On the way of Spring (Nway Oo in Burmese) All Heroes are
coming out with smile.

The late martyrs coming with smile at night strike pathway.

The slaves of dictatorship are shock and extremely afraid of
these smiles.

Not sooner knowing that they'll fall in the deep ravine,
While seeing these smiles, barking and biting.

Whatever it is,
Bearing the smiles,
Singing the song of "Thwey thitsar" (the revolutionary song
composed by Htoo Eain Thin after the 1988 uprising)
Beating pots and pans at 8pm.
Closing their fists of no surrendered till the end of the world,
Covering the truth shield, Smiling bloody….

Min Nadi Kha, *March 18, 2021*

The poetic imagination in "Revolution Smile" brings together the deceased and the living as characters in the poem. It depicts people who have been killed by gunshots, car accidents, beatings, or wounds, all uniting to protest against the military junta. Each protester remains unwavering in their fight to reclaim people's power, demonstrating

until their last breath with a sweet smile. These smiles instill fear in the military officers, leading them to oppress the people even more. However, the greater the cruelty of the military officers, the deeper the people's commitment to the revolution becomes.

One of the revolutionary poets, Khit Thit Ein, explores the role of youth in his series of 15 poems titled "21st Century Youth (1) to (15)," which were posted on Facebook. He highlights the connection between the people, the National Unity Government (NUG), and Generation Z (GZ) in these poems. In one of his poems, he creates a powerful linkage between these groups as follows:

> **21st Century Youth (2)**
>
> "The body of the gun" is people.
> The shooter is NUG.
> The youth is the bullet that is in the heart
> of enemy.
>
> *Khit Thit Ein, October 26, 2021*

In this poem, the Myanmar Spring Revolution is depicted as a people's revolution, uniting all generations toward a common goal. The strength of the people gradually builds an incredible revolution, illustrated through vivid metaphors such as 'the body of the gun,' 'the shooter,' and 'the bullet.' Here, the body of the gun represents the people, the shooter symbolizes the NUG, and the bullet signifies Generation Z (GZ). These metaphorical expressions evoke the revolutionary spirit of the people.

The poem highlights that the cooperation and collaboration between the people, the NUG, and the GZ can establish a new democratic regime while simultaneously suppressing the military regime. Thus, the Myanmar Spring Revolution is portrayed as the people's revolution.

STRONG DETERMINATION

After the military coup in early 2021, the people of Myanmar, especially the youth, felt hopeless about their future. With their dreams shattered, they expressed extreme antagonism toward the military

junta by taking to the streets and raising three fingers in a show of strong determination. Five poems have been selected to illustrate the people's strong determination during the Spring Revolution.

This poetic focus on determination parallels the remarkable persistence seen in other post-coup adaptations. Like journalists who develop new verification methods despite constant threats or healthcare workers who maintain medical standards in makeshift facilities, these poems reveal how revolutionary will persists despite overwhelming challenges, adapting rather than surrendering when faced with military repression. This determination reflects a broader pattern of resilience observed across Myanmar's post-coup society.

The young revolutionary poets deeply believe in the revolution, willingly sacrificing their belongings, including their lives, and taking immense pride in their actions. Despite their youth, the responsibility for the country's future flows in their veins. Their courage is vividly reflected in the poem by Khit Thit Ein:

> **21st Century Youth (3)**
>
> To revolute injustice
> Before going outside, praying in Buddha and ready to sacrifice life.
> So proud of it! Being in great trouble In my whole life.
>
> *Khit Thit Ein, October 27, 2021*

The poet conveys external realities, internal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs in this poem. Before the military coup, most youths in Myanmar were primarily focused on their studies and playing games. However, the oppressive actions of the military regime spurred them into political participation. They have shown remarkable bravery in pursuing their dreams and reclaiming people's power, even after experiencing a taste of semi-democracy during the last five years under the National League for Democracy (NLD) government.

In this poem, the youth express their willingness to sacrifice their lives for a democratic Myanmar. They demonstrate resilience in the face of horrific experiences and take pride in participating in the revolution.

This poem embodies the unwavering determination of the youth in the struggle for democracy.

The strong determination of the youth propels them toward victory as they passionately strive for freedom from fear. The young poet describes the essence of the 21st-century youth in the poem titled "21st Century Youth (4)" as follows:

> **21st Century Youth (4)**
>
> Whenever they destroy, Not our belief.
> We belong to nothing The one whose hope is ruined Come and touch!
> The youth is the blasting cap of the hand grenade!
>
> *Khit Thit Ein, October 28, 2021*

The youth firmly believe that real power comes from within and cannot be destroyed by external forces. The poem evokes strong feelings and emotions by metaphorizing "the blasting cap of the hand grenade." This vivid image allows us to feel the energy and determination of the youth. We can hear their defiant roar against the military officers and witness their boundless courage.

The Myanmar Spring Revolution aims to unite the country's citizens in strongly rejecting the coup and in calling for the return of democratic rule (Global Voices, 2021). The poet is one such citizen; he is not only a CDM teacher (a teacher who joined the Civil Disobedience Movement) but also a writer and poet who strongly believes in the revolution and is fighting for a democratic future. His strong determination is clearly expressed in the poem titled "Pride" as follows:

> **Pride**
>
> Hopeless for paradise (Nirvana), It's OK. Never be the slave of Devadatta (an evil and divisive figure in Buddhism) And never say to him; "Yes, my majesty."
>
> *Ko Ko Lin (Mom's Home)*, *February 11, 2021*

The poet uses the historical character, the monk Devadatta, to express his strong determination. Traditionally, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to attain paradise at the end of their lives. The direct meaning of the poem is that if there is still no hope for paradise on his way, the poet will be pleased rather than being a partner of Devadatta and saying "Yes, *a shin phaya* (my majesty)" to him. However, what the poet wants to say here is that even if there is no hope for a comfortable life in the Spring Revolution, he will keep on fighting and fighting, and he will never be a partner of the military junta, never stay on the same side of the military junta.

The Spring Revolution has transformed ordinary people into revolutionary poets. One such poet, Nyi Taryar, delves into the souls and minds of the Myanmar people in his poem "Internal Battle" as follows:

> **Internal Battle**
>
> The body is in the city But it's a long time, the soul and action are underground.
>
> *Nyi Taryar, November 5, 2021*

Although his body remains in the city, his mind and soul are in the liberated areas, standing against the military. This means he always supports the PDFs (People's Defense Forces) as much as possible and acts as a guerrilla against the military coup in urban areas. This poem evokes a deep sense of courage and the strong determination of the youth.

During the revolutionary period, the conditions of the people deteriorated drastically across many sectors: education, health, economics, politics, and even daily life. Most villages, especially in the Sagaing, Magway, and Mandalay regions—where predominantly Bama ethnic groups live—were set on fire by the brutal military, as were areas in Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and other ethnic regions. Consequently, many people abandoned their homes and belongings, striving to survive amidst these horrific experiences. The poet captures the strong determination of the revolutionary people who lost everything they possessed in the following poem:

Spring Pride

Smoke….
Seen one after another
Houses…
Disappeared one by one.
Barren of words
Dwelling in the heart
The anger smoke is freeze.
No more summer
The revolutionary Padauk (flowers) will blossom
Without home, but with high speed
We pledge with tear pouring water to the noble banyan tree;
"Be in revolution till the end of life"

Min Myat Bone (Naung Lay Pin), March 21, 2024

The poet vividly describes the scene of burning houses alongside the resilience of the revolutionary people. He uses the metaphor "revolutionary Padauk," which is not only the national flower of Myanmar but also symbolizes the spirit of revolution. The stanza ends with "Be in revolution till the end of life," illustrating the people's unwavering determination.

NEW LEADERSHIP TRENDS

The Myanmar Spring Revolution has seen a new trend in leadership—collective leadership complemented by individual leadership. Young people play crucial roles in the revolution, whether in the armed forces, support roles, fundraising, or organizing protests in cities under brutal military control. Many of these leaders are in their twenties and early thirties, such as Dr. Tayzar San, Ms. Ei Thinzar Maung, and Mr. Wai Moe Naing. They initiated street protests that drew millions of participants and inspired thousands of civil servants to join various strikes.

The collective leadership celebrated in these poems reflects the same decentralized, adaptive approaches emerging in other sectors. As documented elsewhere in this volume, Myanmar's post-coup innovations

often feature distributed authority and collaborative decision-making rather than hierarchical structures, allowing for greater flexibility and resilience under pressure. This pattern of collective leadership can be seen across healthcare networks, educational initiatives, and community protection systems throughout post-coup Myanmar.

As the International Crisis Group (2023, pp. 9, 11) documents, young women were highly visible on the protest front lines, making up by one estimate 60 percent of protesters in the initial days after the coup, and most members of the PDFs and other antimilitary armed groups are youths, often still in their teens or early twenties.

Regarding collective leadership, the Myanmar Spring Revolution youth leaders are interdependent and collaborate closely, emphasizing interactions to enhance the overall working process. According to Aye Chan (2023), numerous strikes have emerged, including the 8 p.m. pot and pan strike, honking strike, flower strike, watermelon strike, sleeping strike to symbolize a lack of future, silent strike, *thanakha* strike, *khamauk* strike, bullock strike, *a tar oo* strike, praying strike, *aungthapjay* strike, tumbling kelly strike, candle strike, dawn strike, night strike, walking strike, sitting strike, egg strike, mask strike, stone strike, guerrilla strike, no man strike, and many others. All these strikes are nationwide events and activities carried out under the collective leadership of the youth.

The Myanmar Spring Revolution unites all generations and social statuses with a common purpose: to end the military regime. In his poem "The Way that Must Walk," the poet A Mon describes the youths leading various strikes and protests across the nation:

> **The Way that Must Walk**
>
> I roll the voice and shoot it Mine touches with Hledan and scatters.
> With the spine of Hta Naung and the buds of Tamar,
> The Spring, Nway Oo blossoms.
> I grasp the sunbeam and cast it.
> Town of Myaing proclaims loudly; "We will win."
> Our brothers
> Our sisters
> Wake us up while in half sleep

"Wake up!"
Here is Hlaingtharyar.
Here is Sanchaung.
Here is Kyuk Myaung.
Here is Mandalay.
Here is Nay Pyi Daw.
If I say that is it the whole country? … "We must win!" they said.
Cover with shield Don't care of shooting bullet with a rude look. The sand bags that blocked the street are the tears of ours. Say again…
We fight with heart.
Nway Oo will say; Will give back the multiple For our fallen blood.

A Mon, 2021

This poem clearly highlights young leaders' interactions and active skills, reflecting the enhancement of the revolutionary process they have fostered. The metaphorical expression "the blocked sandbags are their tears" evokes an emotional response from readers. Instead of using euphemisms, the poet directly condemns the bullets fired by soldiers. This poem asserts that the collective leadership of the youths will succeed in the revolution as they devote their heart and soul to it.

Generation Z and Millennials have been "at the vanguard of the movement, and their support remains an important asset" (International Crisis Group, 2023, p. 15). The poem "Having" illustrates how young people are gaining more power and influence in the hearts of the people.

The poet expresses admiration for the youths who strive to end the military regime, and this sentiment inspired the composition of the poem as follows:

Having

Assets laid by
Sailing along the hillside.
They die we live The storm occurs in any season.
In the judgment circle

Injury arrow shoot to the target
To get the era
To own the era
We have the stars who can judge.

Lu Thit Moe Kyaw, *November 4, 2021*

The metaphors "star," "storm," and "injury arrow" are used in the poem. The "star" represents the people, especially the youth, who sacrifice their lives for a democratic regime. This visible image illustrates the determination of the youth and the belief that they are the ones who can ultimately end the military junta. The "storm" implies the extreme attacks by the military, while the "injury arrow" represents the resilience and courage of the youth, capturing their mental fortitude. These vivid images convey not only the collective leadership of the youth but also the country's faith in them during the revolution.

SOCIETAL DIVERSITY

The Myanmar Spring Revolution has created two distinct communities: the revolution side and the military side. On the revolution side, there were doctors and nurses, office workers, teachers, administrators, bankers, and telecommunications staff who joined the CDM. Conversely, the military side includes government staff who did not join the CDM (Non-CDM). Five poems that illustrate the nature and behaviors of these diverse societies during the Spring Revolution were analyzed.

These poetic depictions of social division parallel the complex landscape other contributors to this volume have observed. Like the financial networks that must navigate between military-controlled and revolutionary-aligned areas, poets articulate the moral geography of contemporary Myanmar, mapping not just physical territory but ethical landscapes divided between those supporting democracy and those enabling military rule. This division appears in all aspects of post-coup Myanmar society, creating navigation challenges for essential services like healthcare and education.

One of the revolutionary poets, Thura Min Kant, composed a poem titled "Some" to express the diverse society as follows:

Some….

Thinking about the different worlds…..
Some are wet in water.
Some are wet in sweat.
Some are wet in blood.

Thura Min Kant, April 2024

Based on real-life experiences, the poet describes the different kinds of people who are happy, unhappy, in great trouble, and so on. The visible images of "water," "sweat," and "blood" represent the diverse society, evoking strong feelings and emotions in the readers.

The late writer and poet, A Kyi Daw (Karen), highlighted the distinctions within Myanmar society during the Spring Revolution in his poem as follows:

The Difference

Some are boosting for the chicken curry, Some are eating with the leaf plate.
Some hate the high price,
Some hide their children holding hands tightly.
Some are happy with their sweet hearts, Some are having the bamboo shoots and no murmuring.
Some are yearning for their relatives, Some are walking in heavy rain.
Some are relaxing in comfort bed,
Some are fighting with their dignity.
It's the time not solving secretly
Whatever it is,
Let me have a pure conscience.

A Kyi Daw, January 14, 2022

As the poem mentions, some lives become homeless, comfortless, and cheerless, while others remain rich, comfortable, and cheerful. These contrasting situations lead to a diverse society split into sympathetic and selfish segments. Most people on the revolutionary side, including the poet, strive to maintain a clear conscience even in the face of great trouble.

The famous writer Maung Sein Win (Pa Di Kone) is one of the revolutionary poets, and he wrote the poem "The Parting Landmark" as follows:

> **The Parting Landmark**
>
> I understand your belief and right
> In diverse with full respect.
> At the time of the others' sadness with tears,
> Recite the ones giving sympathy to them
> The ones with no hearts
> Never together.
> Fine art cannot quench the fire of the horrible mind
> Any entertainment cannot put out any worries.
> Therefore, I've already decided,
> Leave former lovely friends on Facebook
> With broken heart.
> **It's our parting landmark.**
>
> *Maung Sein Win (Pa Di Kone), April 12, 2023*

In his poem, the poet cannot accept his old friends who lead easy lives while the whole country suffers under the brutality of the military junta. He ultimately declares his decision to leave them behind. The Myanmar Spring Revolution tests people's ideologies, distinguishing between the selfish and the selfless. Those on the revolutionary side strive to create a selfless society, while those aligned with the military are seen as part of a selfish society.

Maung Hla Myo (Chin Chaung Chan) uses the metaphor "Prostitute" to represent the silent people who stay in their comfort zones, neglecting the revolution, as follows:

Prostitute

If they get what they want,
Whoever he is, whatever it is,
They keep silence.

Maung Hla Myo (Chin Chaung Chan), February 9, 2021

It is a clear expression of a diverse society that accepts whoever holds power in the country as long as they get what they want. The metaphor "prostitute" is a meaningful and effective expression for those who side with the military or remain silent about the military coup and the junta's brutality, as long as their own lives remain comfortable.

The last poem describing the diverse society is "2021 New I-Gyin," composed by a CDM professor. In this poem, she adorns "Nan" in various ways. Here, "Nan" refers to the Non-CDM government staff who did not join the Civil Disobedience Movement and continued working for the military junta, as illustrated in some excerpts as follows:

2021 New I-Gyin

Hey… beloved friends
Best friends …. Sisters in law…..
Nan… Nan…. Nan… Nan
Nan after Nan
Are you a Nan (Non-CDM) from upper hill or lower?
Original Nan or Nan back from CDM?
What kind of Nan you are?
Non CDM cursed that CDM has no justice, We, CDM, are the stupid group… Aww How surprising it is!

Huge Nan, Middle Nan, Small Nan
Flat Nan,
Wet Nan, Dry Nan,
Mad Nan, Crest Nan
Wearing Nan flower,
Eating Nan fruit,
Embracing Nan tree,
Hanging Nan branch,

Smelling Nan smell,
Covering Nan leaf,
Hey …. Nan (Non CDMs), are you sure able to smile for the rest of your life?

Shin Myat Noe Oo, *October 13, 2021*

The poet uses phonological and semantic embellishments in this poem, such as Huge Nan, Middle Nan, Small Nan, Flat Nan, Wet Nan, Dry Nan, Mad Nan, Crest Nan, Nan flower, Nan fruit, Nan tree, Nan branch, Nan smell, and Nan leaf. She also uses satire to criticize non-CDM, and the last stanza implies that a non-CDM will realize that being a non-CDM is full of shame and lack of dignity when the revolution is over.

COMMUNITY SOLIDARITY

The Spring Revolution generates a huge charity environment in Myanmar that is called public-to-public, and all of Myanmar people over the world are key players in it. In the COVID-19 period, our State Counselor, Aung San Suu Kyi, often addressed that the people perform the most important role, and the people are the VIP for the country, and said "ပြည်သူ အဓိက" *(pyi thu adika)*. Nowadays, numerous Myanmar people support the Spring Revolution in every way they can. Four poems written by Pi Ya Thwey (Monywa), Min Ko Naing (two poems), and Ko Ko Lin (Mom's Home) are selected and studied.

The "public-to-public" connections celebrated in these poems function through many of the same trusted networks that distribute medicine, channel funds, and share crucial information. Poetry both documents and strengthens these solidarity mechanisms, adding emotional and cultural dimensions to the practical support systems that have emerged since the coup. This pattern of community self-reliance appears across all sectors of post-coup Myanmar society.

For the victory of the revolution, all Myanmar locals or internationals are inclusive, which can be seen in the poem "Help from Backline" written by the poet Pi Ya Thwey (Monywa) as follows:

Help from Backline

It's the horrible time.
Let me urge; "Scatter the donation seeds"
Age of battle
Brutal military regime will be terminated.
"Come…., lady
Over there is my partner
Give meat and fish to him (the civic tiger) that went underground to be a comrade.

Pi Ya Thwey (Monywa), *November 9, 2021*

This poem reflects the involvement of every individual in the public-to-public process of the Myanmar Spring Revolution. The poet vigorously believes that mutual support among the public plays a vital role in sustaining the fight and achieving success in the revolution. This poem clearly illustrates how someone can be part of this public-to-public process.

Min Ko Naing is a poet and a statesman who has been standing with the people throughout his life, from 1988 until now. Drawing from his real experiences, he created the poem "In My Nursery School" as follows:

In My Nursery School

With the guns
They came to get me.
My teacher said
Do not take him,
I will adopt him.
They dragged me out
I cried.
The whole school cried.
Our toys also cried.

Min Ko Naing, *April 1, 2022*

The poem tells the story of a four-year-old boy arrested by soldiers at his nursery school, in front of teachers and other children. Despite

his teacher's attempts to protect him, it was in vain. The poem uses personification, such as "our toys also cried," to convey the sorrow and terror experienced by the children. This story serves as further evidence that mercy or justice cannot be expected from the soldiers, and it underscores the need for the public to rely on each other to be resilient against the military junta.

Ko Ko Lin (Mom's Home) depicts the Myanmar Spring Revolution as a public-to-public movement based on his own experiences as follows:

> **Hello, Spring! (47)**
>
> Within these days,
> Never ask, "What are you doing?" We all gave up our jobs.
> Within these days,
> Never ask, "Are you OK?"
> We left all good things far behind.
> Within these days,
> Never ask, "Are you healthy?" Nation itself is not healthy.
> To sacrificed ocean,
> All the hearts of rivers flow together
> Among the diverse infinity,
> When all lives are equal,
> Hello, Spring …..
> We've already known the answers of all questions.
> Not dare to ask….
>
> *Ko Ko Lin (Mom's Home)*, *December 19, 2021*

The people involved in the revolution are facing numerous difficulties, such as having their houses burned or ransacked, personal belongings looted, and experiencing a lack of safety and stable places to settle. Consequently, the poet refrains from posing questions with obvious answers. In the poem, the poet employs personifications and metaphors to evoke an aesthetic effect on the readers. Phrases like "Unhealthy Nation," "Sacrificed Ocean," and "Hearts of Rivers" serve as metaphors and personifications to express the immense sacrifices made and the unwavering readiness of their souls and hearts to continue sacrificing.

As the years of revolution lengthen, daily life across Myanmar becomes increasingly difficult. However, most Myanmar people strive to survive amidst the daily brutalities of the military junta by supporting each other physically and emotionally. Min Ko Naing captures this resilience of the Myanmar people in the following excerpts of his poem:

Hands Which Will Write New History

What kind of news the world would like?
Participate in Guerrilla strike along the City streets
Take the photos with tattered phone when the village was burnt,
He is a citizen journalist. One place of the world replied, It was accepted….
This is the new crime record!
In 21st century, the army of land, navy and air forces were fought back by percussion lock firearm,
Which country experienced it?
Which history learned it? Along the difficult journey, never leave anyone, warmly welcome. People, people, … our noble ones….. Wherever we live, Whatever we drink, How far it is!
"It's urgent, our brotherhoods!"
Following one,
Hundreds, thousands, lakhs, millions, millions and millions… stretching our hands.
We can touch everything with our hands.
It is not metaphorical expression that
"it is writing new history"
Really! we are writing a very new world history of revolution….
People…
Our great people…
Our noble people…

Min Ko Naing, August 27, 2022

According to G.H. Luce (2014), it is evident that "out of sweetness comes forth strength, the strength of delicacy of one who knows and trusts his feelings and dares show them, of one who looks into his heart and writes." The poet listens to the people's voices, feels their

emotions, and expresses them on their behalf. This demonstrates the public-to-public sharing, caring, and understanding of the suffering endured during the Spring Revolution.

POETRY AS CREATIVE ADAPTATION

This research reveals how revolutionary poetry serves as a powerful medium through which Myanmar people make meaning of their experiences during the Spring Revolution. The 106 poems collected between 2021 and 2024 demonstrate the creative adaptation that characterizes Myanmar's broader response to the military coup. While highlighting the five thematic elements—people's revolution, strong determination, new leadership trends, diverse society, and community solidarity—this poetry also reflects patterns of innovation, resilience, and connection seen throughout post-coup Myanmar.

These poems function not merely as artistic reflections but as active components in what this volume describes as post-coup assemblages—the dynamic combinations of skills, community networks, and adaptive practices that have emerged across Myanmar since the military coup. Their creation and circulation represent how communities assemble and reassemble various elements when faced with state failure.

Poets transform traditional literary forms to meet revolutionary contexts while maintaining core aesthetic principles, similar to how other professionals adapt their expertise under crisis conditions. The poems move through trusted community networks—sometimes digital, sometimes physical, sometimes oral—connecting urban and rural experiences while evading military surveillance. This poetry thereby becomes part of larger assemblages of resistance, documentation, and meaning-making that help communities navigate unprecedented challenges.

The numerical distribution of thematic elements—16 emphasizing people's revolution, 45 highlighting strong determination, 11 expressing new leadership trends, 24 describing diverse society, and 10 reflecting community solidarity—reveals significant patterns in how Myanmar people understand and express their revolutionary experience. The predominance of determination-focused poems (42.5 percent of the poems collected) suggests that, within this collection,

sustaining revolutionary will was a central preoccupation for communities under military pressure, with poetry serving a crucial role in maintaining resilience despite overwhelming oppression.

The revolutionary poets themselves demonstrate remarkable adaptability. Some poets have paid the ultimate price for their artistic resistance, Khet Thi most famously, while others continued their work despite displacement, surveillance, and material hardship. Their demographic diversity—spanning ages from the 20s to over 70s and including voices from Bama, Chin, Karen, and Mon ethnic groups—reflects the inclusive nature of the revolution itself and challenges assumptions that creative resistance is limited to particular social groups.

The poems depicting societal diversity map Myanmar's complex moral landscape, distinguishing between revolutionary resistance and military collaboration. This poetic construction of ethical categories serves a crucial function in maintaining revolutionary solidarity, establishing clear moral frameworks during a period of social upheaval. Poetry helps communities navigate difficult ethical choices, providing language and imagery that clarify the moral dimensions of resistance.

Perhaps most significantly, these poems document and strengthen the "public-to-public" networks that have become essential for survival. Poetry adds emotional and cultural dimensions to practical support systems, creating bonds that enhance community resilience against military disruption. The poems demonstrate that Myanmar's revolution draws strength from formal organizations and countless everyday connections between people who share resources, information, and courage.

When considered alongside other forms of post-coup adaptation, revolutionary poetry reveals how Myanmar communities maintain cultural continuity even while developing innovative responses to authoritarian pressure. The poems show that resistance involves not just opposing military rule but actively creating alternative ways of organizing community life that may outlast the current crisis and influence Myanmar's future development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how revolutionary poetry provides a window onto the meaning-making processes of Myanmar people during the Spring Revolution. Poetry functions as both documentation and creation—recording revolutionary experiences that might otherwise be erased under military censorship while helping shape the revolution's moral vision and emotional landscape. The poems analyzed here reveal five interconnected dimensions of revolutionary experience: the people's inclusive participation, their unwavering determination, new forms of collective leadership, the complex social divisions the revolution has exposed, and the vital community solidarity networks that sustain resistance.

The enduring legacy of these poems extends beyond aesthetic achievement to their practical function within the revolution. As embodied in the haunting words of the martyred poet Khet Thi—"They shot the head dead, but they don't know revolution dwells in the heart"—these poems articulate a revolution of consciousness that transcends physical repression. The military junta may control territory and traditional institutions, but these poems reveal its failure to dominate Myanmar's cultural and moral landscape. They preserve revolutionary consciousness even when physical resistance is constrained, ensuring that the spirit of revolution continues despite overwhelming challenges.

These poems challenge assumptions that state failure inevitably leads to social breakdown. Instead, they document how communities develop creative adaptations that maintain cultural continuity while responding to unprecedented threats. Poetry becomes part of what this volume describes as "assemblages"—dynamic combinations of different elements that work together flexibly. The poets themselves demonstrate remarkable adaptability—transforming traditional literary forms for revolutionary contexts, finding new ways to create and share their work despite surveillance, and connecting experiences across Myanmar's diverse regions and peoples. Their work reveals how creative expression becomes interwoven with practical resistance, each strengthening the other within these broader assemblages of revolution and community resilience.

This research offers several practical insights for understanding Myanmar's ongoing revolution. First, it demonstrates the importance of cultural expression in sustaining long-term resistance, suggesting that support for Myanmar should include attention to creative and material needs. Second, it reveals how poetry helps communities navigate complex ethical questions, providing moral clarity during periods of social upheaval. Third, it documents how poetry connects different revolutionary experiences—urban and rural, armed and unarmed, professional and community-based—creating shared understanding across diverse contexts.

Looking beyond Myanmar, this study contributes to broader discussions about how communities respond to authoritarianism. It suggests that creative expression serves as commentary on political events and an active component in resistance networks. Poetry's ability to move through both digital and physical spaces, evade censorship through metaphor and allegory, and connect diverse experiences makes it particularly valuable during periods of repression. The Myanmar case demonstrates how poetry can help communities maintain a sense of agency and possibility even amid overwhelming state violence.

The poetry of the Myanmar Spring Revolution represents not just a response to crisis but an active creation of alternative futures. Even as it documents suffering and resistance, it imagines what could be—a Myanmar transformed politically, socially, and culturally. In the words of poet Ko Ko Lin, when "all the hearts of rivers flow together" toward "the sacrificed ocean," poetry becomes not just reflection but creation—part of the remarkable adaptive creativity through which Myanmar's people continue to resist authoritarianism and create new possibilities for their collective future.

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When Myanmar's military seized power in 2021, the state did not simply change hands. In many places it lost its grip on the ordinary work of public life. Doctors, reporters, and aid workers kept that work going by other means, carried by wider networks of trust and mutual obligation that the regime could neither command nor see.

This volume calls that practice fugitive professionalism: expertise that slips the state's hold without abandoning the work itself. Drawing on fieldwork from across post-coup Myanmar and its borderlands, the chapters follow how people sustained everything from protection against explosive ordnance to healthcare, money, journalism, education, and poetry once formal institutions failed them. The editor's introduction sets these accounts against the long contrast between the centralizing mandala of the lowlands and the upland traditions of governing without a center, and argues that what looks like improvisation is the reactivation of long-standing traditions of reciprocal care, from funeral societies to parahita welfare groups, carried at new speed by the digital networks every chapter runs on.

The result is a study of how a society holds itself together when its center falls away, and of what that holding might mean for the country's federal future.

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