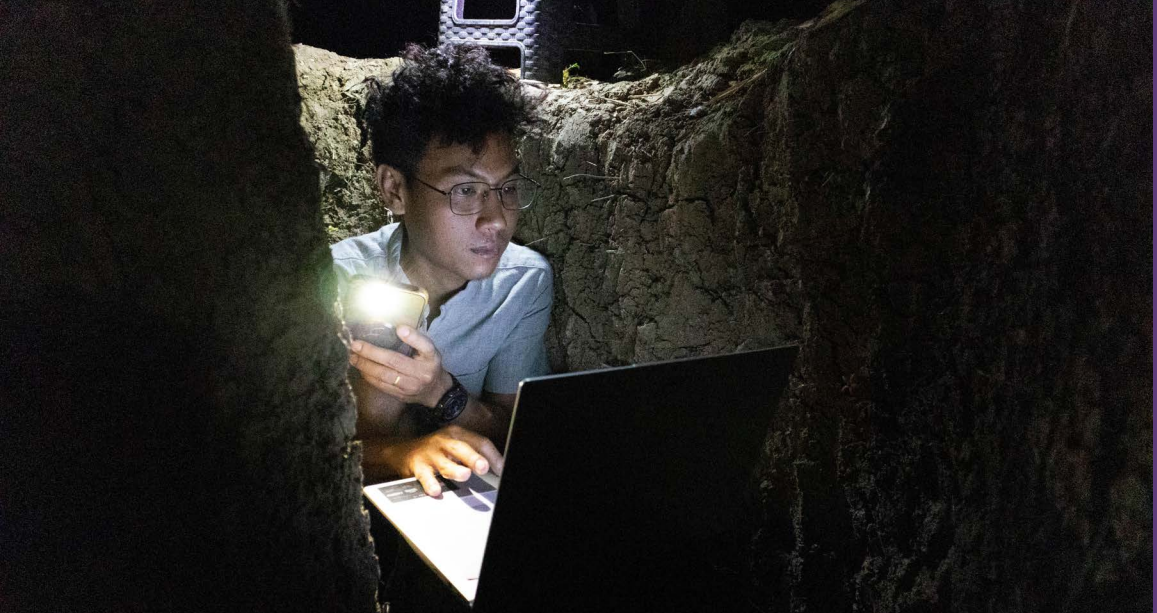




WHEN LEAVING BECOMES RESISTANCE

Student Displacement in Contemporary Myanmar

Amelia Jane



Understanding
Myanmar's
Development

RESEARCH
REPORT
No. 27



IDRC • CRDI

Canada

When Leaving Becomes Resistance

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Foreword

Since 2012, the Understanding Myanmar's Development (UMD) series, supported by the International Development and Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, has sought to enhance knowledge of Myanmar's development processes, strengthen the capacity of Burmese researchers, and encourage them to actively engage the study of development policy and practice. In the first phase of the series, fellowships were given to midcareer researchers to support their work and publication in their respective areas of expertise. In the second phase, under the same UMD series banner the research outputs emerged directly from a long-term capacity building initiative with the University of Mandalay, but which came to an abrupt end with the military coup of February 2021. Today RCSD is reviving the UMD series, using this as a platform to publish the work of independent Myanmar scholars and students of the alternative education systems which have sprung up since the coup. RCSD strives to continue to support knowledge production with this new group of Myanmar scholars and students, including Amelia Jane, the author of this publication.

The author has conducted research with young university-aged Myanmar youth. This research, through the direct testimonies of dozens of displaced students, provides a fascinating window into the context of their situations, and the motivations, reasons, and rationalizations behind their decisions that have led them to where they are today. The author has tied this into the larger existing academic literature on both civil disobedience and displacement, recasting and reconsidering what "displacement" means for her research subjects in a way that critically reframes the agency and

position of Myanmar's university-aged youth. While they have moved to a disparate range of new places both within and outside their home country, displacement itself has become for them a form of resistance and active agency in a way that invites us to reconsider the standard framing of passive or powerless victimhood.

Chayan Vaddhanaphuti, PhD
Director, RCSD

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the forced displacement scholarship from the International Development Research Center of Canada that made this work possible. I am also grateful to the Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD) at Chiang Mai University for the institutional support that enabled the research to be carried out under considerable political difficulty.

My deepest debt is to the 29 CDM students who shared their experiences with me. The book exists because they trusted me with what they had lived through, and I hope it faithfully reflects their accounts. The risks they have taken and continue to take should not be reduced to anything I have written here.

Finally, I thank my parents, whose support has been steadfast throughout this project, and my family and friends, who have made it possible to work as a researcher during this period.

About the series

Before the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021, RCSD was engaged in multiple research capacity-building initiatives for young and emerging academics in the country, including the Understanding Myanmar's Development Research Fellowship Programme and the Research and Capacity Building Project for Knowledge Production at the University of Mandalay. The project was part of the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar (K4DM) initiative, launched in 2017 by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC to support a new generation of researchers and leaders in Myanmar.

Through workshops, research grants, mentoring, and field-based support, the program enabled young researchers to conduct social science research on emerging issues related to Myanmar's transition. The program initially focused on emerging young scholars, a new generation of civil society workers, journalists, and independent researchers, later turning to the professional development and capacity building of academics working in various government universities of Myanmar through a close working partnership with the University of Mandalay.

Between 2016 and 2021, this resulted in the publication of 26 research monographs in the Understanding Myanmar's Development series, covering a wide range of topics across urban and rural settings from Myanmar's Dry Zone to highland ethnic areas, documenting the experiences of local communities amid the country's social, economic, and environmental changes and challenges.

Since the military coup of February 1, 2021, RCSD has no longer been able to collaborate with state universities in Myanmar. As government institutions, including the higher education system, are no longer functioning, RCSD has shifted its long-term

engagement to work with alternative education systems and to support knowledge production independently with Myanmar scholars and students, including those who have relocated to Thailand. RCSD continues to strengthen the research capacities of young Burmese scholars, enabling them to become academically engaged researchers equipped with analytical tools to generate new and contextualized knowledge on critical issues that are central to understanding the country's ongoing and intensifying conflict. Research focuses on themes such as displacement, livelihoods, forced migration, and geopolitics. The publication of the students' and researchers' work advances scholarship on Myanmar and brings locally grounded, non-Western perspectives into international academic debates. At the same time, these publications provide insights for the broader public who want to learn more about the complexities of post-coup Myanmar.

Abstract

The widespread refusal of military rule that followed Myanmar's February 2021 coup gave rise to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Among its most consequential participants were undergraduate students, who walked out of universities and into displacement, some to ethnic-controlled areas inside the country and others across the border into Thailand. This book examines what their movement looked like from inside and what it cost them.

Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 29 students, 13 who remained in Myanmar (IDS) and 16 who went into Thailand (CBS), conducted between 2024 and 2025, the analysis traces how their understanding of CDM evolved. What began as peaceful refusal to legitimize the regime hardened, for some, into armed resistance and, for others, into the slower work of organizing in exile.

Both groups found ways to keep the movement alive: by boycotting SAC universities, setting up alternative learning networks, raising funds for those inside, participating in political organizations, and, in some cases, armed defense. The forms varied by terrain, but the refusal at the heart of CDM, to not recognize the regime, held firm.

Across both groups, a shared collective identity as "CDM students" held even as tactics diverged. The book uses this comparison to argue that, in this context, displacement is not the failure of resistance but its continuation by other means.

The argument contributes to forced displacement scholarship by foregrounding the political agency of the displaced people's movement theory and tracing how a movement evolves under conditions in which its participants can no longer remain in place.

List of abbreviations

NSM	new social movement
AAA	American Anthropological Association
ABSDF	All Burma Students' Democratic Front
CBS	Cross-Border Students
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CMU	Chiang Mai University
CR	Critical realism
EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organizations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GED	General Educational Development
IDP	Internally Displaced Person (plural: IDPs)
IDRC	International Development Research Center
IDS	Internally Displaced Students
KESAN	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network
KNU	Karen National Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization (plural: NGOs)
NUG	National Unity Government
PDFs	People's Defense Forces
RCSD	Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development
RFA	Radio Free Asia
SAC	State Administration Council
STSO	Southern Territory Supporting Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
VOA	Voice of America

Glossary of terms

8888 uprising: The nationwide pro-democracy uprising in Burma that began on the 8th of August 1988, which was met with mass military violence and gave rise to a generation of student activists.

Capability approach: The development framework associated with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum focusing on assessing well-being in terms of what people can do and be (capabilities), rather than resources or utility alone.

Civil Disobedience: A conscientious, principled, and (in the classical Rawlsian formulation) public and nonviolent breach of law, undertaken to communicate opposition to specific laws or policies and to provoke their reform.

Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM): The nationwide noncooperation movement that emerged in Myanmar in February 2021 in response to the military coup, in which government employees, students, and civilians refused to work under or recognize the State Administration Council.

Cross-Border Students (CBS): as used in this book, referrers to i.e., undergraduate students who, after participating in the CDM, crossed Myanmar's border into Mae Sot, Thailand. CBS do not necessarily seek refugee status or permanent settlement.

Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs): Long-standing armed organizations, predominantly drawn from Myanmar's ethnic-minority populations, that have fought the Burmese state for varying degrees of self-determination since independence. Several have hosted and trained CDM students following the 2021 coup.

Framing processes: The interpretive work through which social movement participants identify a problem (diagnostic framing),

propose a solution (prognostic framing), and motivate participation (motivational framing).

Gift of moving: A term coined by Becker (2022), used in this book to describe the unanticipated opportunities for learning, growth, and political development that displacement can sometimes create.

Internally displaced students (IDS), as used in this book, are undergraduate students who, after participating in the CDM, have remained inside Myanmar. The term overlaps but is not identical to “internally displaced persons” (IDPs) under international law.

Mae Sot: District, in Tak Province, western Thailand, is located on the Moei River across from the Myanmar town of Myawaddy. A long-standing destination for Burmese migrants and a hub for Burmese civil society, education initiatives, and humanitarian work.

People’s Defense Forces (PDFs): are civilian armed resistance units formed across Myanmar after the February 2021 coup, many under the loose authority of the National Unity Government.

Phaye-thee: is Burmese for “watermelon” ; it has been used colloquially since 2021 to describe individuals who appear to comply with SAC rules on the outside (green) but covertly support the resistance (red).

Rejected alternatives: Bartram’s (2015) concept, used in this book to describe the options that displaced individuals could have taken (returning home, complying, accepting an alternative path) but consciously did not, on grounds of values or political commitment.

Saffron Revolution: 2007 mass protests in Myanmar, led by Buddhist monks, suppressed by the Tatmadaw with significant casualties.

Section 505(a): of the Myanmar Penal Code criminalizes the spreading of “false news” and material likely to cause fear, agitation, or offenses against state employees. Substantially amended after the February 2021 coup and used widely to prosecute dissent.

State Administration Council (SAC): The Myanmar military junta installed after the coup of 1 February 2021. Self-styled successor to the State Peace and Development Council and the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

Uncivil disobedience: Following Delmas (2020), Brownlee (2012), and Celikates (2016), this is principled resistance to unjust laws or regimes that do not meet classical civility conditions (it may be covert, evasive, forceful, or directed at property or persons) but is distinguished from ordinary criminality by its conscientious motivation and communicative intent.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Why students?

On 1 February 2021, the Myanmar military seized power and detained President U Win Myint, State Counselor Aung San Suu Kyi, and other elected officials. The junta, which styled itself the State Administration Council (SAC), declared a year-long state of emergency. Within days, mass protests had broken out in cities across the country. Within weeks, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) had crystallized: government employees, teachers, doctors, and students refusing to work under or recognize the new regime. What followed in 2021 and 2022 was less a campaign of repression in the conventional sense than the systematic production of conditions under which ordinary life became unsustainable, what Mbembe (2003) has called necropolitics.

Doctors, railway employees, bank workers, teachers, and university staff walked off their jobs. Among the strikers, university students were a distinctive presence: not employees withdrawing labor, but young people refusing the institutions through which the state planned to normalize its rule. This book is about those undergraduates, what they did, where they went, and how their understanding of the movement they had joined changed under repression.

Students were on the streets in the first weeks. They organized online campaigns that drew international attention to the coup,

and they refused to return to classes when the SAC tried to reopen universities. The junta resumed master's programs on 6 January 2022 and classes for third- and final-year undergraduates on 12 May 2022 (Naw Say Phaw Waa, 2021), but most students stayed away. The military responded by establishing camps inside schools and by violently dispersing protests (The Irrawaddy, 2021). Those arrested faced charges under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code; some were tortured or killed in custody (Myanmar Now, 2021). As repression escalated, some students moved from peaceful protest to armed resistance, joining the People's Defense Forces or ethnic armed organizations along the borders. Others crossed into Thailand, where they continued the movement's work from Mae Sot. Supporters inside and outside the country opened interim schools in areas with limited connectivity, ran online classes for students still inside Myanmar, and built education networks across the border. The SAC has tried to disrupt these efforts by surveilling and threatening students who participate in them.

The ongoing threats, repression, and abuses have forced CDM students to relocate to regions with little or no SAC control, where they either join or help establish PDFs. Some joined Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to receive training. In contrast, others attempted to cross into border towns, such as Mae Sot in Thailand, in search of safety and to continue their lives and education. Su Mon Thant stated in her article that "not all who are forced to flee go directly to EAO areas." My group is taking shelter in a village that used to support us...." (Su Mon Thant, 2021). Therefore, some CDM students notably joined PDFs and EAOs to resist the SAC through coercive means.

Undergraduate students constitute a significant demographic among Myanmar's displaced populations following the February 2021 military coup. These students have made deliberate decisions to leave their universities, and often their homes, in response to SAC governance and the deteriorating conditions that threaten their safety, autonomy, and fundamental rights (Nora, 2023). Despite the SAC's attempts to normalize educational operations and compel student attendance, students reject this alternative, as it violates their fundamental human rights and their emotional and physical well-being, and thus choose to opt for displacement. This rejection

represents more than mere non-compliance; it is a conscious exercise of agency that challenges the regime's legitimacy and authority. The students' refusal to engage with SAC-controlled educational systems reflects their participation in the broader CDM, which has been characterized as a key pillar of Myanmar's 2021 Revolution and as an ongoing resistance movement. Their resistance manifests in multiple dimensions, such as educational boycotts, participation in peaceful demonstrations, support for alternative educational initiatives, sustained noncooperation with military-imposed structures, and heightened coercive resistance; even when displaced, they continue to express these forms of resistance.

Therefore, the concept of displacement as resistance is used in this study to highlight students' various forms of resistance even when forcibly displaced, thereby highlighting their capabilities and agency. Rather than viewing displacement solely through the lens of victimization, this framework recognizes students' conscious agency in choosing displacement over complicity with an oppressive regime. It connects structural forces and personal agency by situating students' displacement between its causes and outcomes, aligning with contemporary displacement literature that emphasizes recognizing individual agency in displacement. In contexts such as Myanmar, the lived experiences of displaced CDM undergraduate students reveal that, while alternatives exist, their conscious refusal to cooperate with oppressive regimes transforms displacement into a form of resistance, thus expanding the analytical scope of forced displacement studies to include agency, collective decision-making, and the dynamic nature of displacement itself.

For this study, the identities of these CDM students are primarily defined by geographical boundaries, even as it acknowledges the limitations of state-imposed territorial lines. Internally Displaced Students (IDS) are those CDM students residing inside Myanmar's borders at the time of the interviews. On the other hand, Cross-Border Students (CBS) are displaced outside Myanmar's borders, particularly in Mae Sot, Thailand, as their experiences don't necessarily align precisely with "refugee," "migrant," or "IDP" labels. Though situated outside Myanmar, they neither seek refugee protection nor long-term settlement in Thailand. Their primary intentions are to remain close to Myanmar's territory, continue

their activism within the CDM and the revolution, and maintain ties to their social circle, including family and friends. Thus, CBS accurately describes their unique status: geographically displaced but not always seeking protection or permanent settlement.

Seeing CDM-undergraduate students' displacement as resistance itself has significant implications not only for the individuals involved but also for understanding the CDM in Myanmar and its fluid nature across specific contexts. Therefore, the experiences of these undergraduate students exemplify the concepts of collective identity and framing processes discussed in social movement theory, as they navigate the challenges of displacement while maintaining their commitment to the CDM and pursuing their educational and personal goals. Their choices between internal and cross-border displacement, as well as between continued nonviolent resistance and more confrontational tactics, reflect the complex interplay of factors influencing participation in such high-risk contexts. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as it highlights the agency of CDM undergraduate students who have been less frequently focused on in the context of CDM in Myanmar. This study takes a cross-disciplinary approach, drawing on forced displacement studies, the capability approach, and new social movement theories, with particular attention to how participation in the CDM is framed.

Questions driving this book

The participation of undergraduate students in CDM after the 2021 military coup has resulted in their widespread displacement as they attempt to evade several repressions by the SAC. These students have been forced to relocate across the country and beyond their borders, finding themselves in situations where adapting to new, often challenging environments is necessary for survival. For instance, students are internally displaced when they have to flee their homes or hometowns, and they remain within the country instead of fleeing across borders. On the other hand, some students feel the need to leave the country. This group of students who focused on this study are those who crossed the borders into Mae Sot. Mae Sot is a city in western Thailand that borders Myanmar to the west. The city is part of Tak Province, 87

km from Tak and 492 km from Bangkok. Mae Sot is where the Asian Highway AH1 links Thailand and Myanmar. Mae Sot is well known as a hub for displaced people from Myanmar, with many safehouses and shelters. International humanitarian aid organizations support some efforts, while others are carried out by displaced individuals themselves (Head, 2024).

Illuminating the sustainability and resilience of both student groups is crucial, as their vulnerability due to displacement alone does not define their entire experience. The urgent need to understand the experiences of these displaced students stems from two main reasons. First, it highlights their capabilities and the alternatives they reject, demonstrating the agency they exercise in displacement. Second, it is to gain insights into the evolving nature of the CDM itself, examining the diverse paths chosen by student participants, whether internal displacement, crossing borders, or adopting various forms of resistance, which helps to comprehend better the movement's dynamic character and its impact on its student participants. Moreover, by comparing forcibly displaced students who crossed borders and those displaced internally, this book can illuminate the decisions students make in the context of displacement.

The mainstream narrative of CDM has been that people are participating in the movement uniformly. For instance, the student CDM in Myanmar urges (undergraduate) students not to attend government universities under the administration of the SAC. The significance of undergraduate students from government universities in Myanmar's CDM stems from the movement's primary focus on disrupting the SAC's governing mechanisms (Aung, 2023). Employees from government institutions are encouraged to participate in the CDM by refusing to work under the SAC administration and refusing cooperation with it. In the realm of higher education, public opinion has exerted considerable pressure on students from government universities to refrain from returning to their classrooms, as CDM has been associated mainly with the government sector following the 2021 military coup.

In contrast, students attending private institutions have not faced the same level of societal scrutiny (Mizzima, 2022). This division between government and private university students stems from

the perception that private universities operate independently of the SAC's governance structures. However, the reality may differ.

Despite the reopening of numerous private colleges and universities, the general public has not directed criticism specifically at students enrolled in these institutions. Conversely, undergraduate students at government universities have experienced heightened social pressure regarding their attendance, whether from peers or the broader community. This study, therefore, focuses on these undergraduate students from government universities to accurately represent their circumstances as participants in the CDM. In this book, the role of student participants from government institutions is perceived as more closely aligned with the movement's objectives, and their significance is essential for reflecting the ideological underpinnings of the CDM in Myanmar following the 2021 coup. By examining the specific demographic of undergraduate students from government institutions, this book aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding student participation in the CDM, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on resistance and displacement in contemporary Myanmar.

The CDM in Myanmar is a fluid and constantly evolving movement. It is essential to acknowledge the diverse backgrounds and capabilities of students, which shape the different paths they take in their educational journeys. As Frediani (2010) notes, individuals frame their participation in social movements in ways that reflect their socioeconomic backgrounds, perceptions, and personal experiences. Social movements like the CDM are not fixed entities but dynamic processes that adapt to shifting circumstances. Likewise, individuals are not static actors; they are motivated by different factors and shaped by distinct experiences. In the context of higher education, Myanmar's CDM has shifted from peaceful protests to more confrontational tactics, alongside the emergence of alternative education systems. This fluidity is reflected in the changing roles and experiences of student participants, necessitating a dynamic approach to understanding the students' involvement and its consequences.

Many undergraduate students who are displaced continue to uphold the essence of CDM's nonviolence and noncooperation by refusing

to attend universities under the SAC mechanism. Some of them face direct or indirect threats and repression by the SAC, leading to their cross-border displacement. On the other hand, many others chose to stay inside the country, moving from one place to another in search of safety or taking up arms to resist the SAC through coercive means, which led them to become internally displaced. Therefore, CDM in the interpretation of internally displaced students who have taken up armed resistance can be seen as a form of disobedience called “incivility within disobedience.” Uncivil disobedience (incivility within disobedience) refers to the use of coercive force and the claim of justification, especially when civility and nonviolent means become difficult to employ (Delmas, 2020). Some students fled the country as they fear threats and violence from the SAC and are displaced across borders. Their intention for cross-border movement could be either to explore alternative ways to pursue their education abroad or to seek safety while maintaining proximity to Myanmar to continue their resistance.

In sum, the core argument of this book examines the experiences and interpretations of CDM undergraduate students, with a focus on their internal and cross-border displacement. This research challenges the conventional view of forced displacement by incorporating the concept of “displacement as resistance,” claiming that, even under conditions of duress and repression, undergraduate students actively exercise agency in deciding whether, when, and where to move. Their displacement is not merely a reaction to external threats but is also a conscious, strategic act of resistance. By choosing displacement over compliance with SAC, these students make deliberate, value-laden decisions that reflect a refusal to legitimize SAC, even at a high personal cost. Both internally displaced students (IDS) and cross-border students (CBS) maintain their commitment to the CDM and persist in their resistance against the SAC, whether through armed resistance, continuous activism through protests and fundraising, choosing alternative education systems, or continuous activism beyond Myanmar borders. This ongoing negotiation highlights the coexistence of repression and resistance, vulnerability and agency, positioning displacement as both a site of risk and a platform for continued resistance. Additionally, this work highlights the roles

of support networks and collective identity in sustaining students' agency, resilience, and political commitment during displacement.

The book contributes to the literature on forced displacement by employing the concept of displacement as resistance and connecting critical refugee studies, concepts of civil disobedience, and social movement theory. It shows how student resistance evolves in response to repression, sometimes including shifts toward uncivil disobedience. In practice, it calls for mechanisms that recognize students' agency, diversity, and contributions and advocates for more context-sensitive support for CDM students. Thus, the book reframes CDM student displacement as an active, morally driven form of resistance rather than mere victimhood and vulnerability, highlighting their strategic choices and transformative potential under authoritarian rule.

Three questions run through everything that follows:

1. How do undergraduate students understand their own participation in the CDM, and how has that understanding changed over time?
2. Why do CDM undergraduate students choose to be displaced after joining CDM?
3. What separates and connects the experiences of students displaced inside Myanmar from those who crossed into Thailand?

In pursuing these questions, this book traces how students frame their involvement in the CDM on the way to displacement; to understand the alternatives they weighed and rejected, and the agency behind those decisions; and to lay the experiences of internally displaced and cross-border students side by side to see where they converge and where they part ways.

How the pieces fit together

The framework guiding this book recognizes SAC repression, constituted by military violence, educational disruption, and livelihood insecurity, as the main driver of CDM undergraduate

students’ forced displacement, both internally and across borders. Such repression has also led students to participate in the CDM through both civil and uncivil disobedience, expressing their rejection of the military coup and the SAC.

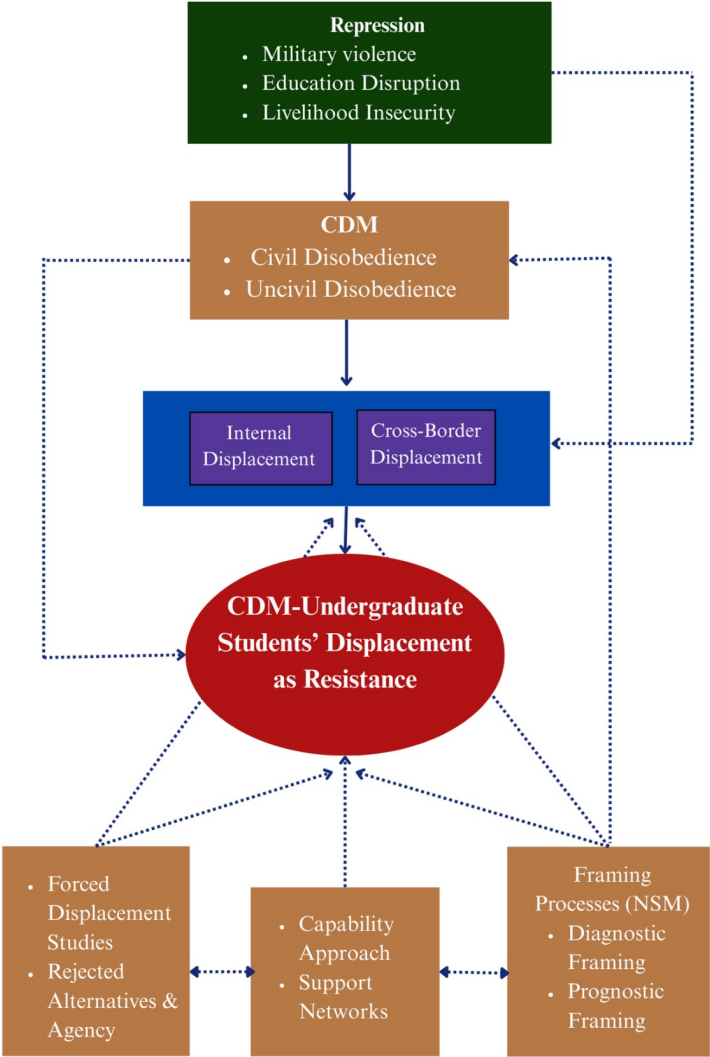


Figure 1.1 Conceptual framework diagram

How stories were gathered

Fieldwork for this book was carried out over six months, from October 2024 to March 2025. Due to the dispersed nature of the participant groups, this study did not confine itself to a specific physical location. In-person interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Cross-Border Students (CBS) were conducted in November 2024 in Mae Sot, Thailand. For Internally Displaced Students (IDS), interviews were conducted online due to the challenges of establishing direct contact with students inside Myanmar, particularly given the internet restrictions and security concerns.

All recruited participants were verified to meet the inclusion criteria as displaced students with active involvement in the CDM through dropping out of universities. While the initial goal was to include 15 IDS and 15 CBS participants, difficulties accessing electricity and the internet for some IDS, along with concerns about the sufficiency and relevance of the data collected, resulted in a final sample of 13 IDS and 16 CBS participants.

One-on-one interviews were conducted with both IDS and CBS. Additionally, four focus group discussions (FGDs), each comprising two to three CBS participants, were conducted in person in Mae Sot. Verbal consent for participation was initially requested online for all participants. All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Burmese and audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Where the focus sits

This book works at the level of the individual, the choices, perceptions, and inner reasoning of the students themselves. At the micro level, the research examines how individual students interpret their own actions, navigate displacement, construct meaning from their resistance activities, and exercise agency within constrained circumstances. This analytical approach enables a deep exploration of personal narratives, individual motivations, emotional responses, and subjective understandings of displacement and resistance.

Who this book is about

This is a qualitative account of undergraduate students who left government universities in protest and were then displaced, some within Myanmar's borders, some across them.

The undergraduate students in this study who are displaced are referred to as Internally Displaced Students (IDS) and Cross-Border Students (CBS). IDS refers to students who remained within Myanmar's borders, while CBS refers to those who crossed into Thailand, specifically to Mae Sot in Tak Province. The study uncovers how IDS and CBS frame their collective identity in the CDM to sustain their resistance, even in the face of displacement, and how these interpretations have evolved. Additionally, it also explores how these students differ in their experiences and dynamics within displacement.

The following maps show the location of Mae Sot in Tak Province, Thailand, where the CBS were interviewed in locations chosen by the participants themselves. The specific locations are not disclosed to ensure participants' confidentiality.

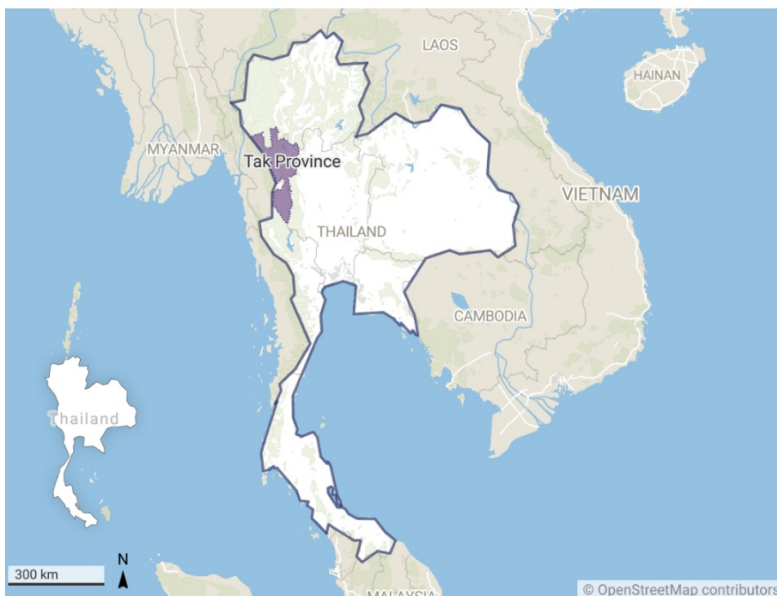


Figure 1.2 Map of Thailand with Tak province highlighted (Map by author using Datawrapper (CC BY 4.0))



Figure 1.3 Map of Tak Province with Mae Sot highlighted
(Map by author using Datawrapper (CC BY 4.0))



Figure 1.4 Map of Mae Sot, Thailand, where CBS were interviewed
(Source: Google Earth, 2025 (Map data © 2025 Google))

Who the students are

Selection and background

Participants were selected based on their participation in CDM following Myanmar's 2021 military coup and their subsequent discontinuation of undergraduate study (4–6-year programs) from government-accredited universities. All participants were unable to continue higher education in officially accredited institutions. Internally Displaced Students (IDS) remained within Myanmar's borders, including both armed resistance participants and those maintaining nonviolent resistance. Cross-Border Students (CBS) were those who crossed into Mae Sot, Thailand, where they face undocumented status and formal barriers to education. These criteria ensured representation of diverse displacement experiences and resistance strategies among CDM undergraduate students.

Gender

Gender equality was prioritized during participant recruitment, and the final sample was 7 female and 6 male IDS participants, and 6 female and 10 male CBS participants. Overall, the study achieved a relatively balanced gender representation, with 13 female participants (45%) and 16 male participants (55%) out of 29 participants. This roughly equal distribution ensures that the experiences and perspectives of both male and female CDM undergraduate students are adequately represented in the findings.

Geographical location

At the time of data collection, only a few IDS participants were located in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay. At the same time, the majority resided in smaller towns, rural areas, and jungle regions, including Sagaing, Magway, Karenni, Kachin, and Karen states. All CBS participants were interviewed in Mae Sot, Thailand. Due to safety concerns, most participants did not disclose their places of origin. While CDM students are widely dispersed throughout Myanmar, my access to potential participants was limited by security constraints and the challenges of establishing contact in conflict-affected areas.

Academic backgrounds and fields of study

All participants were enrolled in undergraduate studies at government universities at the time of the 2021 coup. Most participants were attending full-time undergraduate studies, while two participants were taking distance education, which meant attending classes part-time and taking examinations under government-controlled education. The students' academic profiles reveal concentration in many disciplines. Many students come from art backgrounds, while some students have science backgrounds.

In Myanmar's university system, students' fields of study are primarily determined by their matriculation examination scores (10th or 12th grade) rather than personal choice or entrance examinations. While some students can pursue their areas of interest, major allocation is largely based on academic performance, as Myanmar's universities do not use entrance examinations. Consequently, the distribution of fields of study among participants reflects this merit-based allocation system rather than necessarily representing students' preferred academic interests.

In Myanmar, students typically begin university at age 16-18 and graduate around age 20-22, though some start later. At the time of data collection, all participants in this study were in their twenties, as more than three years had passed since the 2021 coup. Even students who dropped out during their first year of university were approximately 20 years old at the time of the interviews. The year of study refers to the academic year in which participants were enrolled when they withdrew from government universities to participate in the CDM, not their current age or educational status. This distribution is also significant, as it highlights that all the students were pursuing their higher education in government universities. The study focuses solely on students from government universities, as they receive significantly more criticism influenced by the perspective that government mechanisms under SAC must be disrupted, particularly to tackle and overthrow a military-controlled government regime. As a result, government university students, along with government employees, receive more attention in the realm of CDM in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. Therefore, this study focuses on the students from

government universities, uncovering their perspectives on CDM and the lived realities of displacement.

Making sense of the data

This book employs a qualitative, comparative research methodology to examine the experiences of internally displaced students (IDS) and cross-border students (CBS) who participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), following a deductive approach.

Data translation and organization

The interviews were conducted in Burmese, and the recordings were translated into English with careful attention to preserving the original meaning, context, and nuances of participants' responses. To facilitate systematic analysis and comparison, the translated transcripts were organized in Google Sheets, with separate pages created for IDS and CBS participants.

Guiding themes

Table 1 outlines the 10-theme analytical framework developed to organize and compare data across both participant groups systematically. These themes trace participants' journeys, from their pre-coup academic lives through their CDM participation and experiences of displacement to their current situations, while also capturing key themes such as support networks, identity formation, and decision-making processes (see Table 1).

Theme	What it captures
1. Education Pursuits Before the Coup	Documents participants' academic backgrounds and study years prior to joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)
2. Understanding CDM & Forms of Participation	Explores participants' initial perceptions of the CDM and their early forms of involvement following the coup
3. Direct and Indirect Threats Imposed by the State Administration Council (SAC)	Records experiences of threats and intimidation while participants remained in their original locations
4. Rejected Alternatives & Decision-Making	Examine how students assessed risks and made decisions in response to perceived threats
5. Before, During & After Displacement Experiences	Details of the trajectory and impact of displacement on participants' lives
6. Current Displacement Status Describes present living situations and challenges faced in displacement	Describes present living situations and challenges faced in displacement
7. Support Networks	Identifies networks leveraged for safety, relocation, and survival
8. Collective identity & Shifting Identities	Investigates evolving forms of resistance and participants' perceptions of their roles within the movement
9. Framing Participation in CDM	Analyzes ongoing involvement and motivations for continued participation
10. Key Quotes & Summary	Highlights unique insights and illustrative responses from individual participants

Table 1. Thematic framework for data organization

How the analysis took shape

The study employed thematic analysis as the primary analytical method to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the data.

The analysis proceeded through the following stages:

Stage 1: Familiarization and Initial Coding - Interview transcripts and focus group recordings were repeatedly read to develop a deep familiarity with the data. Initial codes were generated to identify significant statements, experiences, and concepts within each participant's narrative. Data from translated transcripts were systematically entered into the relevant thematic categories (as shown in Table 1) for each participant in the organized Google Sheets.

Stage 2: Focused Coding and Pattern Recognition - During this stage, the analysis identified decision points at which participants made critical choices regarding their displacement. Codes highlighted: moments where choices were made and alternatives were considered or rejected; language indicating personal agency, self-determination, and intentionality; instances of strategic planning and risk assessment; and the influence of support networks in shaping individual decisions. This coding process revealed patterns in how participants exercised agency within constrained circumstances.

Stage 3: Theme Development and Comparative Analysis - The coded data were organized into three overarching analytical themes that structure the findings: (1) Framing Participation in CDM, (2) Displacement as Resistance by CDM Undergraduate Students, and (3) Comparison Between IDS and CBS. Within this framework, systematic comparison between IDS and CBS responses enabled the identification of both shared experiences and divergent patterns. The comparative analysis examined differences like selectivity in displacement decisions and the extent to which intentional decision-making and personal agency were evident in participants' narratives.

Stage 4: Theoretical Integration - The concept of "displacement as resistance" emerged as a central analytical lens, drawing from broader theoretical frameworks including critical refugee studies, forced displacement literature, social movement theory, and theories of civil and uncivil disobedience. This conceptual framework positions displacement as resistance at the intersection of structural constraint and individual agency, viewing it simultaneously as a response to state repression and an act of political resistance.

Ethical considerations

Although written consent forms were initially intended, the sensitive nature of the topic and security concerns among IDS and CBS participants made it difficult to collect tangible documents. Nevertheless, efforts were made to ensure participants fully understood the nature of the study and the interview process. Participants were provided with background information on the research and a list of interview questions before the session. All online interviews were conducted only after receiving initial verbal consent from participants.

Participants engaged in CDM and other resistance movements face increased vulnerability due to potential threats to their safety and well-being, requiring additional safeguards to protect their rights and welfare. Therefore, several ethical considerations were considered to protect the safety and well-being of the student participants involved (Gordon, 2020).

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) emphasizes seven principles of professional responsibility, including (1) Do No Harm; (2) Be Open and Honest Regarding Your Work; (3) Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permissions; (4) Weigh Competing Ethical Obligations; (5) Make Your Results Accessible; (6) Protect and Preserve Your Records; and (7) Maintain Respectful and Ethical Professional Relationships. This research adhered to these principles, particularly prioritizing the protection of participants' dignity and well-being throughout the research process (AAA, 2012). The research adhered to the principle of "do no harm" and prioritized transparency throughout the research process. The study did not require approval from an ethics review board, as all participants were above 20 years of age. It was therefore considered capable of providing informed consent and making independent decisions regarding their participation.

Verbal informed consent was obtained to ensure that participants fully understood the study and voluntarily agreed to participate without coercion. Verbal consent is an appropriate alternative to written consent in situations where cultural norms, practicality, or the nature of the study make obtaining a signature unnecessary or inappropriate, particularly in research deemed minimal risk

(Kinzer, 2025). Participants were informed of the study's purpose and assured that their information would be used solely for academic purposes (Klykken, 2022).

The safety and well-being of CDM students were treated as the highest priority throughout the research process. For in-person sessions, CBS participants were allowed to choose the locations for interviews and focus group discussions. Both IDS and CBS participants were given flexibility in scheduling their interviews to accommodate their security concerns and personal circumstances. Such flexibility in research design helps safeguard participants' safety and is particularly important when conducting research with vulnerable populations (Van Wijk & Harrison, 2013). These ethical measures, while necessary, led to delays, extending the data collection period beyond the intended timeline.

Professional and ethical relationships were maintained throughout the research. Participants' preferences regarding anonymity and identity disclosure were fully respected. When audio recordings were conducted, explicit verbal consent was obtained in advance, ensuring participants were aware of how their data would be recorded and used. Participants will also be given access to the final research results via the Chiang Mai University library website, where the book will be uploaded, ensuring transparency and accountability in the research process. This practice reflects the ethical responsibility to ensure research results are not withheld from research participants, especially when those results are shared with others.

The researcher's position

Long-standing relationships with student activist networks and the broader CDM community shaped this study from its inception. These prior connections enabled trust and access that would have been difficult for an external researcher to establish and helped facilitate discussions on sensitive political and displacement-related topics.

At the same time, proximity to the research context introduced potential challenges. Some participants, due to personal concerns or heightened security sensitivities, provided limited responses or kept interactions brief. Closeness to the subject matter also carried

the risk of inadvertently projecting personal interpretations or assuming shared understandings of CDM experiences.

To address these concerns, the research process incorporated continuous reflexivity. Reflexive note-taking was used throughout the interviews to examine my reactions, assumptions, and potential biases closely. During analysis, deliberate attention was given to distinguishing participants' perspectives from my own experiences. This reflexive practice ensured that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than prior familiarity with the CDM context, maintaining both analytical distance and methodological rigor.

Book outline

This book is organized into six main chapters, each designed to deepen the understanding of how undergraduate students in Myanmar have interpreted and experienced the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in the wake of the 2021 military coup, with a particular focus on the experiences of IDS and CBS.

Chapter 1 outlines the study's foundation. It sets the scene, explains why this story needs telling now, and walks through the questions and ideas that shape everything that follows; how the research was designed, how the data was gathered and analyzed, and the care taken to protect the people who shared their stories.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the existing body of literature relevant to this study. It critically engages with scholarly debates and situates the present research within the broader field, highlighting how the study builds upon, diverges from, or fills gaps in existing literature.

Chapter 3 addresses the first research question: "how do students understand the CDM, and how has that understanding shifted over time?" This chapter is structured around students' initial understanding and evolving perspectives on CDM, drawing on their narratives to reveal how their motivations, hopes, and beliefs about the movement have shifted in response to changing circumstances. By analyzing these personal and collective

interpretations, the chapter offers a new lens for understanding the CDM, emphasizing that the movement is not monolithic but shaped by diverse student experiences and evolving viewpoints. This approach highlights the need to look beyond the surface of the movement and to recognize the complexity and individuality within student participation.

Chapter 4 turns to the second research question: “Why do students choose to be displaced after joining CDM?” Here, the analysis focuses on the motivations, backgrounds, and capabilities that have influenced students’ decisions to become displaced, whether internally or across borders. The chapter examines the factors that contribute to various displacement scenarios, including personal safety, family considerations, and available resources, while also highlighting students’ agency in making these decisions. It examines the alternatives that students considered and ultimately rejected, showing how both constraints and opportunities shaped their choices. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the importance of support networks. The chapter highlights the concept of displacement as a means of resistance to reflect these rejected alternatives and the students’ agency. The chapter also introduces the concept of “the gift of moving,” which captures how displacement, despite its challenges, can sometimes open new possibilities and opportunities for growth.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts to a comparative analysis of the narratives and experiences of IDS and CBS, addressing the third research question. This chapter identifies both differences and similarities in how these two groups construct their collective identities and navigate their trajectories during displacement. By examining and comparing how students adapt, resist, and find solidarity, both within Myanmar and across borders, the chapter provides an analysis of how displacement shapes not only individual lives but also the broader contours of the student movement.

Finally, Chapter 6 concludes the book by outlining the theoretical contributions and practical recommendations that emerge from the study. This chapter synthesizes the findings to highlight how the experiences and voices of displaced students can inform future research and policy. It describes the limitations of the study and

offers recommendations to support displaced students, grounded in the concerns and suggestions expressed by students during interviews. It also reflects on the broader significance of student agency and collective action in times of crisis.

2

EXISTING IDEAS ON CDM AND DISPLACEMENT

Introduction

Drawing on concepts from the capability approach, this study develops and applies the concept of “Displacement as Resistance” to capture the agency-driven, strategic decisions students make regarding displacement. Rather than viewing displacement as a purely involuntary or reactive process, the analysis codes interviews for evidence of “rejected alternatives” to uncover students’ capabilities and pinpoint moments when students consciously refuse options that violate their rights or well-being. This approach highlights the intentions behind displacement decisions, bridging the gap between voluntary and involuntary migration, and underscores the complex interplay between constraints and choices in high-risk contexts.

For this study, the identities of these CDM students are primarily defined by geographical boundaries, even as it acknowledges the limitations of state-imposed territorial lines. Internally Displaced Students (IDS) are those CDM students residing inside Myanmar’s borders at the time of the interviews. On the other hand, Cross-Border Students (CBS) are displaced outside Myanmar’s borders, particularly in Mae Sot, Thailand, and their experiences do not neatly align with the labels of “refugee,” “migrant,” or “IDP.” Although they are situated outside Myanmar, they neither seek

refugee protection nor long-term settlement in Thailand. At the same time, the study recognizes that such labels are themselves restrictive and do not rigidly define students' experiences, which can shift and transform across space and time. At the time of this study, the primary intention of CBS was to remain close to Myanmar's territory, continue their activism within the CDM and the broader revolution, and maintain proximity to their social ties, including family and friends. Thus, the term "cross-border students" is used in this book to describe their current status: geographically displaced but not primarily seeking protection or permanent settlement, at least for the time being.

Rethinking displacement: beyond refugee and migrant categories

Contemporary scholarship on forced displacement has expanded beyond refugee and migration studies, yet it still faces conceptual and methodological challenges in understanding the lived experiences of individuals in displacement. This section provides an overview of the literature on forced displacement, highlighting its theoretical foundations and the gaps in existing studies.

According to the European Commission, forced migration is "a migratory movement in which an element of coercion exists, including threats to life and livelihood, whether arising from natural or man-made causes (e.g., movements of refugees and internally displaced persons as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine or development projects)" (European Commission, n.d.). Although comprehensive, the definition still creates a distinction between voluntary and involuntary movement as it focuses on "coercion" and fails to capture the complex decision-making processes and real-life experiences of displaced individuals.

Conventional definitions treat refugees as people forced to move under threat to life or freedom and crossing an international border. The terms "forced migration" and "displacement" are often used as synonyms (Owen, 2024), but recent work has challenged this. Bhagat (2025) and Paynter (2025) argue that "forced migration"

centers the migration system, which classifies and contains people, while “displacement” foregrounds the loss of place itself. This book follows the latter convention: it uses “displacement” to keep the experience of being moved at the center of analysis. It also follows the recent move in displacement studies, particularly Erdal and Oeppen (2018) and Bakewell (2021), to treat the forced and voluntary registers as a continuum rather than a binary, with voluntariness assessed against the alternatives actually available.

Building on David Owen's (2024) most recent focus on “place” in forced displacement, displacement is more than just physical relocation, as it signifies a fundamental disruption of a person's ties to their place. This involves not only the loss of tangible possessions and homes but also the severing of deeper cultural, social, and emotional connections that give a location its meaning. Owen contends that forced movements are not isolated incidents but are deeply embedded in historical and ongoing systems of power that coercively redefine people's connections to their physical, social, and cultural environments, making them “out of place” in multiple senses (Owen, 2024). Moreover, Diab (2025) and Bhagat (2025), along with Owen, advocate for a conceptual shift from “forced migration” to a broader understanding of “displacement” to capture the multifaceted nature of forced movement, immobility, and its underlying structural causes. Just as Owen urged a focus on place, Diab also suggested seeing displaced populations as active agents who can reclaim spaces as sites of resistance and agency, rather than merely as sites of loss. Bhagat also strongly advocates for the emergence of Global Displacement Studies (GDS) as a more expansive analytical framework, claiming that survival itself is a form of resistance in displacement. As Bhagat (2025) claims, real experiences of displacement often don't fit neatly into these official labels, as people's situations are more complex and nuanced than the clean categories suggest. This book thus contributes to a broader conceptual framework for displacement that transcends traditional definitions, enhancing our understanding of the lived realities and agency of displaced populations.

Moreover, the forced displacement literature on Southeast Asia has primarily focused on macro-level, mass-migration patterns of

communities moving in groups, driven by factors such as conflict, disasters, or development projects (Sakdapolrak et al., 2019). The emphasis on collective movements and structural constraints often overlooks how individuals navigate displacement decisions within broader contexts of coercion and constraints. Many migration and displacement scholars argue that the forced displacement literature has grouped displaced people into simple categories, overlooking the fact that, in specific contexts, these individuals still make choices, even in situations that seem to have stripped them of life agency.

Much less attention has been paid to forcibly displaced individuals and to comparisons between internal and cross-border displacements. Most research and knowledge production remain heavily focused on international displacement, particularly from the Global South to the Global North, while emerging work is only beginning to address the consequences of forced internal displacement, often referred to as South–South displacement. This geographical bias creates a gap in the displacement literature, especially when viewed through the lens of Myanmar, where people frequently move within the country or to neighboring states such as Thailand. Movements within cities or short-distance relocations to evade threats are also rarely documented compared with cross-border migrations, creating a gap in understanding the full spectrum of forced displacement (Ali, 2023). This book aims to contribute to the documentation of South-South displacement by focusing on the displacement of students from Myanmar into Thailand, particularly in Mae Sot.

Addressing the type of conflict can help explain whether displaced people flee across borders or remain contained within their own country. Civil wars are among the primary causes of displacement, and even without full-blown civil wars, displacement can occur due to conflict (Lischer, 2007). For example, unilateral state violence by the SAC, such as ethnic cleansing targeted towards the Rohingyas, is aimed at displacing civilians across state borders. When addressing the causes of CDM-undergraduate students' forced displacement, the military coup in Myanmar, which has spread as a nationwide conflict, is the primary driver that has affected citizens from all corners. The concept of “conflict-induced forced displacement” is therefore particularly relevant in capturing this phenomenon.

What follows draws on this contemporary literature to read CDM students' movements as displacement, while also reading their displacement as resistance, an active choice rather than defeat.

Displacement as resistance: emphasizing capabilities & well-being

Displacement is conceptualized as a process of coercive disruption to valued ways of living and functioning. This process begins in place, even before physical movement occurs, and can involve pressures and constraints, as well as strategies of evasion and resistance. In this book, focusing on students' capabilities and agency helps illuminate how CDM undergraduate students resist cooperating with the SAC, reject its legitimacy as a rightful government, and, as a result, experience multiple forms of displacement while continuing to express their resistance despite disrupted livelihoods.

The CDM undergraduate students' resistance in Myanmar can also be seen through a broader pattern of student-led movements across Asia that have challenged authoritarian regimes and demanded democratic reforms. For example, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement in 2014 saw hundreds of students occupy Taiwan's national legislature for 24 days to oppose a trade agreement with China that they perceived as undermining Taiwan's sovereignty and democratic processes. The movement successfully mobilized over half of the Taiwanese respondents who supported the protesters, ultimately precipitating electoral changes and reshaping the island's political landscape (Ho, 2018). Similarly, Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in 2014 emerged when student groups protested against Beijing's decision to pre-screen candidates for the city's chief executive election, with approximately 18-20 percent of Hong Kong's population participating in the 79-day occupation (Ma & Cheng, 2019). These movements demonstrate important parallels with Myanmar's CDM students, including the willingness to challenge deeply rooted authoritarian structures, the use of civil-disobedience tactics, and the strategic deployment of social media for mobilization and transnational solidarity. While some students have led protests that toppled authoritarian

regimes, others faced brutal suppression, such as the current condition in Myanmar after 2021. Understanding Myanmar's CDM undergraduate students within these other movements highlights both the shared repertoires of student resistance and the unique displacement dynamics that distinguish Myanmar students' situation from other movements, in which students largely remained in their home countries.

According to Kaplan (1994), economic deprivation is usually deployed as a tool of repression. This is evident in the measures that the SAC in Myanmar employs against dissenters, including imprisonment, torture, dismissal from public positions, and blocklisting, which directly and indirectly endanger students' safety and security. These unlawful acts aim to silence opposition by making people's well-being conditional and precarious. The concept of "well-being" from the capability approach by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011) is particularly useful here for understanding why students reject the available alternatives that violate their well-being. The capability approach posits that well-being should be assessed based on an individual's "capability of achieving the kind of lives they have reason to value."

From a capability lens, SAC repression shrinks students' capabilities, such as their opportunities to pursue education freely without political coercion, to participate in civic affairs and public life without fear, to enjoy bodily integrity and security, and to engage in meaningful affiliation without surveillance and punishment (Nussbaum, 2011). Additionally, Nussbaum also claims (2000, 2011) that the list of central human capabilities, including bodily integrity, senses and imagination, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, and control over one's environment, is particularly relevant. These capabilities are evidently undermined by SAC repression through threats to students' lives and their capacity to plan their life trajectories. Therefore, in this sense, CDM students' decisions to disengage from SAC-controlled institutions and instead choose displacement are seen as a way to protect their central capabilities, even at the cost of physical and economic security.

"Displacement as resistance" names the central claim of this book: that for CDM students, leaving home is not the failure of resistance

but its continuation. The students in this study did not flee passively. They left because staying meant collaborating with a regime they refused to legitimize. They left to keep open the capabilities, education, political voice, and bodily safety that the SAC rule was foreclosing. Reading their movement this way requires holding two things together: that displacement is genuinely coercive (the alternative was arrest, conscription, or death) and that it is also a deliberate political act. The capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000) provides the language for this combination, treating well-being as what people can do and be and agency as the reasoned exercise of that capability under constraint. The framing also draws on Mahmood's (2005) caution against equating agency solely with resistance to norms; for several of the students in this study, particularly those whose displacement has extended over years, agency takes the form of inhabiting and enduring as much as of opposing.

Three gaps shape this book's contribution. First, the forced displacement literature on Southeast Asia has concentrated on mass migration patterns; comparatively little attention has been paid to the political agency of individual displaced people. Second, students are rarely treated as a distinct category in displacement studies, even though university populations have repeatedly been at the center of authoritarian crackdowns in the region. Third, the binary between voluntary and involuntary movement has been increasingly difficult to maintain in cases like the CDM, where the act of leaving is both coerced and chosen. Each of these gaps is taken up in the chapters that follow. The analysis throughout draws on Asef Bayat's (2013) account of nonmovements and "the quiet encroachment of the ordinary," developed for authoritarian Middle Eastern contexts, as a more proximate comparator than new social movement theory's post-industrial democracies.

Agency, choice, and the rejected alternatives

Critical realism (CR), developed by philosopher Roy Bhaskar (2008) and further elaborated by others, including Margaret Archer and Tony Lawson, offers a comprehensive analytical lens for understanding displacement by examining the systemic structures at play. In doing so, it provides the necessary context to

appreciate the power-structure constraints and their influence on displaced people, thereby emphasizing these individuals as active agents of change whose circumstances are deeply shaped by socio-political and economic structures. Critical realism argues that a real world exists independently of what we know or think about it.

However, in some situations, although not wholly involuntary, people reject available alternatives by refusing to submit to conditions that severely violate their human rights and values, and this can be regarded as a form of forced displacement. People sometimes migrate not because they have no other choice, but because they insist on exercising their rights to continue holding prohibited beliefs or to belong to banned groups (Bartram, 2015). Thus, migration can be “forced” when one rejects available options that violate one's fundamental human rights. The concept of “rejected alternatives” illustrates this agency, where individuals reasonably reject options that would violate their human rights or dignity to avoid forced displacement (Bartram, 2015).

CDM undergraduate students can be seen rejecting options offered by SAC and instead choosing the path of displacement, even under repression. For instance, the SAC has reopened government universities in Myanmar. Yet, many undergraduate students are still refusing to return to these SAC-controlled universities and are still displaced across borders, and others are still internally displaced. It is crucial to investigate why such diverse choices arise when options are available to individuals in the same manner. By highlighting the rejected alternatives and the agency of choice within the constraints of the situation, the study enables exploration of how undergraduate students' demographics serve as key actors in the complex interplay among collective identities in social movements, personal safety, and future aspirations.

Therefore, this study aims to address critical gaps in the forced displacement literature by uncovering the complex spectrum of agency and constraint, acknowledging the students' rejection of available alternatives, moving beyond state-led categorizations, representing the lived realities of displaced individuals, and viewing them as active individuals. By investigating this phenomenon, the research aims to challenge the conventional

narrative of forced displacement as a wholly involuntary and one-time decision-making process. Instead, it claims that individuals, even under pressure, may exercise some agency in determining the conditions of their displacement. This nuanced approach contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of displacement dynamics, particularly in contexts of political chaos.

Moreover, following the urgings in *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* by Yen Le Espiritu, Lan Duong, Ma Vang, Victor Bascara, and Khatharya Um, this book seeks to place displaced students as historicized subjects, agents, knowledge producers, and narrators of their own needs (Espiritu et al., 2022). It asserts that individuals' agency must not be overlooked when examining displacement. Guided by the principles of critical refugee studies, this book uncovers and highlights the stories of displacement of CDM undergraduate students. These principles call on researchers to stop treating refugees and displaced people as statistics, victims, or "problems" and instead to center their experiences, knowledges, and visions for the future. In doing so, this book aims to contribute to the expanding contemporary literature on displacement studies, specifically by emphasizing the agency and lived experiences of people on the move. The book also shifts displacement and refugee studies away from a narrow focus on fear and legal categorization toward questions of livability, dignity, and futurity in people's lives. Rather than objectifying displaced individuals, it recognizes them as agents and knowledge producers with complex, creative, and critical perspectives.

The gift of moving

In terms of forced displacement, four features affect the consequences: lasting physical or psychological trauma, loss of assets, limited choice in destination resulting in suboptimal locations, and low probability of returning home (Becker, 2022). Becker (2022) stated that even when people are forcibly displaced, seemingly having no choice, there is "thin agency" or the "small margin of choice" that people possess. Some studies also explore forced immobility and forced sedentarization, in which stateless individuals and communities, as well as people, are stuck in certain places due to safety concerns. To add to this discussion, there is

also a possibility that, sometimes, young people, even when forcibly displaced, have the opportunity to gain in suboptimal locations, a phenomenon often referred to as “the gift of moving.” This can be seen, for example, in situations such as CDM undergraduate students from Myanmar who cross borders to access better educational opportunities in Mae Sot through migrant schools established by NGOs. Becker (2022) claimed that three generations after forced migration, individuals tend to invest in human capital, and education is one of the many positive outcomes of forced displacement. The term “the gift of moving” explains how young people can sometimes make the most of their migration to these suboptimal locations, even when it is forced.

The role of social capital in the form of “support networks” plays another vital part in understanding students’ displacement: the why and when of CDM undergraduate students’ displacement. For example, in the context of Myanmar’s CDM, some students may choose to stay despite threats due to support from “social networks” that share a collective identity, i.e., to resist the SAC by participating in the CDM. They may also rely on pre-existing support network organizations. For instance, PDF groups that emerge after the military coup, such as those in Chin, Sagaing, Magway, or Mandalay, might serve as new support networks for student CDM participants who wish to express their opposition through armed resistance, allowing them to remain inside Myanmar. Similarly, EAOs that have existed for decades and have fought against SAC may also serve as support networks for internally displaced CDM students facing threats and conflicts. Moreover, cross-border networks, such as migrant schools, academic institutions, and aid scholarships, may also serve as support networks for displaced students.

By examining this aspect, this book highlights students’ resilience, even when they are displaced internally or across international borders. In contrast, much displacement literature has primarily focused on the precarity of displaced individuals. Therefore, by comparing leavers and stayers from the same country, this study aims to understand the different displaced scenarios and contribute to the literature on forced displacement in Southeast Asia.

Framing the movement

Understanding social movements requires examining how participants actively construct meaning and justify their collective action. In the context of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), framing processes offer essential insights into how students interpret their resistance, sustain their participation, and adapt their strategies in response to military repression. Drawing on new social movement theory, particularly the work of Melucci, Benford and Snow, and Tilly, this analysis explores three interconnected dimensions: the framing processes through which CDM participants create shared understanding and purpose; the specific diagnostic, prognostic, and oppositional frames that shape how students identify problems and solutions; and the collective identity that binds diverse participants together despite tactical differences. These theoretical lenses illuminate how CDM has evolved from nonviolent resistance to encompass multiple forms of opposition while maintaining a unified collective identity, demonstrating the dynamic nature of contemporary social movements in authoritarian contexts.

The language of injustice

Gamson et al.'s (1984) "injustice framing" can be applied to interpret how students frame the SAC's actions as unjust, mobilizing support and justifying various forms of resistance (Gamson, Fireman, & Rytina, 1984). Injustice framing is vital to the overall narrative of the CDM in Myanmar. Participants in the CDM frame the military council's actions as unjust, highlighting the illegitimacy of the coup, the suppressions and oppressions, human rights abuses, and their inhumane atrocities. Moreover, through this framing of injustice, one can see how civilians mobilize participants and support to counter the military coup.

Frames that align with the cultural values, beliefs, and experiences of the intended audience are also more likely to gather support and encourage participation (Goodwin, Jasper, & Khattrra, 1999). In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, CDM has resonated with civilians' growing willingness to challenge authoritarian rule and the social norms that sustain it. Even within CDM, participants have

initiated movements that advocate gender equality and empowerment, with women taking on visible roles in organizing, leadership, and everyday acts of resistance. These forms of participation contribute to questioning traditional gender roles that have often marginalized women's voices and political engagement. At the same time, CDM's framing as a struggle over the country's political future has helped foster a sense of shared purpose among diverse groups. While this study does not claim that all cultural or generational divides have been overcome, it suggests that CDM has created spaces where people from different backgrounds can participate in resisting authoritarian rule in Myanmar.

Naming the problem

However, CDM, as a social movement, has been gradually changing, as stated above, shifting its values of non-violence/non-cooperation toward the use of coercive means of resistance. The movement's activities have also been divided into groups with different values, yet they all share a collective identity as CDM participants. "diagnostic framing" represents the foundational element of social movement mobilization, serving as the mechanism through which movements identify problems, assign causality, and attribute blame (Benford & Snow, 2000). In the context of Myanmar's CDM, diagnostic framing has been critical in articulating the fundamental injustices that students and other participants face following the 2021 military coup. This framing process involves multiple layers of problem identification, extending beyond surface-level grievances to encompass deeper structural and systemic issues. With the military coup framed as the primary problem, the public sees it as such. Still, it also includes broader patterns of military authoritarianism, systematic human rights violations, and the destruction of everyday livelihoods. CDM students also frame the SAC as illegitimate and refuse to cooperate with them. This diagnostic frame identifies not only the immediate political crisis but also the long-term implications. However, internal tensions and disagreements can also exist within diagnostic framing. CDM evolved from nonviolent resistance to incorporating more confrontational tactics, and several tactics have evolved to define the main problem and the diverse responses to it. Some participants

continue to view SAC and the military rule as the main problem, responding with nonviolent tactics. Others have come to realize that the problem is broader and requires more elevated forms of resistance, including armed resistance. These diagnostic disagreements have led to movement diversification, encompassing various forms and tactics employed by different groups.

The “prognostic framing,” which takes place in a multi-organizational field, involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan (Benford & Snow, 2000). Within Myanmar's CDM, prognostic framing has undergone significant evolution as the movement has adapted to changing circumstances and varying levels of state repression. For instance, each distinct group of CDM participants, whether employing nonviolent or coercive means, provides clearly articulated tactics and strategies within its own network to help the movement succeed. Initially, CDM's prognostic framing centered on nonviolent resistance as the primary solution to the military coup. CDM students, along with the public, expressed their resistance through nonviolent means such as noncooperation, protests, and boycotts to disrupt the military apparatus. This prognostic framework was inspired by nonviolent resistance movements globally and locally, including the strategies employed during Myanmar's 1988 uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution. People viewed this frame as achievable and would force the SAC to return power to the civilian government. In the context of CDM undergraduate students' prognostic framing, students expressed their refusal to attend SAC-controlled universities, their boycott of government universities, and their shift to alternative forms of education. However, as SAC repression intensified, the prognostic framing of CDM expanded to encompass a wider range of movements. These activities include continual nonviolent resistance, underground operations, and even armed resistance, framed as legitimate and justifiable as self-defense. CDM undergraduate students navigate within these various prognostic frames while maintaining their personal values and decision-making processes.

Collective identity and collective action

Alberto Melucci, an Italian theorist of new social movement theory, emphasized the “cultural” aspect of these contemporary social movements. Melucci claims that new social movements in today’s modern world are spaces where individuals can unite to shape their identities and express their desires, independent of traditional political structures (Buechler, 1995). According to Melucci, modern collective action and social movements emphasize the role of identity and the social construction of collective identity (Buechler, 1995). Melucci argues that collective identity in social movements results from “ongoing efforts” (Buechler, 1995), explaining how diverse students unite under the CDM identity. By participating in CDM as a collective identity, to oppose the military coup, many people from various sectors joined the movement, which Melucci would refer to as “submerged temporary networks” (Buechler, 1995) in contemporary social movements.

CDM has evolved into a collective action, represented in its early days by a range of movements, including peaceful protests, strikes, and boycotts. Tilly’s concept of “Repertoires of collective action” (1978) applies to the students’ CDM. Their actions can be seen as a “flexible repertoire” allowing gradual change. Early CDM actions imitated past movements, including strikes, demonstrations, and university boycotts, which became routinized. The movement evolved from reactive to proactive responses over time (Tilly, 1978). When initiating collective action, appropriate tactics must be employed that will generate sufficient disorder and appeal to their constituency. If the movement fails to meet this challenge, collective action will not develop. For example, in a democratic environment, Martin Luther King used the ideology of love and evil. He used the tactic of “noncooperation,” which made it difficult for the white community to use violence to defeat the movement. However, CDM in Myanmar can be seen using not one but several tactics to resist the military council. For instance, government staff CDM participants employ the tactic of noncooperation within the military mechanism; student CDM participants use both coercive tactics and nonviolent/noncooperative tactics; and general citizens utilize boycott tactics. Later, when CDM deviated from conventional political methods of social movements by

transitioning into more active and coercive forms of resistance, it challenged the military council through cultural movements, enabling the movement to shake societies. CDM as a collective identity and a social movement, adapted to the changing (more violent, oppressive, and life-threatening) crackdowns by the military council, with its decentralized structure and citizens' initiatives. Some collective action frames are broad and influential, serving as primary guiding principles that shape and limit the goals and actions of other movements. These overarching frames are referred to as "master frames," distinct from the more specific frames that encompass individual movements. Master frames, along with their connections to specific social movements and collective action frames, must be flexible and inclusive to mobilize aggrieved groups and ensure the social movement's success.

The weight of a word: civil disobedience

Civil disobedience is a contested term, and since Henry David Thoreau first discussed it in his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" (original: "Resistance to Civil Government") in 1849, many scholars, academic literature, and activists have used this concept through their lenses and interpretations for their respective causes. Thoreau's concept of civil disobedience can be seen as rooted in anarchism, advocating a society free from coercive governments. He called governments "an expedient," urged individuals to stand up for themselves, and claimed that every citizen has the right to revolution. He stated that "all men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government when its tyranny or its inefficiency is great and unendurable" (Thoreau, 1996). Thoreau emphasized that citizens must confront wrongdoing with their consciences and question, point out, and resist unjust laws. In his essay, "Slavery in Massachusetts" (Thoreau, 1996), Thoreau appealed to the laws of humanity and the law of God over policies and political laws while acknowledging the existence of the government and the people's inability to live apart from the state. In other words, Thoreau emphasized natural laws and divine laws in understanding civil disobedience. In the third essay, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," Thoreau confidently

encouraged violent insurrections to negate unjust laws (Thoreau, 1996). Moreover, he continued to hold his opposition towards the government when he said, "We talk about a representative government, but what a monster of a government is that where the noblest faculties of the mind and the whole heart are not represented" (LeJeune, 2018). In all three of Thoreau's essays, one can see his urge to resist repressive powers and his gradually changing views on disobedience, which he regards as coercive when necessary.

CDM, with its well-known interpretation as civil and nonviolent, can also be seen in the context of student CDM in Myanmar. Undergraduate students who chose to participate in CDM through nonviolent means by refusing to go back to classes, dropping out of universities, and countrywide educational boycotts came to face violent threats by the SAC. As a result, they fled their homes and hometowns seeking shelter in neighboring countries, such as Thailand. Some have also fled to areas under EAO and PDF control, hoping to find safety under their protection.

Many undergraduate students who are displaced continue to uphold the essence of CDM's nonviolence and noncooperation by refusing to attend universities under the SAC mechanism. Some of them face direct or indirect threats and suppression by the SAC, leading to their displacement across borders. On the other hand, although they share the same collective identity as participants in CDM, many other students chose to remain in the country and take up arms to resist the SAC by coercive means. At the same time, some had to flee but were unable to leave the country. These students have become internally displaced. Therefore, CDM in the interpretation of internally displaced students who have taken up arms can be seen as a form of disobedience called "incivility within disobedience." Uncivil disobedience (incivility within disobedience) refers to the use of coercive force and the claim of justification, especially when civility and nonviolent means become challenging.

When civility fails: uncivil disobedience

To understand the CDM students' movement within an "injustice framing," it is essential to acknowledge the fundamentally uncivil

nature of disobedience that emerged in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. While John Rawls's (1971) conception of civil disobedience as principled, nonviolent, and respectful violation of law has dominated academic discourse, this framework proves inadequate when confronting the realities faced by students resisting the State Administration Council (SAC). The transition from peaceful protest to armed resistance by Myanmar's students represents not a moral failing, but a rational and justified escalation in response to extreme state violence and the complete failure of civil methods to protect basic human rights.

Uncivil disobedience is characterized by four key elements that differentiate it from both civil disobedience and mere crime. First, it involves incivility through acts of nontrivial violence, defiance, or the use of force against property or persons. Second, it embraces covertness and evasion, rejecting the requirement of publicity that characterizes traditional civil protest. Third, participants refuse to accept legal punishment, actively seeking to avoid or resist state consequences. Fourth, and most critically, it maintains conscientiousness and is motivated by sincere, deeply held moral convictions rather than by personal gain or malice. Myanmar students who took up arms did so not from a desire for violence but from a commitment to protecting their communities and opposing tyranny. This conscientiousness is evident in their continued articulation of political goals, their efforts to minimize civilian harm, and their maintenance of organizational structures oriented toward justice rather than power.

In the context of Myanmar, these characteristics manifest clearly in student resistance. When peaceful protesters were met with live ammunition, when university campuses became battlegrounds, and when arrest meant possible torture or death, students faced a choice: whether to abandon resistance entirely or escalate beyond civil methods. The choice to take up arms, to engage in sabotage, to operate covertly, and to evade capture represents uncivil disobedience motivated by the most fundamental moral conviction. To attain the right to life, well-being, and dignity.

The case for uncivil disobedience is built on several linked moral and political reasons, which become especially important in authoritarian situations such as post-coup Myanmar. Uncivil

disobedience is justified when it is the only effective way to confront severe injustice by SAC. In Myanmar, students had already tried all civil methods such as participating in peaceful protests, sit-ins, symbolic actions, and nonviolent campaigns. Yet, the SAC responded with lethal force, mass arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings. Therefore, when mass atrocities respond to peaceful protests, civil options are not just ineffective but life-threatening, and uncivil tactics become a matter of survival and meaningful resistance. Moreover, the idea of proportionality means that when a regime commits extreme atrocities, stronger responses by civilians can be justified. For instance, the SAC's systematic violence against civilians, torture of detainees, airstrikes on villages, and direct targeting of students are so extreme that defensive violence, sabotage, and covert resistance can be seen as proportionate. In such conditions, using force can be morally legitimate if it is necessary to restore the rights and basic freedoms that the regime has violently taken away.

A critical boundary for justifying uncivil disobedience is demonstrating that it represents a last resort after all other methods have failed. Myanmar's student movement clearly meets this threshold. The progression from peaceful demonstrations to armed resistance was neither immediate nor desired, but was forced by circumstances imposed by SAC. Students first attempted dialogue, then symbolic protest, then coordinated civil disobedience campaigns. Only after peaceful resistance were met with escalating state violence, only after witnessing classmates killed in the streets, and only after experiencing firsthand the SAC's complete unwillingness to negotiate or compromise, did students resort to uncivil methods.

Kimberly Brownlee's framework is particularly relevant here. She argues that the constrained and communicative characteristics are what distinguish uncivil disobedience from other forms of criminal law-breaking (Delmas, 2021). According to Brownlee, what defines civil disobedience is its communicative nature, not necessarily being violent.

Uncivil disobedience is also justified by the moral duty to protect people from immediate and ongoing harm. Myanmar students

acted not just against abstract injustice but to safeguard themselves and their communities. When the SAC threatened students and civilians, the need to defend lives outweighed concerns about civility.

A key justification for uncivil disobedience in Myanmar is the inalienable right to self-defense. People cannot be denied the right to protect themselves simply because they are engaged in political action or because the aggressor is a uniformed officer. When students faced soldiers firing on peaceful crowds, night raids on dormitories, and torture in detention, defensive resistance became morally and legally justified, regardless of the regime's laws. Philosophically, when a state enforces its will through superior force rather than moral authority or reason, individuals are justified in resisting by any necessary means (Brownlee, 2012). Even uncivil disobedience includes a communicative function. It sends messages about the illegitimacy of the regime, the determination of resistance, and the moral boundaries being defended.

Myanmar students' uncivil disobedience communicates refusal to accept military dictatorship, solidarity with victims of state violence, and the assertion that some injustices warrant forceful opposition. This communicative element, even when actions are covert or violent, distinguishes principled resistance from pure force. Justified uncivil disobedience aims to restore just conditions rather than to establish new forms of domination. Students resist not seizing power for themselves, but restoring democratic governance, protecting human rights, and ending military tyranny. For students, the turn to uncivil disobedience represented an assertion of dignity and a refusal to be reduced to mere victims. It communicated to the regime that its violence would be met with resistance, to international observers that the opposition would not be easily crushed, and to fellow citizens that continued resistance remained possible. Unlike contexts where civil disobedience might aim to reform fundamentally legitimate institutions, Myanmar students confront an illegitimate regime that seized power through force and maintains control through terror.

Celikates, Delmas, and Brownlee all preserved Rawls' notion of civil disobedience as a communicative, symbolic act aimed at political change. Yet they interpreted it beyond the "civil nature" of the concept, further claiming it as "uncivil disobedience," including

actions that are covert or communicative, violent, evasive, or offensive. These broad conceptualizations extend beyond previous ideologies that focus solely on being “civil” in disobedience. Moreover, according to Robin Celikates (2016), civil disobedience is an integral part of society that challenges existing regimes, laws, or institutions, sometimes including covert, violent, or offensive acts, especially when governments fail to uphold a just society and protect their citizens.

Expressing distrust, anger, and outrage against an unjust system, affirming dignity in the face of oppression, and showing solidarity with marginalized groups also make “uncivil disobedience” justifiable. This was argued strongly by Delmas in the concluding remarks of her article.

While civility can promote social stability, its demands are all too often used to deter dissent and resistance, and so it tends to alienate already marginalized groups further as they try to speak out against the status quo ... Where the state fails to provide the conditions necessary for civility to flourish, then, Incivility may be the answer, not the problem (Delmas, 2021, p. 225).

By using the concepts of “Civil” and “Uncivil” Disobedience, the book views Myanmar's CDM students not as abandoning nonviolence, but as principled actors engaging in justified uncivil disobedience against tyranny while rooting their conscience in civil disobedience. Framing their actions this way helps explain their displacement, choices, and the dynamics of resistance, showing that necessary incivility in defense of fundamental rights reflects moral agency and not extremism.

Where this leaves us

The chapter has provided a comprehensive, multidimensional literature review examining the experiences and dynamics of CDM undergraduate students following the 2021 military coup. By using three primary theoretical lenses, forced displacement

literature, framing processes from the new social movement theory, and the concepts of civil and uncivil disobedience, the chapter contributes to migration and displacement studies by moving beyond the simple narratives of victimhood. The theories and concepts center on students' agency and the complex interplay between choice and constraint in displacement contexts.

This chapter, therefore, contributes specifically to the contemporary forced displacement literature by avoiding a focus only on structural constraints and recognizing students' displacement as one that maintains agency and continues resistance. This captures the notion that agency and structure are not the two ends of the spectrum but are interconnected, shaping individuals' experiences of displacement.

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3

INTERPRETATION AND EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING OF CDM BY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Introduction

This chapter follows the students themselves. It traces how their understanding of CDM changed: what brought them in, what kept them there, and what eventually led some to move from the picket line to the rifle. Their interpretations were never static. They evolved with the violence of the regime, the deaths of friends, and the slow recognition that what had begun as conscientious withdrawal was now something more sustained. The chapter also draws on Scott (1990) on hidden transcripts: much of what students did in the first months took place off-stage, in encoded Telegram channels, in coded jokes, in the slow rehearsal of refusal that public withdrawal then made visible.

The argument running through the chapter is straightforward: students did not begin with a theory and applied it. They began with action, often improvised, and theory caught up with practice.

Before displacement, participants engaged in various forms of CDM activities. All the students participated in the education CDM, refusing to attend classes at military-controlled universities. Beyond this foundational act, the students also participated in street protests during the early days of the coup, while engaging in

other activities such as online activism through social media campaigns and information sharing. Some participants assumed more specialized roles, such as teaching younger CDM students as an alternative educational form, fundraising, and providing financial support to other CDM participants. As military crackdowns intensified, many participants began to question their actions through protests. They began shifting towards more active revolutionary tactics, such as underground movements, retaliating against the military's violent crackdowns on peaceful demonstrations, cooperating with interim university programs to counter the military-controlled education system, and joining the armed resistance forces and providing financial support to them.

All participants in this study had unique yet similar views on their understanding and interpretation of their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). These perspectives ranged from viewing CDM as simply an act of noncooperation with the SAC to seeing it as a peaceful, nonviolent movement, to perceiving it as a means of dismantling the military mechanism entirely, even by using coercive means. While some students viewed it as a duty primarily intended for government employees, since the movement initially focused on the participation of government employees, others regarded it as applicable to private company employees as well, and as a collective responsibility of all civilians. Some initially did not consider their role as students to be participatory or important in CDM, whereas others recognized the significance of their involvement.

Initial framing and interpretations of CDM

In the early days of the military coup, undergraduate students began expressing their refusal to accept SAC's legitimacy by dropping out of universities. They participated in the nationwide movement called CDM, opposing the military coup. Among CDM undergraduates, many initially perceived CDM as an intuitive act of noncooperation, such as refusing to attend classes under SAC (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), without a full grasp of the movement's theoretical underpinnings. This aligns with Melucci's concept that social movements often begin as spaces for identity formation and

collective action, rather than as ideologically coherent projects from the outset. These ideologies are evident among many participants in this study.

IDS 1, who abandoned her undergraduate studies at a major Myanmar university, reflected on this phenomenon:

I first heard about CDM during the protests, when we shouted the slogan 'Don't go to work, break away, and join CDM'. But I didn't know that we students refusing to continue attending universities were part of CDM at that time (IDS 1, December 26, 2024).

CBS 10 shared her perspective on initially seeing CDM as solely related to government employees:

I heard about CDM after the coup. Initially, I thought it was unrelated to students and didn't affect me personally. Honestly, I had no understanding of politics before the coup. At first, I thought CDM was primarily focused on government employees (CBS 10, November 24, 2024).

CBS 9, although unfamiliar with the movement at first, later explored it further and came across Gandhi's nonviolent movement, which helped him understand the peaceful nature of CDM:

I knew about CDM only after the revolution. After starting to get interested in politics, I read Gandhi and understood it as a nonviolent resistance to the government (CBS 9, November 18, 2024).

Melucci's account of social movements as experimental spaces fits these accounts: people joined the movement before they had a stable theory of what it was. Resource-mobilization accounts of social movements stress prior organizational capacity. These narratives suggest something different: in authoritarian conditions, what mobilizes is moral refusal as much as organizational infrastructure.

These narratives emphasize that in authoritarian settings where traditional political channels are restricted, social movements such as CDM may emerge, manifesting through actions that precede a

complete theoretical understanding, yet open space for later identity formation and strategic planning.

As state repression intensified, with students facing arrest warrants, violence, and exposure through leaked documents, many began to view their participation as part of a broader, strategic effort to disrupt the military regime's mechanisms. Students' evolving interpretations demonstrate Tilly's (1993) concept of repertoires of collective action, where protest tactics adapt dynamically to changing opportunity structures and state responses. The progression from peaceful protests to street barricades to covert resistance illustrates how repertoires evolve under repression, supporting Tilly's argument that protest forms are learned, shared, and adapted over time.

IDS 8 framed their involvement as a systemic resistance rather than a tactical protest:

I understood CDM as a way that we had to act against the military that has been oppressing civilians for decades. The military is controlling every sector in the country, especially education. I didn't want to continue learning under their rule. I didn't like the system even before, so I chose to become a CDM student (IDS 8, November, 2024).

This shift from intuitive resistance to strategic action mirrors Charles Tilly's concept of "repertoires of collective action" (Tilly, 1993), in which protest tactics adapt and evolve in response to state repression and shifting movement goals.

The broadening of CDM interpretations from government employee-focused to universal civilian responsibility demonstrates how collective identity boundaries expand under crisis conditions. Students' understanding of CDM also broadened over time, moving from a narrow focus on government employees to a recognition of the movement as a collective responsibility for all civilians. IDS 13 captured this evolution:

I first heard about it after the coup, when people were talking about it, so I started researching what it

meant. I came to understand it as a movement that every citizen must participate in to resist the government's mechanisms. It is not only the duty of government employees but also of all civilians (IDS 13, March, 2025).

The category “CDM participant” was being negotiated in real time, expanding from public-sector workers to anyone whose refusal to comply was visible to others.

Similarly, CBS 6 developed a more comprehensive understanding of CDM through her own research and news sources. She describes how, in March 2020, a green ribbon campaign was launched at Mandalay Education College to protest the Ministry of Education's unilateral decision to increase school days without consulting students or teachers. Supported by student unions, the campaign aimed to disrupt normal operations by closing offices and departments, effectively halting institutional functions in response to the ministry's inaction. Through this experience, CBS 6 came to view such collective action as a form of resistance designed to stop the functioning of government mechanisms. This understanding later shaped her perception of CDM after the 2021 coup, leading her to recognize it as a similar effort to disrupt and resist authoritarian control. These narratives and stories suggest that shared opposition to extreme repression can create a sense of solidarity that encompasses diverse social groups under unified resistance frameworks.

These findings reveal that students' tactics evolved in response to repression, exemplifying Tilly's argument that protest forms are learned, shared, and adapted over time. The movement served as a site for constructing and negotiating collective identity, consistent with Melucci's and Polletta and Jasper's theories. As Melucci claimed, participation within social movements such as CDM is considered a goal in itself by the CDM undergraduate students (Buechler, 1995). Moreover, being participants in CDM became a shared identity among CDM undergraduate students and therefore serves as both a requirement and a key achievement of new social movements. The findings of IDS and CBS also support Honari's (2018) argument that movements can emerge and persist even

under severe repression. As encouraged by the new social movement theory, students emerged as active agents, prioritizing collective action driven by identity, information control, and structural change (Flynn, 2021). Over time, CDM came to be seen as a movement for all citizens, not just government employees, broadening its base and deepening its collective identity.



Figure 3.1 Street protests in front of Yangon University as a form of participation in the CDM (Photo by the author)

Evolution of CDM interpretations over time

As the political crisis in Myanmar deepened, students were forced to navigate a complex and evolving revolutionary landscape. While early participation in the CDM was often fueled by emotional momentum and urgency, over time, students developed more nuanced understandings of the movement's limitations, possibilities, and ethical dilemmas. The evolution of CDM interpretations among Myanmar's undergraduate students, both IDS and CBS, highlights the dynamic interplay between lived experience, collective identity, and the shifting realities of authoritarian repression. This section draws on participant narratives and social movement theory to analyze how students' understandings of CDM matured from initial, emotionally driven

acts to more nuanced, strategic, and inclusive forms of resistance. Their evolving perspectives, 3 years after the military coup began, demonstrate that revolutionary consciousness is not static but is continuously shaped by lived experiences, social capital, temporal and geographical contexts, and political developments.

Inclusive understanding of CDM participants

The evolution from initial judgmental attitudes toward non-participants to empathetic understanding of participation constraints reveals important insights into movement maturation.

IDS 3 showed a nuanced understanding of the varying capacities for CDM participation across different socioeconomic backgrounds, acknowledging the complex realities that prevent equal participation by every student:

There are many reasons why some students may not be able to join CDM. Some families depend entirely on their children graduating and securing employment to support the household financially. For these individuals, regardless of their desire to actively participate in the revolution, joining CDM may not be possible (IDS 3, October, 2024).

This empirical finding shows that socioeconomic status, particularly education and income, is a key determinant of political participation among youth, but that material constraints can limit engagement even when motivation is high. Over time, students like IDS 3 shifted from a rigid, judgmental stance to a more empathetic and strategic approach, recognizing the diversity of constraints and contributions within the movement.

IDS 2 also had a similar sympathetic understanding for those who cannot join CDM:

In the beginning, we were very passionate and intense. We welcomed those who joined CDM but were harsh toward those who didn't. We didn't try to understand their reasons at all.... Now that the revolution has been ongoing for a long time, we've learned a great deal

about war, the laws of war, and the rules that revolutionaries should follow. We've become better at listening to people's stories and understanding why they can't join CDM. Some people are acting as "watermelons (phaye-thee)", those who keep their jobs under the military government but secretly give us information (IDS 2, October, 2024).

With time, students advocated reevaluating CDM's definition to better account for diverse forms of resistance. CBS 10 reflected on the long-term social impacts of CDM and emphasized the need for critical assessment:

There are things that aren't very fair within CDM. I see a need for more nuanced categorization within the movement. During COVID, CDM doctors played a crucial role, but many doctors also stopped working as part of their participation in CDM, which had consequences for civilians. Similarly, young students who dropped out of school to take part in CDM might face long-term consequences. While children in areas with better access to education may still be able to continue on the right path, those in remote areas may face significant barriers. So, I've learned that we need to re-evaluate every new term that emerges, like CDM (CBS 10, November, 2024).

CBS 5 echoed the need for broader interpretations of CDM, arguing that the movement goes beyond simply stopping government operations:

There should be broader definitions for CDM. The main definition that people are using in this revolution is only to stop the mechanism of the government. But I feel like there's more to it than that (CBS 5, November, 2024).

This evolution supports Jasper's (1997) argument about the emotional and moral dimensions of protest, in which movements serve as sites of moral development rather than merely strategic action. The progression from binary thinking (participants vs.

non-participants) to a nuanced understanding demonstrates the development of a sophisticated political consciousness through sustained resistance experience.

Students gradually recognized the structural constraints on participation in CDM, providing evidence for debates about structure versus agency in social movement theory. IDS 3's analysis demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of participation barriers:

People can only participate in revolutionary activities when their basic needs are secured, when their stomachs are full. However, they may still find alternative ways to demonstrate their noncooperation with the SAC within their constraints (IDS 3, October, 2024).

IDS 12 also shared her concerns about the gap between political expectations and the practical realities of participating in CDM:

In reality, people are sometimes forced to comply with the system. For instance, they may have to pay electricity bills and taxes, or their power will be cut off. So, the realities of daily life don't always align with political ideals or expectations (IDS 12, March, 2025).

This recognition supports Bourdieu's (1986) concept of different forms of capital, i.e., economic, cultural, and social, as determinants of political participation. Additionally, the Myanmar case reveals how movements can develop inclusive frameworks that accommodate diverse forms of contribution, challenging binary notions of participation versus non-participation.

Specific understandings of the CDM

Locally distinctive articulations of CDM participation in Laiza, Kachin State, provide strong evidence that local contexts shape movement meanings in ways that substantially vary from general narratives. According to IDS 11, locals in Laiza consider anyone who fled from different parts of the country due to the SAC's atrocities as CDM participants:

CDM is the same in principle, but locals in Laiza interpret it differently. They view all of those who fled from major cities in middle and lower Myanmar after the coup as CDM participants. These newcomers are seen as part of CDM. Also, the real CDM participants who arrived here now have better opportunities because the Kachin authorities provide the necessary support to help them rebuild their lives. Many have been able to start their own businesses and live more stable lives (IDS 11, November, 2024).

This narrative demonstrates how geographical and ethnic contexts can also influence the construction of collective identity. It questions universalist social movement theories that presume consistent meanings and strategies across contexts.

From non-violent civil disobedience to uncivil disobedience

The evolution of conscious resistance among students is most evident in their debates about the relationship between nonviolent resistance and coercive resistance. These internal deliberations reveal how movements navigate the theoretical transition from Rawlsian civil disobedience to what Delmas (2020) conceptualizes as "uncivil disobedience." Some students shifted from civil resistance and protests to uncivil forms of resistance, which, in this context, refers to armed resistance. They chose to join the armed resistance groups when they faced the extreme repression of SAC, forcing them to be displaced. Students frame their ongoing participation in resistance through the use of coercive tactics. Although they shared similar experiences with their peers as CDM participants, their paths of displacement differed based on their individual perceptions. These divergent perspectives among undergraduate students demonstrate sophisticated strategic thinking about the effectiveness of movement.

CDM was used to initiate the collective spirit, but now it doesn't matter if people participate in it or not. Because, as you know, we have already arrived at the highest wave of revolution in the form of armed resistance (IDS 11, November, 2024).

IDS 11's assessment reflects what Tarrow (2011) describes as "tactical innovation under pressure," which means adapting protest repertoires when existing methods prove insufficient against state repression. Civil disobedience was perceived as a preparation phase that builds collective capacity and solidarity before movements transition to more confrontational tactics. IDS 11's framing of CDM as having "initiated the collective spirit" precisely captures this preparatory function.

For some students, the shift from peaceful protest to armed resistance was not immediate, but rather gradually shaped by their lived experiences of repression. Initially hesitant or uncertain about joining armed revolutionary groups, some students came to view armed struggle as the only viable form of resistance after witnessing the military's violent suppression of unarmed demonstrators and experiencing personal persecution. The experience of arrest and detention often became a turning point that solidified their decision to flee and align with armed resistance. IDS 1 recalled her experience, saying that:

After the coup in March, we were protesting, but it felt like the protests were doing nothing. The SAC was cracking down on peaceful protesters with weapons, and we realized we couldn't continue resisting without any way to defend ourselves...But we had to stay at home for a while, also because of financial difficulties. In June, I was arrested. At that point, I thought: if I had gone to the armed groups in March, I wouldn't have been captured. After that, I was certain that I would join the armed revolution as soon as I was released from prison. Nobody could stop me. I stayed somewhere else after I got out, and within a month, I left (IDS 1, October, 2024).

In some cases, students proactively choose coercive forms of resistance not only due to personal threats or direct surveillance, but as a reaction to the extreme violence they witnessed. The brutal repression of young student protesters, including arrests and killings in broad daylight, created an environment of fear and urgency, forcing many to flee immediately. IDS 6 shared his story,

I left very early, around March 2021, while others were protesting. My friend was killed by the police while protesting. That's how we started questioning everything. I was 18 at that time and felt like we couldn't resist with just words. First, we went to Karen, and we only arrived here in Karenni about two years later. They came searching for us, but we had already left by then. I don't think SAC regards us as important individuals (IDS 6, October, 2024).

However, some students acknowledge the need for armed resistance yet still seem to perceive CDM as an important and necessary step towards building collective identity among students. This perspective offered by IDS 7 reveals equally sophisticated strategic reasoning:

The momentum of the revolution has intensified recently into armed resistance, and I've come to understand the significance of CDM better... I remind people that the education system under SAC is unable to function properly to this day precisely because CDM students and teachers have remained steadfast in their refusal to cooperate (IDS 7, November, 2024).

This perspective supports the use of uncivil disobedience, yet it also acknowledges the importance of CDM that goes hand in hand with elevated armed resistance.

Armed resistance is one form of revolution and so is CDM... CDM serves as a bridge between the armed resistance and the general public (IDS 6, October, 2024).

This narrative shows how different resistance strategies can coexist and mutually reinforce one another rather than compete in a zero-sum way. Further, drawing from his personal experiences in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, IDS 6 observes a significant shift in public attitudes toward armed resistance. Unlike the perception in 1988, when armed struggle was widely regarded as a violent and disruptive strategy fraught with collateral damage, the contemporary public increasingly views armed resistance as a

legitimate and effective means of resisting and destroying SAC. This evolution in public sentiment reflects both a contextual adaptation to ongoing authoritarian repression and a redefinition of what constitutes effective and justifiable resistance in the current sociopolitical landscape.

The enemy we're facing, the SAC, has immense organizational power, and CDM alone may not be enough to confront that (IDS 4, October, 2024).

These debates have deeper theoretical significance, not just about tactics but about what civil disobedience really means for students in Myanmar under harsh repression. IDS 6's observation that "we can't just define them with fixed definitions from the books" directly challenges Rawls's strict view of civil disobedience, which draws clear lines between civil and uncivil actions. The student's perception aligns more with Brownlee's idea that "conscience-based resistance" can extend beyond the usual rules of civil disobedience when people face serious threats to their lives (Brownlee, 2012).

Beyond civil disobedience

Civil disobedience is often understood as a deliberate, peaceful, and open act of defying the law, carried out to challenge and change unjust laws or state policies (Delmas & Brownlee, 2024). In authoritarian settings where youth and students are routinely excluded from political processes, civil disobedience serves not only as a method of protest but also as a crucial means of political expression and resistance. While John Rawls (1971) highlights the nonviolent essence and public visibility of civil disobedience, as well as the acceptance of punishment to sustain its nature, new scholars such as Candice Delmas and Kimberly Brownlee push back against this limited definition of civil disobedience. They claim that where profound injustice and violent authoritarian rule prevail, resistance can transcend these conventional boundaries.

Student movements in Myanmar have a long history and tradition of challenging authoritarian rule, with the most famous movements dating back to the 8888 uprising and continuing to the present.

CDM stems from this legacy, putting students as symbols and participants in resistance. For instance, participation in CDM by undergraduate students is framed as a moral duty, extending beyond government employees to encompass all citizens (Sim, n.d.). Through this conceptualization, the collective identity of students, rooted in opposition to injustice, is highlighted in this study.

Students' perceptions and methods evolved in response to SAC repression as seen through the narratives of IDS and CBS, from intuitive acts to more reflective and strategic movements. Many students acted covertly, evading arrest and using anonymity to protect themselves and their peers. Such tactics, while "uncivil" in the Rawlsian sense, were necessary for survival and for sustaining the movement under existential threat. Drawing on Delmas's argument, these acts of uncivil disobedience can be seen as morally required responses to systemic injustice, especially when civil avenues are foreclosed or ineffective (Giunta, 2020). Brownlee's work, often in dialogue with Delmas, acknowledges that while civil disobedience is typically communicative, there are circumstances in which the communicative function is less central, or when incivility is warranted to disrupt entrenched injustice (Delmas, 2020). According to new social movement theorists such as Melucci, contemporary movements are less about formal organizations and more about identity, meaning-making, and everyday resistance. CDM can be seen as a result of ongoing efforts rather than just an initial starting point for collective action. For Myanmar's students, collective identity and moral opposition to injustice become central, even as the forms of resistance adapt to the realities of surveillance and violence. In the context of undergraduate students in Myanmar, the urgency and severity of repression meant that students' actions sometimes prioritized disruption and protection for themselves and their communities over communication with authorities. Thus, to highlight the necessity of tactics that fall outside the traditional boundaries of civil disobedience, CDM undergraduate students' participation in CDM can be viewed through the lens of "uncivil disobedience."

NSM theory also supports the fluidity and creativity of student-led resistance, where the boundaries between "civil" and "uncivil" tactics blur in the face of existential threats. The movement's persistence,

despite the absence of structural openings or strong oppositional organizations, underscores the agency and resilience of ordinary participants (Honari, 2018). In the face of violent repression by SAC and extreme restrictions on human rights and civic space, students' use of covert, disruptive, and sometimes confrontational actions through armed resistance is not only understandable but can be seen as morally justified. As reflected in the narrative of IDS 9,

Participating in CDM means not cooperating and not following their rule. But the armed resistance continues to oppose them actively, not just covertly, and passively refusing to cooperate. This form of resistance (armed resistance), I think, is the highest form of resistance. But we cannot divide CDM and armed resistance either, as they go hand in hand (IDS 9, November, 2024).

Through the lens of students' movement, this study aims to broaden understanding of CDM, recognizing the ethical force and strategic necessity of "uncivil" acts in the struggle for justice and democracy. Students' use of covert tactics, coercive tactics, and protective strategies, as reflected in armed resistance, shows what Delmas (2020) terms "uncivil disobedience": resistance that maintains moral legitimacy while abandoning traditional constraints on publicity and acceptance of punishment. The theoretical significance is that these findings show how specific contextual factors, especially extreme state repression, can legitimize tactical adaptations that, although diverging from traditional civil disobedience models, still maintain moral integrity.

Comparing the understanding of CDM among displaced students

Comparing the framings of internally displaced students (IDS) and cross-border students (CBS) reveals how displacement shapes evolving understandings of the CDM in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup. Despite different contexts, both groups maintained a shared collective identity while adapting their strategic perspectives.

Both IDS and CBS initially held only limited, intuitive knowledge of CDM, responding with immediate outrage rather than ideological clarity. Many students initially viewed CDM as mere noncooperation and nonviolent acts, such as refusing to attend classes at SAC-controlled universities. They were unable to grasp the broader significance of the movement. Over time, both groups developed more nuanced understandings, recognizing CDM as a complex, evolving movement encompassing multiple forms of action and demonstrating empathetic understanding toward non-participants facing constraints. Students' interpretations evolved, deepened, and diversified, influenced by their individual and collective struggles and experiences of repression.

However, their displacement contexts produced distinct strategic adaptations. IDS often transitioned toward viewing armed resistance as a legitimate extension of civil disobedience, with some describing CDM as "becoming a bridge to armed struggle." CBS tended to call for broader, more inclusive conceptualizations of the movement and encouraged critical reflection on its impact. These tactical innovations support Tarrow's (1993) argument that periods of heightened conflict serve as crucibles where new forms of contention are fashioned, tested, and refined.

Despite tactical evolution, students maintained their collective identity as "CDM-students" resisting authoritarian rule. This collective identity, defined by shared experiences of the coup, protests, repression, and displacement, was continually sustained through peer networks and digital communities (Buechler, 1995). The persistence of this identity enabled tactical evolution without ideological fragmentation.

Students' framing processes evolved alongside their tactical adaptations. Through diagnostic framing, they defined the SAC as illegitimate and identified the need to restore civilian rule. IDS reframed CDM to include armed resistance as a legitimate democratic action, while CBS emphasized an inclusive conceptualization. These framings reflected the movement's bottom-up nature and students' lived experiences under repression.

The findings reinforce that social movements can emerge and persist even in contexts of severe repression without strong

organizational structures (Honari, 2018; Loveman, 1998; Jasper, 1997; Einwohner, 2003). Analyzed through the lens of new social movement theory, students' sustained participation demonstrates their cognitive, moral, and emotional connection to the broader CDM community. The findings also contribute to conceptualizations of civil disobedience by suggesting that uncivil disobedience through covert and coercive tactics may be necessary under extreme state repression (Celikates, 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter analyses undergraduate students' interpretations of the CDM in Myanmar and makes several important theoretical contributions to the academic literature on social movement theory. Most significantly, it demonstrates how collective identity formation can occur through practice rather than ideology, demonstrating how repertoires of collective action can adapt rapidly under extreme repression, extending beyond the well-understood notion of civil disobedience. The findings reveal how local contexts shape movement meanings while maintaining broader collective identity, contributing to debates about unity and diversity in social movements. The findings collectively support the chapter's central argument that Myanmar undergraduate students' interpretations of CDM evolved from intuitive, emotionally driven responses to sophisticated strategic frameworks that fundamentally challenge traditional boundaries of civil disobedience. Evidently, both IDS and CBS began with limited understanding but developed nuanced perspectives shaped by their distinct displacement contexts. IDS developed coercive resistance strategies and escalated armed resistance in response to threats of surveillance and arrest, while CBS developed critical analytical frameworks emphasizing inclusive conceptualization. The findings demonstrate that extreme repression accelerated collective identity formation and necessitated "uncivil" resistance tactics that maintained moral legitimacy while transcending conventional constraints.

The broader theoretical implications concern the relationship between repression and resistance to innovation. These findings suggest that extreme repression can accelerate movement learning

and identity formation, producing sophisticated political consciousness more rapidly than traditional theories suggest. This has important implications for understanding contemporary resistance movements facing authoritarian repression. Through the narratives of IDS and CBS, the initial understandings and their evolution regarding CDM can be seen. For instance, many students initially viewed CDM as a simple act of noncooperation and nonviolence, such as refusing to attend classes at SAC-controlled universities. They were unable to conceptualize the broader importance of the movement. Over time, the students' interpretations have evolved, deepened, and diversified, influenced by their individual and collective struggles and experiences of repression. Therefore, as Jasper (1997) claimed about the cultural, moral, and emotional dimensions of protest, social movements are not simply reactions to structural change but are sites of creativity, moral vision, and identity construction. The perceptions of CDM undergraduate students demonstrate that social movements under extreme repression can develop sophisticated uncivil tactics while maintaining collective identity and moral purpose.

Students' displacement has reshaped, rather than weakened, political identity and agency by abandoning traditional constraints on accepting punishment in rejecting authoritarian control. Rather than producing fractured victimhood, displacement enabled students to sustain their opposition actively through shared grievances and collective resilience. This has important implications for understanding contemporary resistance movements facing authoritarian repression, revealing how extreme constraint can generate forms of political agency and innovative resistance strategies.

4

FORCED DISPLACEMENT AS RESISTANCE

Introduction

Why did the students leave? The chapter takes that question seriously, treating it not as a question with an obvious answer (because they had to) but as one whose texture matters. Students described their leaving as a response to immediate threat, arrest warrants, raids, the death of friends, but also as an exercise of agency: a refusal to remain in a country whose institutions they no longer recognized.

What follows is organized by theme rather than by individual: state repression as the initial driver, the slow erosion of livable conditions, the role of support networks in deciding where to go, and the lived realities of displacement once it had happened. Each section moves between students' own words and the broader patterns those words make visible.

State repression as an initial driver

Repression came fast and unevenly. In the days after the coup, students were among those targeted: arrested at protests, surveilled through Facebook, named on regime watch-lists, and, in many cases, turned in by neighbors or relatives sympathetic to the SAC.

What might appear as the simple intensification of authoritarian rule reads better as what Stoler (2016) terms “duress”: the live, sedimented force of decades of military government, colonial-era ethnic categorization, and the long Bamar-centric state-making project, reactivated at speed.

Based on the findings, students’ displacement was initially triggered by several SAC repressions in response to students’ participation in CDM and several forms of resistance, ranging from dropping out of universities to marching protests.

While some started their activism with hope in mass mobilization, the increasing surveillance, targeted threats, and loss of safe spaces to protest gradually pushed them to flee. As protests in cities became too dangerous, many students attempted to continue their efforts in rural areas, but this, too, became impossible under SAC's increasingly restrictive measures. IDS 10 shared her experiences:

After the coup, we organized people's protests because we knew we couldn't stay silent anymore. When it became too dangerous to protest in the cities, we moved our demonstrations to villages. But even there, the threats from SAC continued. We had to live in fear every day, not knowing when we might be arrested. They eventually obtained name lists of protest participants, including ours, so that we couldn't stay at home anymore. That's when we fled to another area (IDS 10, December, 2024).

This demonstrates how suppression and resistance coexisted within the same situation, illustrating that CDM students experienced displacement as both an active choice and a passive consequence of state repression.

Another significant factor contributing to the displacement of students was the widespread destruction and military offensives carried out by the SAC, particularly in areas located near military brigades or active conflict zones. In such cases, students were not targeted solely for their political participation. Still, they were forced to flee due to the unsafe and unlivable conditions in their home communities caused by systematic violence. IDS 7 shared that:

I had to flee from my home because my village was very close to the SAC brigade, and there were frequent attacks. We experienced sudden airstrikes and artillery shelling, and people were killed even while staying inside their homes. Our houses were burned down regularly. It became impossible for us to remain there and continue the protests. My family chose a place they could safely go, and I chose a different location where I could keep doing what I was committed to. Now, we're all separated (IDS 7, November, 2024).

This narrative reveals how militarized violence eliminates multiple capabilities simultaneously, such as bodily integrity through direct violence, shelter through destruction of homes, and affiliation through family separation. Displacement, in this context, is not due to the student-CDM's political affiliation, but rather to the systematic destruction carried out by SAC.

Some students were targeted after expressing dissent online, an act increasingly criminalized under laws such as Section 505(a) of the Penal Code. CBS 3 explained:

I shared a Facebook post about an arrest that ended in death, catching the ward administrator's attention. They investigated me, labeled me an activist, and filed a 505(a) case. By April, the authorities were searching for me. Fortunately, I was out shopping instead of at home when they arrived. My family warned me, and I fled to Karen State immediately (CBS 3, November, 2024).

Others had to flee after military forces raided their homes or issued threats against their families. For these students, displacement stemmed from the activism of their parents or other family members. In many cases, students became secondary targets through what can be described as collective punishment. CBS-S from FGD 4 shared:

It wasn't due to my participation in CDM but more because of my family's participation as activists in the

revolution... Since the start of the coup, SAC confiscated my phone, so they had all the information about me. My house was confiscated, and around April 2021, SAC came to arrest us at home (CBS -S, November, 2024).

This collective punishment systematically undermines Nussbaum's capability for affiliation by making family relationships themselves sources of vulnerability rather than sources of support. The confiscation of phones and homes represents the elimination of both material and informational conversion factors necessary for maintaining social connections and personal security.

From a capability approach perspective, CDM undergraduate students experience what Sen (1999) terms "capability deprivation" across multiple domains simultaneously. They lose not only material capabilities (access to higher education, homes, career prospects) but also fundamental capabilities that Nussbaum (2000) identifies as central to human dignity, including practical reason (the ability to plan one's life), affiliation (meaningful relationships with others), and political participation (engagement in political choices governing one's life).

Across these accounts, repression worked through more than physical force. It operated through surveillance, denunciation, the closure of livable institutions, and the slow narrowing of every available alternative. By the time many students decided to leave, the choice was less between displacement and stability than between displacement and surrender.

Rejected alternatives and agency of choice

If repression set the conditions for leaving, it does not, on its own, explain the decision. For many students, leaving was a deliberate political act: a refusal to remain in a country whose institutions they no longer recognized, even where staying might have been physically possible. The category "rejected alternatives," from Bartram (2015), is useful here. It names the options that displaced people could have taken: staying, complying, accepting an alternative path, but consciously chose against.

Students' agency surfaced through both overt acts, such as protests, underground organizing, or joining armed groups, and subtle, everyday forms of defiance. As CBS 6 explained:

As a participant in the revolution, I had to do what I had to do. If I return, it's another chance for them to spread propaganda. I could've returned and pretended as if nothing happened, but I didn't. I only thought about moving forward (CBS 6, November, 2024).

This decision reflects what anthropologist James Scott would refer to as “everyday forms of resistance” (Scott, 1985), in which even simple passive acts, such as refusal or non-participation, constitute significant political agency in repressive contexts like Myanmar.

Some students initially chose to remain in Myanmar despite the risks and limitations associated with displacement. For them, staying close to the movement and participating directly in anti-coup activities was a deliberate choice, even when safer alternatives were available. However, as SAC's repression intensified, staying became impossible. Still, rather than abandoning the cause entirely or seeking distant asylum, these students made strategic choices to flee to border areas such as Mae Sot, where they could remain close to Myanmar and continue supporting resistance efforts. As CBS-C from FGD 3 reflected:

Participation in the revolution is best if we are close to the on-ground situations. Even though things were very difficult in Yangon, we didn't leave. We have guerrilla protest groups, political prisoners, and CDM groups inside the country. We need to be inside the country to help them. I stayed as long as I could. But I was forced to leave. I don't think I can help people that effectively by being here, but it's still good because I'm still close to the border (CBS-C, November, 2024).

These accounts complicate any simple model of displacement as flight to safety. Students who stayed inside Myanmar often did so for political reasons: to remain close to the movement, to keep working with people they trusted, to refuse the symbolic concession that crossing the border could imply.

Students' refusal extended beyond political resistance to encompass rejection of limited life opportunities. IDS 10 articulated this clearly:

I was already a 4th-year student at our program, which required 5 years only. So, that means that when there are job openings at agricultural companies, I could apply and work there. Even though I didn't graduate, we could negotiate and work. But I didn't choose that path (IDS 10, December, 2024).

The decision to stay away from their hometown was shaped less by direct threats and more by a conscious rejection of constrained environments. Likewise, IDS 13 shared that although he had completed his accounting studies and could have returned home, he chose to remain in Mandalay, a big city where opportunities are better.

I first moved to Mandalay about two to three years ago to attend accounting classes. After completing my courses, I didn't return to my hometown right away because things had become so difficult. I stayed in Mandalay, helping out where I could. The decision to leave Myanmar entirely came later, after the situation worsened, and I crossed into Thailand with friends in 2024 (IDS 13, March, 2025).

This narrative reveals a sophisticated capability analysis in which the student evaluated environmental conversion factors (urban versus rural opportunities, curfew restrictions) and their impact on multiple capabilities: education, work, and, crucially, what Nussbaum terms "play and recreational activities" and practical reasons. The refusal to accept "life with limitations" reflects what the capability approach recognizes as resistance to the normalization of capability constraints.

Overall, these cases show how CDM undergraduate students exercised agency by strategically rejecting constrained alternatives. Even when choices were limited, they made decisions that preserved their political identities, protected valued capabilities, and sustained participation in the broader resistance movement.

Decisions to Leave

The decision to leave home represents a pivotal moment in students' political evolution, marking their transition from passive resistance to active defiance of the SAC. This choice, characterized by participants as both deeply personal and inherently political, demonstrates how individual agency intersects with collective resistance movements in contexts of authoritarian rule.

Students consistently framed their departure from home not merely as a tactical decision, but as a foundational act of political resistance, what IDS 4 termed "the first act of resistance." This conceptualization reveals how participants understood their personal sacrifices as integral to broader revolutionary praxis. IDS 4's reflection illuminates this understanding:

For me, I come from a family where parents and children understand each other, so they eventually accepted my decision. However, not all students may have this opportunity. I would even say that choosing to leave our home is the first act of revolution. This decision plays a crucial role in shaping the course of our lives (IDS 4, October, 2024).

The characterization of leaving home as revolutionary suggests that students viewed their departure as more than geographical displacement. It represented a symbolic and practical rejection of the social order imposed by the SAC. This framing also aligns with James C. Scott's concept of hidden transcripts evolving into public acts of defiance, in which private resistance transforms into open confrontation with power structures (Scott, 1990).

Choosing to leave home involved navigating tensions between family responsibilities and political convictions, highlighting how participation in resistance movements can disrupt traditional family roles but also foster new solidarities. These experiences differed widely depending on family relationships; some students received support from their parents, while others encountered strong resistance.

IDS 2's experience illustrates the delicate balance between maintaining family relationships and pursuing political goals:

In February 2022, some comrades returned to the jungle to form the People's Liberation Student Army. I joined them in April, initially without my family's knowledge. Though they opposed my decision at first, they eventually accepted it (IDS 2, October, 2024).

The initial secrecy surrounding IDS 2's departure highlights the anticipation of family conflict. At the same time, the eventual acceptance suggests that families often underwent their own political awakening process, coming to understand their children's choices within the broader context of national resistance.

These narratives show that the process of leaving home functioned as a rite of passage that consolidated students' political identities and deepened their commitment to the resistance movement. The physical act of departure became intertwined with psychological transformation, as students shed their former social roles and embraced new identities as revolutionary actors. The characterization of departure as revolutionary suggests that the decision to leave home represents more than a tactical response to political repression. It constitutes a foundational moment in which students transformed from sympathizers to active participants in revolutionary struggle, establishing new forms of community and commitment.

Capability costs and destroyed dreams

Beyond physical safety, displacement closed off futures students had been building. The capability approach distinguishes between resources and the freedom to convert them into a livable life; for these students, the resources of education, family, and community remained partially in place, but the freedom to do anything with them collapsed. Studying abroad became inaccessible. Pursuing a career inside Myanmar would have required collaboration with the regime.

As is the nature of youth, we want to contribute to our country, make it better, study abroad, and see the world. I had many plans. I was planning to study Japanese because I wanted to go to Japan, not just to work and make money, but because I was genuinely

curious and eager to learn. My goal was to return to my country and work towards improving the botanical field. But now, everything is destroyed (IDS 8, November, 2024).

I was a jobless student but participated in the revolution in any way I could, and I'm proud of that. However, I somewhat regret not finishing my government education. When I was in Kachin, I could speak the language, but NGOs wouldn't employ me because I didn't have a graduation certificate. Now I'm illegal in Mae Sot, which creates another difficulty. Comparing these two situations, I think that if I had graduated, I could have continued to stay in Kachin and work. Not having graduated has been a significant challenge (CBS 10, November, 2024).

These narratives highlight that students' choices are made against a rapidly diminishing menu of alternatives, with each rejected path representing both a loss and an assertion of self-determination.

Transformed life trajectories

The coup disrupted undergraduate students' plans to graduate and pursue careers, carrying significant practical implications in Myanmar's context. However, students' adaptation to these disruptions reveals capability reasoning and the exercise of what Sen terms adaptive agency; the capacity to pursue valued capabilities through alternative pathways when conventional routes become unavailable. Some students initially attempted to continue revolutionary activities within the country before eventually joining armed resistance. IDS 2 shared that,

We started with protests in Mandalay. Then we carried on with our underground activities, started a page, and supported the activists financially. The things we did were not as popular as the high-profile groups. Even when our comrades were captured, tortured, or killed, we tried to continue to carry out these duties within the cities (IDS 2, October, 2024).

Their reasoning reflected what Sen calls "committed agency" combined with pragmatic capability assessment:

There's a thing that I always say: "As long as we're not captured and are still alive, we can do lots of things." With just this mindset, I chose to join the armed revolution and came to the jungle (IDS 2, October, 2024).

This illustrates how the agency is exercised not only through major decisions, such as displacement, but also through smaller, persistent acts of resistance, until those, too, become impossible.

In some cases, the students' decision-making was shaped by evolving family dynamics and the urgency of local threats. CBS 8 shared how an initial plan to study abroad had to be abandoned due to both personal and political disruptions.

I was working at an office back inside Myanmar. I discussed with my mother whether I should study abroad, and she said she would support me. So, I quit my job. But my grandmother's health deteriorated, so my mom couldn't support me anymore. At that time, people were being captured in our neighborhood by SAC, so my mom was very worried. She told me to leave for the liberated areas, and I left. I didn't have my passport either (CBS 8, November, 2024).

This narrative illustrates how alternatives, such as studying abroad, were initially considered but became inaccessible due to the emergence of caregiving responsibilities and intensifying threats from SAC. Although this student initially refused to study at SAC-controlled institutions in the hope of studying abroad, she had to flee to a liberated area. Additionally, the lack of passports further restricted her ability to study abroad. This shows that displacement can sometimes result from choices being shut off one by one, leaving only one option.

For CBS, border towns like Mae Sot became more than places of refuge as they became sites of continued resistance, community rebuilding, and proximity to the movement inside Myanmar. Yet

these decisions were also shaped by information gaps, lost opportunities, and limited support networks. The agency these students exercised was often quiet but profound: staying close to Myanmar despite risks, continuing to teach, organize, and resist from the margins.

Across these narratives, displacement is not the moment agency ends. It is the moment one set of options closes, and another opens, and the decision about which way to move is itself a political act, one shaped by values, by relationships, and by what the student involved was prepared to give up.

Agency in displacement is expressed in dramatic acts, leaving home, joining armed resistance, crossing borders, but also in quieter ones: refusing to attend SAC universities, refusing to apply for SAC-issued documents, refusing to engage with the bureaucratic infrastructure of the new regime. The drama is uneven; the political weight is more even than it looks.

“Thin agency”, the term used in forced migration studies for action taken under severely constrained circumstances, captures part of what these accounts describe. Even where available options have shrunk almost entirely, students were making choices: to leave, to stay, to fight, to teach, to wait. Those choices were not unconstrained. Mahmood's (2005) revision of the liberal equation of agency with resistance is also of importance here. Some students find ways of enduring the regime in place rather than opposing it visibly, and that endurance is not the absence of agency but a different mode or form of agency.

Navigating social capital in displacement

Whether and how students could move depended on the people they could reach. The networks that made displacement possible, family contacts in border zones, classmates already in Mae Sot, professors who could vouch for them, and ethnic political organizations with safe houses in liberated areas did not exist as abstract resources. They had to be activated, often quickly and under pressure.

Bourdieu's concept of social capital captures part of this. So does Putnam's distinction between bonding social capital (close ties within a group) and bridging social capital (ties across groups). Both kinds mattered for the students in this study. Bonding ties, classmates, fellow CDMers, and family carried them through the early months. Bridging ties, professors, NGO contacts, and EAOs made onward movement possible.

These networks were both safety nets and strategic tools. They enabled collective decision-making about whether and when to leave. They provided routes, documents, and contacts on the other side. And they sustained the political and emotional work of staying in the movement after displacement.

Peer networks and collective decision-making

Peer networks emerged as a crucial factor in students' decisions to leave, demonstrating how resistance movements rely on horizontal solidarity to sustain commitment despite personal costs. Group membership provides a collective purpose and acts as a safety net, offering emotional support and access to resources. This collective agency becomes particularly evident in students' resistance activities and displacement decision-making processes. For CDM-undergraduate students, decisions to flee were strongly shaped by social circles and traumatic events affecting themselves or their peers, illustrating how capability reasoning operates through collective rather than purely individual processes. Many IDSs cited SAC atrocities against fellow students as their primary motivation to flee.

IDS 10 explained the collective decision-making process:

We participated in protests. At that time, SAC cracked down on our comrades with weapons, which we witnessed with our own eyes. Because of that, we decided that we had to resist the armed enemy with arms. That's when we decided to leave our homes (IDS 10, December, 2024).

From a capability perspective, this narrative reveals how collective witnessing of capability violations (bodily integrity threats against network members) enhanced the group's collective capability to reason about appropriate responses.

IDS 4's reflection demonstrates how peer discussions function as social conversion factors that enhance individual capability reasoning:

In the early days, after reading some political books, I sensed that the direction of this revolution was not very promising. Another influencing factor was my friends. We have a small group that often discusses various issues, and through these discussions, we collectively decided that joining the armed revolution was the path we should take... I had the option to go to Thailand for my studies or to work as a crew member on a vessel. However, this path convinced me more than these alternatives (IDS 4, October, 2024).

The tension between individual safety and collective solidarity reveals sophisticated capability reasoning about relational versus individual capabilities. IDS 11's account:

My mom didn't want me to join the revolutionary army. She wanted me to hide in Myitkyina for a while. She had already made arrangements for my passport. But my friends were already here (in Kachin), so I came. If I had left for a foreign country, I would have had to start everything from scratch again. I'm also interested in participating in the armed revolution (IDS 11, November, 2024).

For some students, the loss of close friends during protests became a defining moment, cementing their decision to take up arms. IDS 6 recounted:

My friends would be the main reason for me to join the armed resistance. I wouldn't know where to go on my own, and if I were alone, I would be a bit anxious. My friend was killed by the police while protesting, which made us start questioning everything... That profoundly changed our perspective and led me to choose this path (IDS 6, October, 2024).

This demonstrates how peer commitment served as both an

emotional anchor and a political imperative, with friends providing practical support while reinforcing the collective nature of their struggle. The friend's death eliminated important social conversion factors (emotional support, practical guidance) while simultaneously reinforcing the group's collective capability, reasoning about the necessity of resistance.

Facilitating displacement through existing networks

Existing community networks play crucial roles in supporting displaced students by facilitating access to shelter, education, and safety. These networks provided material assistance (shelter, transportation, safety information) while functioning as social conversion factors that enabled continued capability development during displacement transitions. The existing networks proved instrumental in providing integrated conversion factor packages that enabled capability-preserving displacement rather than mere survival-focused flight. CBS 3 described how connections enabled initial escape:

When they (SAC) first came to search for me at home, I left for Karen by contacting my friends in ABSDF, telling them about my situation. I actually planned to flee to another country, but since I was able to contact my friends, I went to Pha-An and stayed in Brigade 7 (CBS 3, November, 2024).

For displaced students in Mae Sot, displacement journeys often involved navigating complex capabilities, including temporary stays in jungle areas for armed resistance training. Existing peer networks, particularly those formed by individuals who had fled earlier, played pivotal roles in shaping decisions and routes for others planning to escape.

CBS 5's experience illustrates the continued influence of security threats:

Before we arrived in Mae Sot, we stayed in Lay Kay Kaw in Karen State. We didn't plan to come to Mae Sot but to continue staying in IDP camps. But SAC

came searching for my mom even in the IDP camps, so we couldn't continue staying there and had to flee here (CBS 5, November, 2024).

The student's progression from IDP camps to Mae Sot demonstrates how network connections enabled adaptive strategies for preserving capability that responded to evolving threat environments. Violence exposure often served as a turning point. CBS 6 shared:

I participated in the protests and later chose to join the armed revolution. On March 13, 2021, Phone Maw Day, two students were killed on the streets during a military crackdown. One of them was taken to the hospital but denied treatment. The other was captured alive by soldiers and later returned dead, with his skull split open. That incident was my tipping point (CBS 6, November, 2024).

From a capabilities perspective, witnessing systematic violations of the most basic capabilities (life, bodily integrity, access to healthcare) served as a conversion factor that transformed the student's own capability priorities. However, when networks fell short due to isolation or lack of protection, students often made difficult decisions to cross borders. CBS 6 continued:

The problem for me was that I wasn't affiliated with any specific group, so I didn't have protection as a member. I began facing mental and physical difficulties, which made it impossible for me to continue with the armed groups... So, I eventually fled to Mae Sot in December 2023 (CBS 6, November, 2024).

CBS 8 described how community connections facilitated her path:

I left home to teach at an IDP camp... Then one day, my aunt asked if I wanted to continue my GED studies in Thailand. I said yes because I wanted to continue my university education. That's how I came to Mae Sot (CBS 8, November, 2024).

Structured educational networks, including interim schools established after the coup and migrant learning centers, serve as key support systems, offering educational continuity while fostering purpose and community among CDM students.

These testimonies demonstrate the multifaceted impact of support networks on displacement trajectories. From organizing resistance to facilitating survival abroad, peer and community relationships significantly shaped when, how, and where students moved. This influence highlights that displacement is not solely reactive to structural violence, but also shaped by social agency, collective identity, and relational infrastructures.

Across these three sections, displacement emerges as a process in which structural constraint and individual agency interact at every step. State repression set the conditions, but it did not determine the form the response took. Networks moved possible, but did not decide on their direction. Both shape each student's account.

Lived displacement experiences

According to UNHCR statistics as of 30 June 2025, the number of "refugees, people in refugee-like situations and asylum-seekers" has reached 1.5 million, with 81,000 asylum seekers in Thailand and 3.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (UNHCR, 2025). These figures reflect the State Administration Council's (SAC) systematic campaign of state repression, which has created conditions of precarity that force populations into displacement (Boano et al., 2024).

This dramatic decline reflects students' participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), in which they refused to legitimize SAC's control by boycotting classes. In response to this nonviolent resistance, the SAC has systematically targeted students through charges under Section 505(a) of the Penal Code, digital surveillance, home raids, personal and familial threats, arbitrary detention, and forced military conscription.

What happens after the decision to leave is its own story. The students in this study described displacement as a continuous

process rather than a single event, multiple movements between locations, repeated negotiations with armed groups and border guards, the slow building of provisional lives in places they had not chosen and could not stay.

Patterns of early displacement

Student displacement following the coup was characterized by immediate threats from State Administration Council (SAC) forces, who specifically targeted university students as symbols of resistance. The displacement process often began with surveillance and detention, creating a climate of persistent fear that forced students into continuous mobility. IDS 1, who had previously been detained, described her constant fear and sense of surveillance even after being released:

I was staying here and there after I was released from the detention center. Although I was released, the police car followed me around everywhere, so I had to flee to a village and stay there for a while. Even in that village, when I heard a car or a motorcycle, I thought they had come to capture me (IDS 1, October, 2024).

Her account reflects the lingering psychological toll of state surveillance and the uncertainty that forced her into a state of continuous mobility.

Another account further illustrates the creative strategies students employed to avoid detection during their displacement. IDS 4 recalled having to conceal his identity through appearance and behavior to pass through SAC checkpoints undetected:

We came here quite early, so there wasn't much of a problem. However, we have young students' faces, so it's obvious. We had to change our appearance. For example, I had long hair at that time, so I brought a guitar and pretended I was some singer or artist going to a show. I did that so I could answer questions at the checkpoints more easily (IDS 4, October, 2024).

In this case, serving as a musician became a tactic of resistance

and evasion. This performance of alternative identities reflects the subtle forms of resistance that allow marginalized groups to evade authoritarian control through deception and disguise. The strategy also reflects an acute awareness of how SAC forces perceived youth identities and how visual and behavioral cues could be used to either incriminate or escape scrutiny. Such experiences highlight the complex interplay between displacement, identity, and authoritarian surveillance.

The decisions they made often reflected a complex negotiation between safety, ideology, and lived reality. IDS 6 shared their story of early displacement and ongoing adaptation:

I left very early, around March 2021, while others were still protesting. At first, we went to Karen and only arrived here in Karenni about two years later. The SAC came searching for us, but we had already left. I don't think SAC regarded us as important individuals. There were some interrogations, but not to the extent that they were threatening to my family (IDS 6, October, 2024).

Crossing international borders does not guarantee safety for displaced students. Although many manage to escape the immediate threats posed by SAC forces, they often face new forms of vulnerability upon arrival, particularly due to their undocumented status. In some cases, students are arrested or interrogated by Thai authorities shortly after crossing the border. CBS-D from FGD 3, who fled in mid-2024, shared how displacement continued even after reaching Thai soil:

I left around July 2024, and there were heavy interrogations at that time. The SAC soldiers checked our phones thoroughly, even though we had cleared everything a week before. Other people on the same bus were arrested after their phones were checked. But I was arrested after I crossed the border by Thai police. They kept me for the whole day (CBS-D, November, 2024).

His account illustrates how, even after surviving SAC inspections

and avoiding immediate arrest inside Myanmar, students remain at risk once they reach Thailand. For undocumented migrants, particularly those fleeing political persecution, the act of crossing the border only shifts the terrain of vulnerability, from military repression to immigration enforcement. The fear of arrest is therefore not confined to Myanmar's borders but continues to shadow students as they attempt to rebuild their lives in exile.

Perilous journeys and strategic mobility

Both IDS and CBS undertook dangerous journeys marked by military checkpoints, surveillance, and the constant threat of arrest. These journeys required careful planning, local knowledge, and often involved life-threatening decisions. For internally displaced students, joining armed resistance groups became both a form of political participation and a survival strategy.

Some IDS chose to join armed resistance groups, often as a response to increasing threats and loss of safe spaces within urban areas. Their displacement journey, usually long and perilous, involved navigating military checkpoints and adopting creative disguises to avoid arrest. IDS 2 shared her experience:

Initially, we tried to continue staying inside the city. Four of my friends were captured, so we kept moving around, trying to hide. But then we received information from the family of a friend who had been imprisoned and forced to reveal details, so we decided it was time to leave... We split into groups of two and traveled using transport less likely to be searched, such as cargo trucks. The boys went undercover as truck conductors. SAC troops think PDFs are dirty and untidy, so the girls dressed nicely, wore makeup, and acted like they were going on a trip (IDS 2, October, 2024).

For some IDS, staying in Myanmar despite the constant threat from SAC forces was extremely difficult. In many cases, escaping was not just about finding safety; it became a matter of life and death. These students were forced to make unimaginable decisions while running for their lives, often with no clear or safe path ahead.

IDS 7 shared her journey of escape, illustrating the intensity of fear and the resilience required to survive:

When I first had to flee, wherever I ran, there were SAC troops that followed. I tried to move from village to village and stayed at monasteries, but wherever I went, they followed. At one point, there was nowhere left to run, SAC troops had surrounded us, and the Chindwin River blocked our path. The last thought I had at that time was that I would rather jump into the river than get captured by them (IDS 7, November, 2024).

This narrative not only underscores the life-threatening nature of displacement but also her willingness to risk death rather than fall into SAC custody, which reflects both the brutality of the regime and the strength of her resolve.

CBS faced additional challenges in crossing international borders without documentation. CBS-S from FGD 2, who crossed the border without documentation or preparation, recalled the uncertainty and fear she felt traveling alone through unfamiliar territory:

I didn't have a passport and thought I could just cross the border without it. My brother didn't explain it well, so I made it to Myawaddy, where they dropped me at the gate and told me to cross the bridge. I had never experienced anything like that before. There were so many people, some looked like drug addicts, and I thought I would be trafficked. I couldn't turn back, so I kept going, but I didn't know I had to cross by boat. I went through mud fields and had to stay in a stranger's bathroom. It was very chaotic, but I arrived here in the end. I felt so relieved when I finally got here (CBS-S, November, 2024).

Her experience reflects the disorientation that many young women face when crossing borders irregularly, without clear guidance or support. The fear of trafficking, uncertainty about the route, and lack of trusted networks all point to the high-risk nature of such

displacement. Yet her relief upon arrival highlights the emotional toll and the fragile sense of arrival and safety that follows.

CBS-A, from FGD 2, described an even more traumatic journey filled with physical illness, conflict-related delays, and graphic encounters with violence:

I was vomiting the whole way.... For the first time in my life, I had to sleep at a roadside restaurant. While I was eating, I went outside and saw a motorcycle accident; the victim's brain matter landed right in front of me... We then paid an agent to cross the river on foot. I couldn't swim, and I lost my shoes. At one point, a car light appeared, and we were told to duck. My phone rang, and the agent shouted that we'd be shot if the soldiers found us (CBS-A, November, 2024).

Her account powerfully illustrates the physical and psychological trauma of external displacement, where delays due to armed conflict, dangerous terrain, and the threat of military violence converge into a profoundly distressing experience. The image of ducking into the dark to avoid detection while crossing a river by foot to cross a border, without knowing how to swim, paints a stark picture of what is often an invisible journey for many displaced students.

For many CBS, the journey across the border was not only physically exhausting but also legally and emotionally precarious. Those who traveled without documentation often had to rely on unconventional and unsafe means of transportation, further exposing them to risk, fear, and discomfort.

CBS-S from FGD 4, who crossed into Thailand with his family, recalled the challenges of traveling in secrecy and discomfort:

Yes, there were many checkpoints along the way. And since I came here illegally, it was so difficult. Our whole family came here on the back of a delivery truck, in the cargo section with no window. We came at night with our luggage, so it was really hard (CBS-S, November, 2024).

His story highlights how families on the run must often conceal themselves in enclosed cargo vehicles, enduring cramped, airless conditions to avoid detection. Traveling at night, hidden in the back of a delivery truck, speaks to the lengths displaced people must go to evade border controls and checkpoint scrutiny.

Beyond the physical risks of displacement, many students also experienced a shift in their relationship with everyday activities, especially travel. What once felt ordinary became a source of fear, as militarized checkpoints, surveillance, and uncertainty reshaped their sense of freedom and safety. CBS 10: how his love of travel was replaced with fear, and how he masked his displacement by pretending to be a tourist:

There were so many checkpoints. I used to love traveling, but I became afraid to go out. When I fled to Kachin (initially to join armed resistance), I pretended I was traveling legally. When I arrived in Mae Sot, there was tension due to the Aung Zay Ya campaigns in early April. The SAC soldiers didn't even dare to wear their uniforms. I was lucky as they didn't check me (CBS 10, November, 2024).

This story reflects how the crossing of the border was shaped not only by planning but also by political timing and sheer luck, highlighting the fragility of displaced students' safety even after they appear to have reached their destination.

Adaptation and transformation in new environments

Arrival at armed resistance groups, IDP camps, or across the border into Mae Sot did not always mark the end of the struggle for many displaced students. Instead, it marked the beginning of a new and often difficult adjustment to unfamiliar environments, living conditions, strict organizational structures, and physical demands that stood in stark contrast to their previous lives. IDS 2 also reflected on the varied challenges faced by young recruits, noting how their background and prior life experiences profoundly influenced their ability to adapt.

When we arrived in the PDFs, everyone had different levels of difficulty depending on their upbringing and family backgrounds. Some kids never had to do anything at home. They had a tough time in the battalion, from having headaches to crossing rivers and moving through jungles in complete darkness. Most of us who joined the PDFs were around 20 years old. Many had little or no work experience in their own careers. So, it's not just me, but everyone has to go through these things. We had to adapt to the new environment. Some had health problems, others struggled with socializing. Some were used to only having their close friends back home, and now they're in a structured organization where they can't keep up with all the rules. There are a lot of difficulties like that (IDS 2, October, 2024).

Importantly, fleeing to join armed resistance does not always translate into safety or sustainability, particularly for students from academic backgrounds who suddenly find themselves in militarized environments. Despite this, many continued to navigate their paths with determination, striking a balance between personal survival and political commitment.

Beyond the emotional and logistical struggles of fleeing, displacement often forced young students into living conditions that were radically different from their pre-coup lives. Many came from relatively comfortable, urban, or family-supported backgrounds and suddenly found themselves in remote areas with limited access to food, water, shelter, or basic hygiene. The adjustment to such harsh conditions was both physically and psychologically challenging.

IDS 6 also shared a candid account of the drastic shift in lifestyle and the complex realities he had to endure:

I was very fat at that time, weighing over 200 pounds, but now I'm very thin. When we first arrived in Karen, there was nothing to eat. No transportation either, and we had to walk everywhere. The water

was very scarce, too... On the first day in Karen, they served us rat curry. I could even see the rat's tail in the bowl. The aunty who brought us there warned us that we might even have to drink our own urine. Up to now, I've tasted cow's pee, but not my own yet (IDS 6, October, 2024).

His story highlights the intense bodily and emotional adaptation that young people undergo when they enter conflict zones. The shift from being cared for at home to struggling for survival in an armed territory underscores the deep rupture caused by displacement. Humor, resilience, and trauma are intertwined in his reflection, demonstrating how students were forced to mature rapidly, recalibrate their expectations, and survive in unpredictable environments.

What these IDS narratives share is a refusal to read displacement as straightforward loss. Many students describe the move into PDF or EAO territory as a political ascent rather than a political defeat, the place where their resistance became most concrete, even when it cost them safety, education, and family connections.

CBS describes a different texture of displacement: the legal precariousness of being undocumented, the slow work of building lives in a country whose state apparatus was more often an obstacle than a resource. Many had not intended to stay long. The duration of their displacement, however, has lengthened with each passing year of the conflict.

The gift of moving and resilience

CDM undergraduate students have experienced profound disruption in their lives, both as a direct consequence of state repression and because of their commitments. Yet, amidst displacement, insecurity, and the disruptions of formal education systems, many of these students have shown remarkable adaptability and resilience, embodying what scholars term forced displacement resilience, which is the capacity to withstand, adapt to, and recover from involuntary uprooting while maintaining agency and hope for the future (Sustainability Directory, 2025).

Many students in this study describe their displacement as the unexpected condition under which something else became possible: forms of learning, organizing, and political work that would not otherwise have occurred. Becker's (2022) phrase "the gift of moving" captures this without sentimentalizing it. The gift, where it appears, is not a compensation for what has been lost. It is a recognition that displacement is also a condition under which lives continue. Hedström's (2025) work on militarized social reproduction in Kachinland is also relevant: the resistance work that displacement makes possible depends largely on female domestic and care labor in safe houses, kitchens, and clandestine networks, which is rarely visible in the male-fronted accounts of armed struggle.

Continuing pursuits

The students' narratives reveal displacement as a site of transformative learning rather than merely disruption. Social movement learning theory provides crucial insights into how political movements become laboratories of learning (Kutan & Çelik, 2024) where participants develop critical consciousness through active, reflective engagement. For some students, although displacement has disrupted their formal education, it has also opened alternative pathways that challenge conventional educational models. The concept of alternative education in displacement contexts encompasses flexible, non-formal programs that respond to the specific needs of displaced learners. IDS 8 reflected on how displacement had fundamentally altered his educational trajectory and dreams, yet he continues to find meaning and learning through alternative paths:

In terms of education, I can no longer dream like I used to. I've been away from formal schooling for too long. But now, I'm enrolled in what I call the 'university of life.' I've been learning about human rights, democracy, and issues that truly matter to me. Even though I can't pursue the dreams I once had, I'm still learning, just in different ways..... I don't want to receive a formal graduation certificate anymore, but I'll keep learning through alternative platforms and vocational skills (IDS 8, November, 2024).

However, not all students' experiences, even in the same displacement scenarios, are the same. IDS 7 shared how, due to her specific role in the armed forces, she retained partial access to the internet, allowing her to continue learning in limited ways:

When I joined the armed forces, my role allowed some internet access, although there are restrictions. Because of that, I was able to continue learning. I even managed to write a paper last year. What I've realized is that I'm someone who was displaced from my home, and if I had stopped learning just because I couldn't continue formal education, that chapter of my life would have been closed. So, while fulfilling my duties as a revolutionary, I also kept learning in my free time. That means I'm not completely cut off from education (IDS 7, November, 2024).

This narrative highlights a vital nuance. While displacement often creates barriers to education, individual circumstances and agency can enable partial continuity. The experiences of IDS 7 illustrate how agency operates within structural constraints, consistent with scholarship on refugee decision-making that emphasizes strategic navigation of limited options (Kavak et al., 2024). It also shows that displacement is not linear; it is sometimes layered and unequal.

For other students, displacement offered an unexpected turning point. CBS-A from FGD 2 described her initial reluctance to leave Yangon University after the coup and her growing realization in Mae Sot that alternative forms of education could offer something more aligned with her aspirations:

When I first thought about it after the coup, I knew that attending university was something I shouldn't continue doing. I didn't think of it as a huge impact on my life because I felt that I would be able to go back to school soon enough. When I arrived here in Mae Sot, I still thought I would go back to Yangon University one day. But here, I get to learn the type of education I've always wanted, a better education. The turning point was when I learned more and discovered my passion. So, it's for the better (CBS-A, November, 2024).

This reflection captures the duality that many individuals experience: the sorrow of leaving behind familiar institutions and the empowerment of finding an education that resonates with their deeper interests.

Similarly, CBS-S from FGD 2 echoed these sentiments, describing her transformation as a personal awakening:

It's something good out of all the bad things. When I arrived here, my eyes were opened, my thinking changed, and personally, I've changed for the better. Although I don't think it's a huge transition yet, I feel like my life is starting to transition in a better way. I thought this was just a border town with nothing here and worse, but actually, there are more opportunities here (CBS-S, November, 2024).

These testimonies reveal that the experience of displacement is not solely defined by loss or deprivation, as Becker (2022) claims. For many students, relocation has been a gateway to self-discovery, resilience, and a renewed sense of engagement with education. It is in these borderlands, often perceived as margins, that CBS has found space to reflect, redefine its goals, and reshape its futures on its terms.

For some CBS, life in Mae Sot has become more than just a temporary pause in their education; it has also become a platform for giving back. These students are not only navigating their challenges as displaced individuals but are also actively supporting others. Their stories reflect a powerful sense of agency, resilience, and unwavering commitment to the broader cause they stand for. These students are not simply surviving displacement; they are transforming every experience into an opportunity.

CBS-3 shared her experience working with a grassroots initiative in Mae Sot:

I live with a friend and two other people. They have been helping people in Mae Sot who are having difficulty with medical supplies and food. Now, we have a mobile clinic called STSO, Southern Territory

Supporting Organization. All these years, we haven't asked for any donations. I'm now working with them, helping keep patient records, taking temperatures and oxygen levels for patients, and noting the medicine lists at home (CBS-3, November, 2024).

Her involvement in the STSO mobile clinic shows a profound sense of civic responsibility that extends beyond personal survival, even in displacement. Such experiences demonstrate that, for these youth, education is not only formal or institutional but also deeply intertwined with their lived experiences, compassion, and practice. This contradicts dominant narratives that position displaced populations as dependent recipients of aid, instead highlighting their roles as active agents in community development (Mayer & Tran, 2022).

Halted futures and structural constraints

However, gaining opportunities and continuing life in displacement do not mean romanticizing the constraints and limitations students experience in real life. Not all students envision returning to formal education. While many students demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability, others face more severe constraints that limit their transformative potential. For some, displacement has reshaped their life priorities, leading to a focus on activism and survival rather than academic advancement. IDS 9 expressed this shift clearly:

I don't think I will continue my education because I've been away from classes for too long. I'm still going to continue my learning through other alternative ways. But I have to focus on building my career from scratch. But I'm 100% sure that I'm going to keep working for the revolution. Revolution is priority No. 1 (IDS 9, November, 2024).

While many students strive to find meaning and growth in exile, life in displacement is not always characterized by resilience and optimism. Students often face severe discouragement due to the SAC's repression, which includes restrictions on basic needs and

targeted persecution of CDM students. IDS 4, who joined an armed resistance group, reflected on these challenges:

During this time, learning has become difficult. Even for us in the armed resistance groups, we can only continue learning through YouTube and such. We're completely cut off from other sorts of learning. Especially now that we're part of the revolutionary forces, we don't get access to the internet most of the time. Life in these armed forces is more difficult. For those who are not in these forces but were forcibly displaced, their learning might also be halted (IDS 4, October, 2024).

This testimony highlights the sharp contrast between the ideals of resilience and the structural limitations faced on the ground. While alternative forms of education exist, they are not always accessible, especially for those in remote, militarized, or restricted areas. The lack of connectivity, institutional support, and basic security serves as a stark reminder that resilience is not limitless and that the conditions of forced displacement often push young people to the margins of both education and opportunity.

IDS 3 also reflected on how her life has dramatically shifted since displacement and joining the armed resistance. Her story reflects how the trajectory of student life can be derailed, not just logistically but emotionally and psychologically, as dreams once rooted in education give way to survival and armed struggle:

Now, the things I'm facing and the life I'm living are totally different from my expectations. Starting from participating as a CDM student to resisting the military, and to this day, it's totally different. Honestly, I did try to apply for scholarships to go abroad while my comrades were attending training... I received a scholarship, but didn't go in the end. My life changed from holding a pen to holding a weapon (IDS 3, October, 2024).

This intense personal account captures the emotional toll of displacement and militarization on young students. While resilience remains, it coexists with a sense of loss and divergence

from previously envisioned futures and familiar livelihoods. IDS 3's experience highlights a critical nuance in the broader theme of resistance: the personal cost of staying committed to the revolution can be the abandonment of one's educational and professional aspirations. This narrative illustrates what the literature on forced displacement identifies as the tension between survival strategies and long-term development goals (White & Van der Boor, 2021).

One unique aspect of the CBS displacement experience is that sometimes these displaced students do not wish to be integrated into Thai society, nor do they hope to relocate to third countries. Their reasons for fleeing to Mae Sot originally were to be close to Myanmar, to be near their communities and families, and to continue participating in revolutionary activities. They hope that opportunities will be available to them in their displacement, such as certified online courses. Although there are initiatives by the interim organization on the Myanmar side, specifically from pro-revolutionary groups, they are not always sufficiently qualified or certified to continue their education or pursue their careers. They desire opportunities even in displacement.

The forced displacement experiences of CDM undergraduate students reveal how displacement, initially life-threatening and disruptive, can also become a generative space that fosters new ways of learning, self-discovery, and civic engagement. Rather than viewing undergraduate students' forced displacement solely through a lens of loss, students' narratives highlight how education is reimaged through everyday acts of adaptation and contribution. Moreover, these students challenge dominant perceptions of displaced populations as passive or dependent. Instead, they emerge as active agents shaping their futures and those of their communities, whether by participating in grassroots health networks, enrolling in interim academic programs, or cultivating new aspirations in unfamiliar environments. These findings invite a broader reconceptualization of displacement as a process continuously being recreated, particularly in this context, by youths on the move.

Displacement, though deeply challenging, has also created unexpected opportunities for both groups of students. Many have accessed alternative forms of education, developed new skills, and

discovered personal resilience in the face of adversity. The experience has fostered civic engagement, with students participating in grassroots initiatives and building supportive networks in their new environments. By staying close to their communities and the movement for change, these students demonstrate that displacement can be not only a story of loss, but also a space for growth, learning, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Therefore, the forced displacement of CDM undergraduate students in Myanmar is a complex and inherently political phenomenon that goes beyond reductive narratives of victimhood. Whether displaced internally or across borders, their journeys sometimes open unexpected opportunities, changing political awareness, and a lasting dedication to CDM and the revolutionary cause. Despite many disruptions to their education and personal lives, many students demonstrate resilience by pursuing alternative forms of learning, engaging in grassroots initiatives, and sustaining their involvement in the movement. Rather than interpreting displacement solely as loss or enforced stasis, these students' narratives encourage us to consider the "gift of moving," acknowledging how forced mobility may open unforeseen spaces for learning, identity reconfiguration, and collective agency. This "gift of moving" is not romanticized but recognized as carrying dual potential. The hardship of uprooting and loss persists, yet, as students' stories show, movement also generates where mutually enriching encounters, solidarity networks, and alternative educational platforms emerge. In sum, the story of CDM undergraduate students' displacement in Myanmar underscores the need to reconceptualize forced migration as more than a story of loss. By foregrounding the "gift of moving," we recognize that even amidst adversity, mobility can be a source of learning, transformation, and new forms of political and civic agency. In the borderlands of Mae Sot and within resistance networks, these students show that, while displacement is deeply challenging, it is also a continual process of social and personal re-making, a ground for the emergence of new subjectivities, solidarities, and imaginations for a democratic future.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the complex phenomenon of forced displacement among CDM undergraduate students in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup, revealing how forced displacement operates not just as a consequence of state repression but as an active form of resistance in this context. The narratives of CDM undergraduate students show that, although their displacement undoubtedly resulted from SAC repression, individual choices and perceptions shape their decisions to be displaced. These stories, therefore, help us understand why they choose to be displaced. Using the lens of the capability approach and social capital, the findings challenge traditional binary distinctions between "forced" and "voluntary" displacement and instead highlight displacement as a form of exercising agency within the margin of choice and consciously rejecting unacceptable alternatives. The book highlights that, when examining forced displacement, the causes and drivers may not be the only factors to consider; by also focusing on individuals' agency, the study contributes to the discussion of the forced displacement literature in the global south and why individuals move from South to South.

The central argument advanced in this chapter is that displacement among CDM-undergraduate students constitutes seeing "displacement as resistance", representing a deliberate political act that extends beyond passive victimhood to encompass strategic agency, value-driven decision-making, and continued participation in the collective movement. Students' decisions to leave home even when forced by SAC repression, reject collaboration with SAC-controlled institutions, and sustaining resistance movements demonstrate what Sen terms "reasoned agency" (Garcés Velástegui, 2020) which in the case of CDM-undergraduate students are choices that prioritize core capabilities such as political participation, practical reason, and affiliation with democratic communities over material security or conventional stability. The narratives indicate that while students acknowledge SAC's repression that caused them to be forcibly displaced, they also highlight their deliberate and strategic decision-making, suggesting that displacement in their context is experienced as both a reactive and agentic process. By refusing to normalize oppression, students exercise what Butler

(2020) describes as a politics of refusal, that is simultaneously individual and collective, ethical and strategic.

Students reject safer alternatives such as remaining enrolled in SAC-controlled universities, accepting employment under repressive control, or disengaging from politics, revealing their active choices to preserve the core capabilities they value most. Their displacement decisions demonstrate what Kabeer (1995) terms thin agency: intentional decision-making within severely constrained environments that nonetheless reflects meaningful choice and strategic thinking. Students consistently prioritized capability preservation over material restoration, choosing displacement that allowed them to maintain their political participation, practical reason, and affiliation with resistance communities, even when these choices imposed educational, economic, and personal costs. The systematic analysis of their "rejected alternatives" reveals how displacement operates as both a capability constraint imposed by state repression and a capability exercise by students themselves.

Additionally, the book's focus on social capital and support networks in displacement processes reveals how peer networks function not only as external support but also as fundamental conversion factors that enable students to transform available resources into actual capabilities for valued living. Students' displacement decisions are found to emerge through collective decision-making within resistance networks, alongside individual calculations, demonstrating how agency operates through social relationships and shared collective identities. These support networks helped students continue their participation in CDM and resistance, provide necessary information along displacement journeys, and provide sustained resistance in displaced locations. The findings in this chapter represent displacement as involving "constrained choice" exercised through social networks that provide emotional support, practical resources, and collective purpose. The existing networks served as sites for sustaining commitment to the movement despite the costs of displacement.

Moreover, the analysis of lived displacement experiences reveals that displacement is not a singular movement but an ongoing process of moving from one place to another, negotiating with risks,

identity, survival, and political commitment. Both internally displaced students and those who crossed borders faced continuous threats, adaptation challenges, and identity transformations that extended far beyond initial drivers of flight. The experiences of students displaced within Myanmar and those in Mae Sot demonstrate how displacement continues to evolve even after reaching intended destinations, as arriving in those locations doesn't always mean safety. Students faced new forms of vulnerability, adaptation challenges, and ongoing risks that require continuous strategic thinking and navigation of safety. Their narratives challenge the linear understanding of displacement as movement from danger to safety, from point A to B, and instead reveal it as a complex, ongoing negotiation of multiple risks and opportunities.

Despite the disruptions and losses involved in displacement, students' narratives also reveal what Becker (2022) terms "the gift of moving," which are the unexpected opportunities for personal transformation, political development, and community building that emerge through forced displacement. Students accessed alternative forms of education, such as online learning, at interim schools, or by learning vocational skills; developed new skill sets; discovered personal goals and resilience; and contributed to grassroots initiatives in their newly displaced environments. Many students described displacement as opening their eyes, changing their thinking, and creating growth opportunities that they had not previously imagined. Border towns like Mae Sot became sites not only of refuge but of continued resistance, community rebuilding, and proximity to the movement inside Myanmar. However, pinpointing these opportunities doesn't mean romanticizing displacement, as it has indeed imposed structural constraints that limit transformative potential for many students. Some have faced educational disruption, economic precarity, family separation, and psychological trauma that severely limited their opportunities for growth and development. The analysis reflects displacement as carrying dual potential, generating both hardship and possibility, loss and transformation.

This chapter makes several key theoretical contributions to the literature on forced displacement. First, this chapter reconceptualizes forced migration from passive victimhood to active agency. Second,

it demonstrates how the capability approach can reflect the sophisticated reasoning processes involved in displacement decisions and the strategic navigation of conversion factors by displaced students. Third, it demonstrates how the focus on network relationships in social capital theory gains greater analytical clarity, as these support networks function as conversion factors that facilitate different forms of capability achievement. The experiences of CDM undergraduate students illustrate displacement as a deep political process, functioning both as a state-imposed capability restriction and as a strategic response actively employed by the students. Most fundamentally, these students' experiences illustrate that displacement does not mark the collapse of capability but serves as a space where new expressions of resistance, identity, and capability preservation are continuously shaped. By refusing to legitimize authoritarian rule and making difficult, value-driven choices about education, work, and mobility, they assert themselves as active agents. Thus, the chapter concludes that understanding displacement as resistance requires recognizing both the severe constraints imposed by SAC repression and the complex strategies by which students maintain agency, reject alternatives, preserve valued capabilities, and continue participating in the broader political movement.

5

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN INTERNALLY DISPLACED AND CROSS-BORDER DISPLACED STUDENTS

Introduction

What does the comparison between students who stayed and students who left actually show? This chapter sets the IDS and CBS accounts side by side, looking for the patterns that hold across both groups and the points where their experiences diverge.

The starting point is shared: both groups were forced from their homes by the same antagonist, the SAC. Whether internal or cross-border, displacement disrupts the SAC's capacity to project authority over the people it claims to govern. What follows from that shared starting point, however, varies considerably.

This comparison matters because it tests the book's central claim against the sharp differences between the two groups. If displacement among CDM students is a form of resistance and not simply the end of it, the argument has to hold both for those who stayed inside Myanmar and for those who crossed into Thailand, even though the conditions they now live under could hardly be more different. Reading the two trajectories together shows where the claim holds most clearly and where the costs of resistance fall most heavily. It also clarifies what the two groups continue to share once the moment of flight has passed: a refusal to be governed by the SAC, and a determination to keep the movement alive from wherever they have ended up.

Forced displacement: experiences and dynamics of IDS and CBS

The comparison spans four dimensions: the catalysts that drove the decision to leave; the forms of resistance that occurred once people were displaced; the capability outcomes, what people could and could not do after they moved; and the trajectories of displacement itself, which differ markedly across groups.

Shared catalysts and decision-making processes

Both groups described the same catalysts: SAC violence, surveillance, loss of livable conditions, and a moral refusal to comply. What sets them apart is not what triggered the decision but what they could do with it. Some had networks of contacts in border zones; some had family members who could help them leave; some did not.

In this context, the most immediate threats that students face are to their safety and well-being. Almost every student experienced violence by SAC, destruction of their everyday livelihoods, and threats to their lives in their homes. Both students actively participate in protests, boycotts, and other forms of resistance. Both groups are collectively targeted, whether due to family members' activism, their association with resistance networks, or their participation in CDM. The most significant catalyst for both groups was witnessing fellow students killed during peaceful protests, which fundamentally altered their assessment of remaining in their original locations.

IDS 10 shared, "SAC cracked down on our comrades with weapons, which we witnessed with our own eyes". Both IDS and CBS demonstrate their deliberate rejection of SAC-controlled institutions and normalization of oppression in everyday lives. As IDS 13 shared, "I didn't want to live a life with so many limitations".

This conscious rejection of available alternatives demonstrates capability reasoning. CDM undergraduate students can be seen prioritizing resistance and democratic values over material security. Many students can be seen exercising their thin agency within severely constrained environments. They employ sophisticated evaluation to determine which capabilities they valued most, demonstrating capability reasoning.

Seeing displacement as resistance through diverse forms

Both groups continued to participate in resistance activities, adapting their strategies to their geographical contexts, thereby demonstrating the continuity of their political commitment across displacement.

The IDS in this study remained inside Myanmar after their initial displacement. Many moved into ethnic-controlled territories, Karen, Karenni, Kachin, parts of Sagaing, where they joined PDFs, took on roles in NUG-affiliated administrations, or worked with local resistance organizations. Their resistance has been continuous and embodied; in some cases, lethal. Brenner's (2019) account of the internal politics of Myanmar's armed organizations, particularly his analysis of how legitimacy is captured and lost within revolutionary movements, frames the trajectories of those who joined PDFs or aligned EAOs.

The CBS, by contrast, is now in Mae Sot. They moved across the border in 2021 or 2022, often without papers, and have built their political work in the legal gray zones of Thai border governance: as undocumented students in informal schools, as fundraisers for those still inside, as participants in cross-border education and humanitarian networks.

These divergent forms map onto the distinction between civil and uncivil disobedience developed earlier in the book. The IDS who took up arms or joined PDF and EAO structures moved toward the uncivil end of that spectrum, where resistance becomes coercive and at times lethal. The CBS who ran informal schools and sustained cross-border fundraising and education networks stayed closer to civil forms of disobedience, though now practiced from outside the state they oppose. The difference is one of method rather than of commitment. Both groups continued to act against the SAC, and both understood that continued action as part of the same revolution.

Diverse capability outcomes and support networks

Seen through the capability approach, the two groups have preserved different capabilities. IDS retained a closer connection to the political community for which they had been organizing,

but at high cost to safety and education. CBS retained access to formal education and physical safety, but at the cost of distance from the immediate fight.

Their support networks reflect those different positions. For IDS, networks run through ethnic armed organizations, PDF command structures, NUG affiliates, and local civil society in territories outside SAC control. For CBS, networks run through Mae Sot's civil society infrastructure: long-standing NGOs, education initiatives, the Burmese diaspora in Thailand, and donors based in Bangkok and abroad. Both kinds of networks have made resistance possible. Neither has made it safe.

Diverse displacement trajectories

After arrival, both groups have had to adapt. For IDS, that has meant learning to live in jungle bases or makeshift camps, often without reliable food, electricity, or medical care. For CBS, it has meant the slower precariousness of the undocumented: navigating Thai immigration enforcement, paying for housing without legal work, building lives in a country whose government has its own complicated relationship to the SAC. Mae Sot's long-standing role as a site of Burmese migrant labor, mapped by Campbell (2018) and Tangseefa (2007), shapes the legal and infrastructural terrain CBS students enter; the temporality they inhabit there resembles what Jansen (2015) calls the Meantime, life suspended between a foreclosed past and a federal democratic future that does not arrive.

Conclusion

What this comparison shows is that, for CDM students, displacement is shaped at every step by political choice. The choice to leave was political. The decision of where to go, into ethnic-controlled areas or across the border, was a political choice. The forms of resistance that followed were political choices.

IDS chose a radical break with civilian life: they took up arms or moved into territories where the SAC could not reach them. CBS chose a different but equally consequential break: they crossed an international border to keep the movement alive from outside.

The choices look different from each other, but they share the same underlying refusal.

Forced displacement, on this account, is not defined only by what people are escaping from. It is also defined by what they are moving towards: the political community they continue to claim, the kinds of action they continue to take, and the futures they continue to imagine. The students in this study did not stop being political actors upon leaving. They became political actors of a different kind.

6

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Man is a social animal, and life is not easy for him when social ties are cut off. Moral standards are much easier to maintain within the texture of a society. Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political, and legal status is completely confused. Lacking the courage to fight for a change in our social and legal status, we have decided, instead, so many of us, to try a change of identity. And this curious behavior makes matters much worse. The confusion in which we live is partly our own work (Arendt, 1943).

Arendt's 1943 essay "We Refugees" argued that refugees confront a choice: to obscure their displacement and try to assimilate as quickly as possible, or to acknowledge it and build a politics around what has been lost. The students in this study sit closer to the second position. They have not tried to forget that they were forced to leave; they have tried to make their leaving mean something.

Key findings

Three findings carry the weight of the book. First, CDM students were not passive victims of displacement; they were active

participants in the politics that produced it, and they continued that politics from new locations. Second, the line between civil and uncivil disobedience, between principled noncooperation and the use of force, turned out to be far more porous in practice than the theoretical literature treats it. Third, the displaced students sustained a shared collective identity across very different terrains, and that identity, more than any single tactic, is what kept the movement going. Together, these findings point toward what Hage (2015) terms *alter-politics*: not only opposition to the SAC, but also construction in miniature of an alternative polity through parallel education, parallel administration, and the distributed work of the National Unity Government in exile.

These findings have implications for how humanitarian and policy actors read displaced populations. Treating displaced students as passive recipients of aid, rather than as political actors who continue to make political decisions, misreads what displacement is, in this case, doing.

“Displacement as resistance” is the analytical wager of this book. It does not romanticize displacement: the costs to students, in education, family ties, safety, and futures, have been real and ongoing. It does insist, though, that the choice to leave was political, made under coercion but made nonetheless, and that it deserves the same analytical attention we would give to any other form of organized refusal.

Theoretical contributions

Contribution to the new social movement theory and civil disobedience.

The book contributes to social movement and civil disobedience scholarship in three ways. The first concerns how the line between civil and uncivil disobedience holds up in practice. CDM in Myanmar carries both classical and contested marks of civil disobedience. It is conscientious, public, and grounded in moral claims about the regime’s illegitimacy. But under sustained repression, it has also moved into terrain that classical theory

excludes: covert organizing, support for armed resistance, and forms of action that are no longer nonviolent in any straightforward sense. The students did not abandon the moral claims that brought them into CDM. They reinterpreted what those claims required of them.

A key theoretical innovation is the integration of uncivil disobedience into the Myanmar context among undergraduate students. The book argues that, as the SAC's repression intensified, students' shift from peaceful protest to armed resistance can be understood through the lens of "uncivil disobedience (incivility within disobedience)". Drawing on the work of philosophers such as Candice Delmas (2018, 2020) and Kimberley Brownlee (2012), the study justifies uncivil disobedience among undergraduate student participants in CDM. When nonviolent means are met with extreme violence, and all other avenues for dissent are closed, the use of coercive tactics becomes a morally and politically defensible form of resistance.

Therefore, CDM in the aftermath of the 2021 military coup and the specific context of CDM among undergraduate students are understood with greater flexibility and nuance, acknowledging its potential to disrupt SAC mechanisms and its role in challenging systemic injustices in this diverse, non-ideal political landscape. With such understanding, students expressed their resistance through participation in both civil and uncivil ways, exercising both nonviolent and coercive forms.

The second contribution concerns new social movement theory. NSM accounts emphasize collective identity formation in stable contexts: workplaces, public spaces, and organizational networks. Under authoritarian repression, those settings collapse. What this study shows is that identity can be sustained, even strengthened, precisely under conditions where the public sphere has been closed off, sustained instead through encrypted channels, dispersed networks, and the slow work of mutual recognition across border zones.

Third, the book contributes to forced displacement studies by foregrounding the political agency of displaced people themselves, an emphasis that runs through critical refugee studies but remains underdeveloped in mainstream displacement scholarship.

Contribution to forced displacement literature

Drawing on Eleanor Paynter's (2025) emphasis on agency within displacement contexts, this study includes the concept of "rejected alternatives," also extending from the capability approach, as a key mechanism through which displaced persons exercise agency. Supporting this notion, this book argues that when examining displacement, the "agency" of individuals should not be neglected (Paynter, 2025). This framework helps explain why displaced individuals sometimes choose suboptimal conditions (such as harsh living conditions in ethnic-controlled territories) over more comfortable alternatives that compromise their political identity.

Where conventional accounts read agency in displacement primarily through improvements in material conditions, this study insists on a different register: agency expressed through political refusal and continued resistance, even as material conditions worsen.

The critical refugee studies collective advocates for community-engaged scholarship that centers refugee voices and experiences, moving beyond deficit-based approaches. This perspective holds that refugee storytelling enables the production of new forms of knowledge, emphasizing the importance of displaced people's interpretations of their experiences. Unlike traditional displacement narratives that cast displaced individuals as victims, this book highlights their voices and interpretations of their experiences of displacement.

Geographical boundaries primarily define the identities of undergraduate students in this study, although state-imposed territorial boundaries should not be the sole basis for characterizing displacement; one must, however, acknowledge their existence. Therefore, CDM students in this study who reside within Myanmar's borders at the time of the interviews are referred to as "Internally Displaced Students (IDS)". On the other hand, CDM students who are geographically located outside Myanmar's borders, particularly in Mae Sot, are referred to as "Cross-Border Students (CBS)", as their identities cannot be accurately classified as either refugees or migrants. They are residing outside of the Myanmar border, yet they don't seek any protection as refugees,

nor are they looking forward to staying in Thailand in the long term as migrants. They intend to remain close to Myanmar's territory to continue their activism and participation in CDM and the revolution, and to maintain their social ties, such as with family and friends. These findings advance critical refugee studies by providing concrete evidence for how displaced people actively resist being positioned as passive victims, instead asserting their political subjectivity even within contexts of severe constraint.

Across the comparison between IDS and CBS, displacement emerges not as a fixed status to be assigned but as a condition that students live within and against. This reframing, from displacement as classification to displacement as a continuing political condition, is the key empirical contribution that runs through the case material.

Limitations

Three limitations frame this work. The study focuses on undergraduate students participating in CDM after the 2021 coup; it does not speak directly to graduate students, faculty, or other categories of CDM participants whose displacement trajectories may have followed different patterns. Data collection concluded in March 2025, before some of the most significant escalations of the conflict. And the security context constrained both the methods available and the range of voices the study could responsibly include.

The role of external support networks, international solidarity organizations, diaspora networks, and donors is treated only obliquely; a fuller account of those infrastructures would be a useful complement. Comparative work that situates Myanmar student resistance within broader regional and global histories, as well as the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, the 2019 Hong Kong protests, and the 2014 Thai student movement, remains to be done. Finally, future researchers should explore innovative methodological approaches to navigate security constraints while expanding analytical depth, potentially through collaborative research models that engage displaced Myanmar students as co-researchers rather than solely as research subjects.

Future research directions

Longitudinal work that follows individual CDM students over time would deepen what this study can only sketch in cross-section: how participants reinterpret their own decisions, what kinds of political identifications survive prolonged displacement, and what kinds of futures students who have been out of formal education for five years or more end up building.

Studies of how digital technologies and social media platforms have sustained CDM organization across border zones would also extend this account, particularly given how central encrypted communication has been to the movement's survival.

Conclusion & recommendations

What this book has tried to do is take seriously what 29 displaced students said about why they left and what they continued to do once they were gone. Their accounts do not resolve into a single political theory. Taken together, they do demand that displacement not be read as the end of agency but as its continuation under different conditions. Lall and Okamoto (2024) have recently mapped the broader landscape of student involvement in Myanmar's Spring Revolution; what this book adds is the comparative ethnography of internal and cross-border trajectories, with the textural attention that Ortner (1995) argues resistance studies have too often been willing to forgo.

The integration of civil and uncivil disobedience theories reveals how moral legitimacy can be maintained across a spectrum of resistance tactics in the face of extreme state violence. Rather than viewing the evolution from nonviolent to armed resistance as a moral compromise, this study shows how such tactical adaptation can represent a deepening of ethical commitment to justice and democratic values. Moreover, this study highlights undergraduate students as active participants in the CDM in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup, positioning them as important figures in the resistance and the revolution.

This study ultimately demonstrates that understanding displacement requires recognizing the political agency of displaced people and the multiple meanings they assign to their mobility. CDM undergraduate students' experiences reveal displacement not as a mere consequence of political violence but as a form of resistance that preserves democratic possibilities for Myanmar's future. The students' commitment to maintaining their political identity while navigating displacement challenges both academic theories that treat displacement as victimization and policy frameworks that prioritize assimilation over political agency. Their stories demonstrate that sustainable solutions to political displacement must acknowledge and support its political dimensions rather than seek to depoliticize displaced persons.

The theoretical frameworks developed in this study, particularly “displacement as resistance”, offer an analytical tool for understanding how political identity persists under extreme adversity and how individuals reject alternatives to exercise agency within structural constraints. These insights have relevance beyond Myanmar for understanding youth political mobilization in an era of rising authoritarianism and increasing displacement. While UNHCR's durable solutions emphasize voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement, this book adds to the discussion by incorporating the political dimensions of displacement. Through the experiences and interpretations of CDM undergraduate students, this book suggests the fourth solution, i.e., to include political displacement solutions that recognize displacement as a form of strategic resistance and to support displaced individuals' ongoing resistance and political engagement in movements. This study calls for the forced displacement literature to conceptualize displacement through a resistance-framing lens. This book also contributes to the literature on forced displacement by showing how forcibly displaced individuals exercise agency not only through adaptation but also through decision-making processes during displacement. The distinction between IDS and CBS also challenges the “voluntary-involuntary” distinction by highlighting how similar political commitments can manifest in different strategies and across geographical boundaries. The book also reveals how displacement can sometimes sustain and strengthen resistance movements, contributing to transnational and diaspora politics.

Drawing directly from the voices and lived experiences of CDM undergraduate students in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar, the following section presents a series of recommendations to enhance the support mechanisms available to displaced CDM students. These recommendations are informed by empirical data collected through interviews and are intended to inform both policy and practice at national and international levels.

Policy suggestions

1. **Develop Political Displacement Protection Frameworks:** Protective mechanisms for political displacement populations should be created, acknowledging these individuals as distinct from other forms of forced migration and ensuring their safety in new locations/countries.
2. **Recognition of Student Participation in CDM:** There is a critical need to formally acknowledge undergraduate students as legitimate participants in CDM, rather than focusing exclusively on government employees. Policy frameworks and aid initiatives should be expanded to include and prioritize the unique needs of student participants.
3. **Create Flexible Student Visa Categories:** Develop immigration policies that recognize the political nature of student displacement and allow for educational continuation without requiring formal refugee status determination.

For education and development organizations

1. **Provision of Technological Infrastructure:** For internally displaced students with limited internet access, providing technological solutions, such as satellite internet (e.g., Starlink), is essential to enable continued participation in alternative educational programs.

2. **Establishment of Accredited Alternative Education Programs:** There is an urgent need to develop and implement accredited educational programs for undergraduate students who have been forced to discontinue their university studies. Such programs should be recognized nationally and internationally to facilitate academic and professional mobility.
3. **Flexibility in Higher Education Admissions:** Foreign universities should consider flexible admission policies for displaced students who lack formal bachelor's degrees and related documents, enabling them to pursue higher education despite disruptions to their academic trajectories.
4. **Nuanced Understanding of Armed Resistance:** Both domestic and international audiences must recognize that students' engagement in armed resistance does not necessarily equate to an endorsement of violence or terrorism. Constructive, context-sensitive criticism should be encouraged, with an emphasis on promoting nonviolent strategies wherever possible.
5. **Expansion of Educational Opportunities in the Border Regions:** Science, technology, and vocational training programs should be made accessible to displaced students residing in border areas such as Mae Sot, thereby supporting their continued personal and professional development.

For Myanmar civil society and resistance organizations

1. **Valuing Non-Participation as Resistance:** Even seemingly modest acts, such as the refusal to attend government-controlled universities, constitute significant forms of resistance that disrupt the mechanisms of SAC. These actions should be recognized and supported as legitimate expressions of dissent.

2. Advocacy for Broader Definitions of the CDM:
Public discourse should encourage a more inclusive and nuanced definition of the CDM that recognizes the diverse forms of participation and resistance beyond traditional categories.

Overall, these recommendations highlight the need to adopt a holistic, contextually informed approach to support displaced CDM students. This strategy acknowledges their capacity for active decision-making, varied circumstances, and ongoing participation in Myanmar's broader movement for democratic governance and social justice.

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WHEN LEAVING BECOMES RESISTANCE

Student Displacement in Contemporary Myanmar

Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, thousands of university students joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), abandoning their studies and, in many cases, their homes. Some sought refuge in ethnic-controlled areas inside Myanmar, while others crossed the border into Thailand. Drawing on interviews and focus groups with 29 students conducted between 2024 and 2025, this book examines how displaced students experienced, understood, and sustained resistance under radically changed circumstances. It traces the divergent trajectories of those who remained in Myanmar and those who entered exile, from boycotting military-controlled universities and establishing alternative education networks to political organizing, fundraising, and armed resistance. Despite these differences, both groups maintained a shared identity as CDM students and a commitment to refusing the legitimacy of military rule. The book argues that displacement does not mark the end of political resistance, but can instead become a means through which movements persist, adapt, and transform.



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