



### *Young Myanmar's Scholars Commentary Series*

*Young Myanmar's Scholars Commentary Series: Youth Perspective on Post-Coup Myanmar is a commentary-based advocacy project providing young Myanmar scholars with the space to share their reflections on the many layers of dynamics in the aftermath of the Myanmar coup that have impacted the livelihoods of their society and generation*

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# **Is the Yangon Dream Over? How Yangon was Lost in the Coup**

**Yay Chann**

*Research Assistant, School of Public Policy, Chiang Mai University*  
yaychann\_y@cmu.ac.th

**Walking in Yangon,  
Getting lost in Yangon<sup>1</sup>**

- A song by a Myanmar singer, Glatt

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<sup>1</sup> Author's rough translation.

## Introduction

What does the 'Yangon Dream' mean to us? It struck me for days thinking about this question after watching a short film titled 'Late Summer Day', which perfectly presented the hope, dream, (and fear) of a young couple struggling in Yangon. The 2020 film made the younger generation, including me, reflect on ourselves. Back then, we all knew that living in Yangon had meant living with a lot of struggles. Yet, we were holding onto our 'Yangon Dream'. I see two kinds of the 'Yangon Dream': the dream of those who are coming to Yangon, including myself, to have a better life; and the dream of those who were born or raised in Yangon, nostalgic for the good old Yangon of the past, to have Yangon back like its old golden days – an immigrant port city, as historian writes, with plural society, where a great university and an international airport reside, and the people enjoyed a higher standard of living. After the military staged the coup, I have been thinking about this dream again. But instead, I am tempted to change the question: is the 'Yangon Dream over?' This article is what I cried for.

## Yangon: 'A city of hope and fear'

Yangon has been a city of hope for migrants coming from across the country. Since the 1990s, along with the promotion of the market-oriented economy of the country, people have come to Yangon with the hope to have a better life – i.e., seeking better education, income, and job prospects. When Cyclone Nargis struck in 2008, resulting in over two million displaced and 100,000 casualties, Yangon became the last resort for those affected.<sup>2</sup> The migration trend to the city was high after the disaster, and the city was expanded to accommodate the increasing arrival of migrants and the growing population. Reports have suggested that the population of Yangon, including the migrants, has grown from about 3.1 million in 1993 to 5.2 million in 2014. It was expected that the city would have a population of more than 10 million in 2040. The urban expansion was also increasing rapidly – from 578 km<sup>2</sup> in 1993 to 947 km<sup>2</sup> in 2014 in terms of total city areas.<sup>3</sup> Given their over 20 percent of the country's GDP contribution, urban development projects have been growing across the city. The city has since been facing developmental challenges – from the expansion of informal settlements to the ineffective delivery of public services.

At the same time, Yangon had also become a city of fear, especially for the urban poor. The benefits from the city's economic growth could not translate equally for everyone, even when the urban poor have been the main drivers of that same growth. As urban inequality grew

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<sup>2</sup> Myo Min, "The Socio-Economic Struggles of Cyclone Nargis' Migrants in Yangon," *Tea Circle Oxford*, 30 March 2020, <https://teacircleoxford.com/essay/the-socio-economic-struggles-of-cyclone-nargis-migrants-in-yangon/>.

<sup>3</sup> Yangon City Development Committee, "Comprehensive Development of Yangon: Basic Data and Recommendations", 2016.

in the city, policymakers overlooked the problem. Public services delivery fell short of reaching those in need, especially the urban poor living in slum areas and the city's outskirts. For example, the urban poor were excluded from the city municipal's plan of "providing potable water for all citizens," making them spend most of their daily incomes on water uses.<sup>4</sup> The same has been true with other services, such as sanitation, waste management, electricity, as well as health and education services: access to all the basic municipal services has been limited, if not lacking, in informal settlement areas. Given the lack of citizenship scrutiny cards (CSC)<sup>5</sup> and other legal documents like household registration for most informal settlers, the prospect of these services becoming more accessible in the future is low. Such discouraging fate for the urban poor has not come only from the city's public services but also from the state of its job sector – informal settlers end up with informal employment, whereas inhumane working conditions, labour exploitation, and workplace harassment are not uncommon.

What was more, without enough capacity to accommodate adequate housing for the growing population, a state of housing inequality has been happening in Yangon. Owning formal housing remains just a dream that the working-class people, including myself, cannot afford to dream. Data shows only 25 percent of households have access to formal housing, such as condominiums, apartments, and brick houses.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, rental cost for housing has been skyrocketing, pushing the urban poor away from the city, and forcing them to spend more than one hour on crowded public transportation to commute to their workplaces. Even public spaces are not equally distributed for these people – parks are concentrated in the inner city but dispersedly located for the urban poor.<sup>7</sup> Instead of having a better life, the urban poor, which mostly consisted of migrants from outside Yangon, who has been forced to live in slums without having access to basic public services while suffering the cost of unequal urban policy and planning.

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<sup>4</sup> Compiled from several sources; "Yangon 2040 The Peaceful and Beloved Yangon: The Strategic Urban Development Plan for the Greater Yangon", Yangon City Development Committee (YCDC) and Japan International Cooperation Agency, March 2013, [https://www.ycdc.gov.mm/download.php?pdffile=20130518\\_YGN-MP\\_ENG\\_final1](https://www.ycdc.gov.mm/download.php?pdffile=20130518_YGN-MP_ENG_final1); "Water Supply Problems Are Overlooked in Yangon City", *Tea Circle Oxford*, 18 August 2020, <https://teacircleoxford.com/policy-briefs-research-reports/water-supply-problems-are-overlooked-in-yangon-city/>

<sup>5</sup> This is a kind of identity document.

<sup>6</sup> "Yangon's Housing Inequality during the Covid-19 Pandemic", *Tea Circle Oxford*, 13 January 2021, <https://teacircleoxford.com/policy-briefs-research-reports/yangons-housing-inequality-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>7</sup> "Green Spaces in Yangon City: Towards a Greener City for all", *Tea Circle Oxford*, 24 June 2019, <https://teacircleoxford.com/policy-briefs-research-reports/green-spaces-in-yangon-city-towards-a-greener-city-for-all/>

## Yangon: 'A city lost in the coup'

After the military staged the coup, when I talk about Yangon with friends, they instantly say, "Yangon might be dying in all aspects," and continue, "Yangon will not be Yangon anymore".

The city of hope is turning into a city lost in the coup. Both the country's economy and the urban economy of the city have contracted, and both outlooks for 2022 remain bleak. Following the western economic response to the coup, the banking system has been paralysed.<sup>8</sup> Most development projects have been suspended or pulled off.<sup>9</sup> Foreign investments left the city, forcing some factories to suspend their operations while some others closed permanently. The growing garment sector, which fills up around one-third of all Myanmar exports and offers tens of thousands of jobs, especially to the urban migrants, has collapsed. The unemployment rate has since been increasing and has continued to do so. Commodity prices soar to a higher level with the increased inflation rate. The housing market dried up, but the rental price has fallen. Frequent blackouts have become common, and so does the unavailability of internet access. People have to queue for water services.<sup>10</sup> The city became unsafe in all aspects.<sup>11</sup> Mis-guided urban planning is coming back.<sup>12</sup>

An immigrant city is becoming lost in the coup. People, including the migrants, have since been leaving Yangon, and some have to return to their hometowns.<sup>13</sup> Although they were at the centre of the anti-coup movement, the urban poor remaining in the city were disproportionately impacted by the coup: they were pushed into a vulnerable situation. Given the economic hardships and following the country's loss of 1.6 million jobs in 2021 due to Coupvaid, it is estimated the rate of urban poverty will triple from 11.3% in 2019 to 37.2% by 2022.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Mcdonald, "Myanmar coup: Could Sanctions on the military ever work", *CNN*, 9 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56248559>

<sup>9</sup> "TIMELINE-Foreign companies withdrawing from Myanmar after coup", Reuters, 27 January 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/myanmar-politics-foreign-companies-idUSL8N2U12AI>

<sup>10</sup> "လျှပ်စစ်မီးသမက ရေမလုံလောက်သည့် ဒုက္ခပါ ရန်ကုန်လူထု ရင်ဆိုင်နေရ", *The Irrawaddy*, 10 March 2022, <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/news/2022/03/10/250457.html>

<sup>11</sup> "ခိုးဆိုးလုနီက အန္တရာယ်နှင့် လုံခြုံမှုကင်းမဲ့လာသည့် မြို့ပြများ", *The Irrawaddy*, 12 March 2022, <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/article/2022/03/12/250502.html>

<sup>12</sup> P.Yangon (Pseudonym), "Yangon, a city tragically halted from its long-awaited development and transformation", *Tea Circle Oxford*, 26 January 2022, <https://teacircleoxford.com/politics/yangon-a-city-tragically-halted-from-its-long-awaited-development-and-transformation/>

<sup>13</sup> "Leaving Hlaing Tharyar: Factory workers flee city for uncertain future", *Frontier Myanmar*, 1 April 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/leaving-hlaing-tharyar-factory-workers-flee-city-for-uncertain-future/>

<sup>14</sup> "Myanmar lost 1.6 million jobs in 2021 amid COVID, coup: ILO", *Aljazeera*, 28 January 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/1/28/myanmar-lost-1-6-million-jobs-in-2021-amid-covid-coup-ilo;>

Inevitably, the worst scenario will be seen in Yangon. The urban poor in the peri-urban areas of the city is facing the loss of their livelihoods as well as the loss of their income. In the one year after the coup, it is estimated that 350,000 jobs in the construction sector, 220,000 jobs in garment manufacturing, and 80,000 jobs in accommodation and food services have been lost.<sup>15</sup> Loss of income for the urban poor will mean that they will be forced to sell their assets or face debt.<sup>16</sup> In the Myanmar slums, more and more people are getting stuck in a debt cycle, forcing them to reduce their food consumption (or eating rats and snakes to survive) or even turning to odd jobs, such as prostitution.<sup>17</sup> As more and more people struggle to afford food or are even unable to afford them, a new reality of food shortage and starvation has arrived. Children are experiencing malnutrition and have to start giving up their education. Violence, including domestic violence, has become prevalent.<sup>18</sup> What was more, their houses were forcibly removed by the junta regime without any support given in return, and more than 8,000 families were displaced.<sup>19</sup> People still at work are also passing through hardships – they are forced to work in inhumane working conditions, forced to take extra assigned work, while overtime pay has been cut. Labour exploitation and sexual harassment are becoming more prevalent after the military took over.<sup>20</sup>

As the struggles and hardships of the urban poor continue, these communities are also facing the possibility that they might be overlooked by most international humanitarian aid. So far, the distribution of international humanitarian aid remained concentrated on border

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“U.N. says about half of Myanmar’s people could sink into poverty in 2022”, *reuters*, 1 December 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-says-about-half-myanmars-people-could-sink-into-poverty-2022-2021-12-01/>

<sup>15</sup> “Employment in Myanmar in 2021: A rapid assessment”, ILO Brief, *International Labour Organization*, January 2022, [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms\\_835900.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-yangon/documents/publication/wcms_835900.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “Peri-Urban Yangon Approaches a Food and Nutrition Crisis in the Face of Loss of Livelihoods”, United Nations Myanmar, 19 April 2021, <https://myanmar.un.org/en/125427-peri-urban-yangon-approaches-food-and-nutrition-crisis-face-loss-livelihoods>

<sup>17</sup> “In Myanmar’s urban slums COVID-19 is worsening a hidden crisis”, *Danish Refugee Council*, 10 January 2021, <https://drc.ngo/it-matters/current-affairs/2021/1/covid-19-in-myanmar-s-slums/>; Ko Maung and Stephen Campbell, “Dare to struggle, dare to win: Workers’ resistance since the coup”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 18 February 2022, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/dare-to-struggle-dare-to-win-workers-resistance-since-the-coup/>

<sup>18</sup> “Peri-Urban Yangon Approaches a Food and Nutrition Crisis in the Face of Loss of Livelihoods”, United Nations Myanmar, 19 April 2021, <https://myanmar.un.org/en/125427-peri-urban-yangon-approaches-food-and-nutrition-crisis-face-loss-livelihoods>

<sup>19</sup> “Squatters removed from Hlaingtharyar Township”, *Mizzima*, 29 October 2021, <https://www.mizzima.com/article/squatters-removed-hlaingtharyar-township>

<sup>20</sup> Courtney Vice, “Myanmar’s Garment Workers Are Fighting for Freedom. It’s Time We Fought with Them”, *Women’s Media Center*, 6 August 2021, <https://womensmediacenter.com/women-under-siege/myanmars-garment-workers-are-fighting-for-freedom-its-time-we-fought-with-them>

and conflict areas due to the ongoing conflicts intensity and apparent hardships around these areas, and possibly logistical reasons.

### Is the 'Yangon Dream' really over?

Yangon had been through these hardships before, and the city will find a way to come back again, keeping the 'Yangon Dream' alive. But our generation must also acknowledge that these people who are forced to live in the slum are also the ones keeping our Yangon Dream alive. The Sino-Burmese communities in Yangon, as a cultural anthropologist once wrote, were waxed and waned, responding to the socio-economic and political situation of the country. The same is true with the 'Yangon Dream:' it is just waning for the time being, and I believe the dream will not be over as long as we hold onto it.

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