



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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Hanging by a Thread: Education in Post-Coup Myanmar

The Grit and Dedication of Myanmar Scholars at Risk

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¹ Spring University Myanmar is a non-profit interim educational platform supporting the scholars at risk and vulnerable communities. The virtual university offers certificate courses and diploma programmes from a wide range of disciplines. Established in May 2021, more than 7,000 students have enrolled as of March 2022.

There was a time when Myanmar youths were brimming with hope. For a generation that grew up in the dark — literally, due to power outages — and reading colourless textbooks, the rise of the telecoms and internet connectivity enabled them to tap into the global pool of knowledge. In 2020 at least, Myanmar's economic growth was among the highest in Southeast Asia, and Myanmar's talents were beginning to get competitive with their peers in the region. Yet, it all came to a halt with the pandemic and the military coup the following year.

Myanmar's education sector is among the most affected as it is among the most involved in the aftermath of the military coup. Before the coup, the education sector was among the largest in the country.² This has changed drastically after the coup, with the involvement of students and teachers in resisting the military junta's attack on Myanmar's democracy. The young people of Myanmar, Generation Z, were instrumental in the aftermath of the coup, taking to the streets with their creative demonstrations. Likewise, 400,000 teachers from basic and higher education combined were crucial in spearheading the nonviolent resistance against the junta, as the majority of them took part in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). The teachers' refusal to work under the military regime was evident from the many white and green uniforms and the teachers' formal attires that were distinctly visible in the rallies and protests.

The Teachers' Dilemma: CDM and the Fragility of Myanmar's Education System

The enormity of the CDM must have caught the military by surprise. As the movement grew in popularity, the military ramped up its pressure on those involved in the CDM. CDM personnel — teachers, school staff, and students alike — have been dismissed by the Naypyidaw government. Soldiers and police have continuously cracked down and confined individuals associated with the CDM in prison, regardless of their status. One year after the military takeover, schools and universities are barely functioning, and few students are going back to classes.

While the CDM has successfully embodied the spirit of Myanmar's Spring and showcased the junta's inability to govern the country and protect its people, it has also come at a cost. Prior to the coup, the education system had already been weakened due to the pandemic. Since

² As of 2020, the education sector hosts around eleven million grade school students and nearly one million university students. The Ministry of Education was the largest institution in the country. Public schools and universities are highly centralised in Myanmar and the Ministry of Education controls all aspects of these schools. This includes but is not limited to recruitment, promotion, and dismissal of teachers, curriculum development, student admission and assessment policies, and examination pass rates. Teachers for schools and universities, therefore, are regarded as bureaucrats or civil servants rather than faculty members of the academia.

the first case of COVID-19 was reported in March 2020, schools have been closed. Even though the nation had a promising and nascent digital infrastructure, Myanmar was unable to completely and quickly migrate public schools to online learning. With the involvement of teachers and students in post-coup protests, the education system has basically come to a further halt, with March 2022 marking the second anniversary of Myanmar students' time away from classes.

When teachers and students decided to abandon their schools and campuses, they knew what they were getting into. These people knew how viciously the military would hunt them. A high school teacher in uniform was shot dead while protesting in downtown Yangon. Many others have followed similar fates under the brutal hands of the military.

They also knew that while the protests would be what was needed to resist the junta, their involvement would mean a fatal blow to the already fragile education system. The teachers well understood how millions of children and youth would get cut off from education with their participation in the protests. Yet, what drove them was the view that holding classes under the fascist regime was anything but true education.

"I chose to be a teacher because it is a noble profession, and we must educate our next generation," said a teacher from Yangon. "But it is also our duty to help the children understand the right and the wrong. Working under military rule, we can no longer champion justice and morality."

The Persistence of Teachers and Students under Persecution

The exact span of involvement of education personnel in the CDM, particularly the specific numbers of CDM teachers and students involved in the movement, vary across townships and timeline. At its peak in February 2021, right after the coup, more than three quarters of teachers and school administrative staff boycotted the new administration. The impact might not have been immediately visible back then since schools and universities were already closed due to the pandemic. But over time, it was growingly felt.

In the subsequent months, the number of teachers being involved in the CDM fluctuated. Some had no other options but to go back to work. Others persisted and abandoned their jobs and titles. But even those who returned to their workplaces were still persecuted for the political stance they had taken.³ Thus, the teachers were trapped in an infinite dilemma

³ As the military started violent crackdowns on protests, activists, and those involved in the CDM – locally known as the CDMers, these individuals were not only forced to flee their homes, they also had to live with the fear of their family members abducted by the military on their behalf – with many reported kidnappings conducted by

between conforming or resisting, with some having gone in and out of the CDM multiple times. The exact nationwide data for CDMers is hard to collect largely due to the sensitive nature of the CDM and in consideration of the security of the people involved.

The Scholars At Risk⁴ network has reported widespread cases of the military seizing control of and setting up bases on schools and university campuses. Students' Union (SU) leaders who were critical in mobilising large-scale protests were violently persecuted. Their campus offices were raided. In recent months, as clashes between the civilian defence forces and the military intensified, the junta began a notorious campaign to indiscriminately torch villages, schools, hospitals, and monasteries.

As the Spring movement drags on to Year II, we must find ways to honour these brave teachers, students, and their families and figure out possible solutions to address the education gap in Myanmar.

Irreversible Consequences in Education Gap

Millions of students and youths in Myanmar currently do not have access to public education. While teachers and students involved in the CDM knew of some of the immediate consequences, not a lot of them had expected or foreseen the scale of the impact of the CDM on the education sector. One of the underlying reasons would be that the CDM was never supposed to be a multi-year enterprise. In a couple of months following the coup, when the CDM was gaining momentum, those involved expected two possibilities, that the status quo would soon return and they would go back to their normal lives, or that, at least, the Spring movement would prevail in a matter of months given the overwhelming solidarity of all the groups in the nation. But such prospects were quickly proven very difficult by the escalation of both the junta's extreme atrocities and the efforts of the parallel government in opposition to topple the regime.

The CDM started as a bottom-up campaign behind which civil servants and students wholeheartedly rallied. But as the movement progressed, it became an indispensable platform for the opposition forces. As it gets increasingly tied to the goals of these junta opposition forces, scaling down or ending the CDM engine is nowhere near consideration. As radical as it may sound, students are encouraging fellow students NOT to go back to school at all costs, and they are so far successful in the campaign.

the military on those associated with the CDM. For those CDMers who had to rely on government housing and social welfare support, it has meant leaving all their belongings and their entire livelihood behind.

⁴ Scholars at Risk, "Free to Think 2021: Myanmar," *Scholars at Risk*, n.d., <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Free-to-Think-2021-Myanmar.pdf>.

Such a hardened stance is not without consequences for their own sake. As things drag on, grave consequences for the children of the country could be irreversible, with how the situation could damage their social and psychological developments due to being away from their peers and classroom activities in a formal learning space. A learning loss of two years (and counting) would haunt their academic progress for the rest of their lives. Moreover, looking after the youngsters at home is an added extreme burden for family members. Students cut off from higher education may have some more options to explore during the interim period.⁵ But few of these options are accredited, and none of them leads to a degree or diploma. After all, online learning can only do so much for subjects that require practical experiences and experimentation. Worst of all, Myanmar students are now years behind their peers in an increasingly globalised job market.

Despite all this, what could be the alternative? The military has tried to reopen schools and universities on multiple occasions but to little success. To begin with, their faculties are largely empty. Their substitute teachers are rarely qualified. Most importantly, the youths of Myanmar have realised that education is so much more than obtaining a certificate at the end of a school year. For them, substance matters. They have also heard accounts of the oppressive tactics of the military junta during the dark decades of Myanmar (1990-2010). It might be tempting to give up on the CDM and go back to school, but those classes would have been a mere shadow of what was promised by the democratic regime a few years prior.

Way Forward

Amidst these difficulties, the hope of a better education for the Myanmar youths remains. For the future of education in Myanmar, at least two pathways exist. The first is to seek alternative education. The second is to seek systemic change in the education sector.

1. Supporting Alternative Education

For students in Myanmar, there is a growing need for alternative education - one which accommodates the urgent needs of this interim period and one that could help sustain the CDM apparatus. The National Unity Government - Ministry of Education (NUG MoE) has devised homeschooling programmes for basic education and a series of webinar broadcasts for higher education. A number of civil society initiatives have also come up with a variety of Interim Education Programmes (IEPs) that reflect the demands of the students.⁶ Already before the coup, there was a strong establishment

⁵ The time until the government in opposition regains power.

⁶ The IEPs are largely diverse in terms of their courses, medium of delivery, financial model, and expected learning outcomes. IEP courses are primarily centred around two groups: (i) ideological topics; and (ii) vocational topics. The first category is the most widespread and includes courses on federalism, governance, human rights, gender,

of ethnic education providers that offered courses in their mother tongue, mostly for basic education.

Yet despite the positive programs, the loose format of IEP courses still fell short of the expectations of students and parents.⁷ Particularly with how the courses would not lead to official credits attributed to formal education. There are hopes from students and parents for more continuous and formal learning during the interim period.

Furthermore, the current coverage of the IEP is a far cry from real demands. One issue for students and users of the programs is the state of digital infrastructure in Myanmar. Students from low-income families, which make up the majority of the population, cannot afford smart gadgets, nor are they able to stay online for multiple hours to participate in the courses. Teachers, on the other hand, are also no better off because they were never trained to deliver lessons virtually. Another issue would be the operational and academic capability of IEP providers. Often, they are led by youth activists who are eager to contribute to the cause but are limited in their management capacity and experience. Adding to the security risks and constant scrutiny by military forces towards the providers of these programs, it is a miracle that the IEPs are running at all.

An even larger threat for the generation would be when the general public gives up on the political struggle and bows to the military education system.

Education in Myanmar currently characterises both “a means to an end” as well as being “an end of its own” for the country. It is an end because education is indeed a goal for the nation and a fundamental right for every person. At the same time, Myanmar’s Spring is the means to an end as the education sector will serve as an indicator of who will have the true mandate in the ongoing democratic strive - whichever party accommodates the 11 million children and 1 million youth and their family members, shall earn their legitimacy.

and social inequalities, among others. This is largely due to the ideological upheaval that sprung up in the aftermath of the coup and many youths became invested in matters that were never mainstream. Vocational topics encompass language skills, programming and computer skills, and other topics that could lead to tangible job opportunities. At the moment, these two topics are some of the main priorities for Myanmar students to cover. In conflict zones, many youths may be required to learn life skills such as basic healthcare, first aid medical procedures, sanitation topics such as soap-making, and nutrition-food production topics such as food preservation and protein bars production.

⁷ IEP courses are almost entirely non-profit. In cases where enrolment fees were collected, they were for the purpose of fundraising for the CDMers. IEP classes run synchronously on Zoom and most organisations would provide recordings for those who missed their class. Their learning design might be loosely arranged and not all classes include assessment or monitoring mechanisms.

This politicisation of provisioning of access to education is among the bitter truths that post-coup Myanmar is facing. For democratic forces, time is not in their favour. More and more students will likely choose to side with the military as the movement drags on.

2. Enabling Systemic Change

For international and development partners who are keen to support the Myanmar cause but are reluctant to be involved in the armed resistance, one objective would be the perfect avenue: to catalyse systemic change in Myanmar's education sector.⁸

It might be counterproductive to establish a brand-new platform in the name of the donor. Such a platform could have the best user interface, world-class courses, and excellent assessment designs. But despite the good intentions and superb quality of the provision of such a platform, it would hardly be anything that a local initiative could replicate or sustain. Furthermore, the country would be pressured to continue to rely on incoming foreign funds and may never be able to break out of those influences.

Instead, development partners could introduce capacity building mechanisms for existing IEP providers, including the NUG's MoE, and share their best practices on curriculum development, student support, assessment and evaluations, and revenue models. They can also anticipate IEP organisations to start employing CDMers, as they scale up their platforms to rival those under the military education system. Development partners could also support the organisation of massive nationwide campaigns to advocate for *lifelong learning*, which was never a mainstream concept in Myanmar.⁹

Conclusion: Strengthening the Education System through Strengthening the CDM

Challenges in the education system are far beyond its thematic scope of education - it is a highly politicised manoeuvre, a testament to democracy, and a testament to our humanity.

⁸ Such catalysation of systemic change for the education sector must begin with a comprehensive, yet realistic, assessment of the stakeholders, including their preferences, strengths, limitations, and relationships. It should also enshrine genuine cultural appreciation of the local populations - starting with the unique role of a teacher in the classroom, the tri-factor relationship between parents-students-teachers, and differing attitudes about online learning and certain learning interfaces.

⁹ The stigma surrounding education is that it must happen in blocks - finish high school by 18, get a degree by 22, secure a job, and one's education is done! There seems to be a notion that those who missed these marks shall hardly have a second chance, and this mindset would only exacerbate the current education crisis. By promoting lifelong learning, students could not only broaden their window of opportunity to learn but also continue developing their skills throughout their careers.

Education is a fundamental human right and should certainly be a priority for children and youths from all corners of the world. But when the same institution committing the worst human rights atrocities is inviting you to join their school, how would you decide?

When teachers and students join the CDM, they are not leaving their education behind. They are, in fact, demanding what true education should represent and defying an inhumane regime. When one student stands up to the injustices of the system, the world cheers for her (Brown v. Board of Education). When millions are standing up to the injustices of the system, the world should not remain silent.

Myanmar's education CDM must persist in order for democracy and human rights to prevail. We seek support from the international community in strengthening the alternative education platforms and bringing about systemic change in society for the better and for good.

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