Beyond Democratic Backsliding in Myanmar

Rebuilding an All-Inclusive Society as a Nation

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the root causes, present realities and prospects for resolution of Myanmar's long-standing crisis of political fragmentation and violent ethnic conflict, drawing on an interdisciplinary, ethnographically grounded methodology. Rejecting the simplified post-coup narratives, it argues that the military takeover of 2021 manifested a deeper, long-standing structural failures inherited from colonization, authoritarian centralism, and ethnical marginalization. Analyzing Myanmar's fragmented political evolution from independence in 1948 to the present civil war (2021–2025), this examination locates the current conflict within generations of failed nation-building, democratic degradation, and militarization of ethnic identities.

Drawing on political ethnography, and interviews with resistance actors, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), along with displaced communities, the study outlines how repression, resistance and rival state agendas coalesce. It endeavors to look at the Myanmar crisis through the lens of a multidimensional theoretical framework of contentious politics, internal colonialism, historical institutionalism and federalism theory and critiques the fallacies of state-building paradigms and reimagines Myanmar beyond authoritarian governance. It demonstrates how resistance evolved from symbolic nonviolence to armed insurgency, and how the rhetoric of democracy restoration transformed into a deeper revolutionary—insurrectionist language of systemic transformation that includes de-colonization. However, it also concludes that the sheer scale and bravery of the anti-junta resistance is interrupted by internal distrust, poor coordination and historical grievances among resistance actors due to the ideological incoherence, and the absence of a central coordinating institution.

Against this background, this thesis shed lights on a contradictory and alternative concepts that is based on a pluralist, territorially restructured federal union based on shared sovereignty, inclusive governance and recognition of its ethnic and religious diversity. Drawing on both theoretical models and field-derived insights, it outlines a comprehensive roadmap including eight-state territorial federalism, equitable resource-sharing, absolute religious freedom, and a unified federal army under civilian oversight. The study contends that federalism—if genuinely negotiated and inclusively implemented—remains the only viable framework to transcend Myanmar's "Burmanization" crisis and build a stable, democratic, and multi-ethnic polity.

Centering grassroot narratives and everyday resistance of Myanmar crisis, this thesis challenges elite-centric and top-down analysis. It contributes a new theoretical framework called 'Broader Contentious Political Theory'. Rather than understanding Myanmar crisis solely through episodic and structural lens, this new theory widens the perspective by

combing micro and macro perspectives of the crisis and integrates historical institutionalism, and grassroots ethnography analysis into the framework**.** The thesis ends by arguing that while the perils of state disintegration are real, a democratic federal re-emergence negotiated through fair power sharing is more likely to release Myanmar from protracted civil war than any other alternative.

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This thesis would not have been possible without the continuous guidance, encouragement, and intellectual generosity of many individuals and institutions. It is both a scholarly undertaking and a deeply personal journey, forged in a time of national crisis and tremendous human suffering. As a citizen of Myanmar and a researcher, I owe a great debt to those who shared their insights, opened their lives, and supported me in this fragile yet courageous endeavor. Suddenly, years of research has gone by. Making sense of authoritarianism trap in Myanmar is still difficult just like walking in the dark jungle of deep despair. Here and there throughout the country, honorable young people led the march, fight and fall. At least, it's a noble death – against tyranny. But it's so overwhelming when the sad news comes more often than the leaves falling around. Researchers research, fighters fight, but the country lie in ruin. It was more than overwhelming to do the research of Myanmar civil war.

I owe my deepest gratitude, first of all, to my supervisors, Prof. Dr. Kristina Großmann & PD Dr. Andrea Fleschenberg dos Ramos Pinéu, whose steadfast support, challenging conversation and intellectual clarity steered me through each step of this undertaking. Your high standards pushed me always further, challenged me to think more deeply, and I was forced to ask — over and over again — why it mattered. Your incredible feedback, patient mentorship and the holistic manner in which you view scholarship — your influence has been bricks laid at the foundation of this thesis, that I could never have foreseen coming into fruition. You have both been more than academic mentors and I am still deeply grateful for your faith in my research, even when I was not so sure of myself.

The study was performed in a time of national emergency. The February 2021 military coup has thrown Myanmar back into dark era of authoritarianism, followed by national civil war, crumbling political institutions and devastating millions of people. Undertaking fieldwork during this time—across border regions, displaced communities, and resistance networks—was both a privilege and a burden. Thanks to all the people and communities who contributed to this research. For all the people brave enough to share their stories, describe their dreams, and trust me with your words—this work is yours more than it is mine.

Thank you for your courage amidst chaos—to leaders, members, and affiliates of numerous EAOs, civil society groups, activists, fallen heroes and the CDM. I am keenly aware many of you cannot be named for reasons of security, your contribution is crucial to this effort and so greatly appreciated. I hold your words, your courage, and your compromises with the highest honor and secrecy.

We are especially grateful to those at Mae Sot and on the Thai-Myanmar border who not only provided access but also accommodation, translation and logistical provisions. A special thanks to the local NGOs, community organizers and health workers who facilitated contextually appropriate interviews, providing me with an invaluable data. I would also like to acknowledge the emotional labor that this research has required of me, and of the participants. The tales of loss, exile, imprisonment, death and survival which were shared by these individuals resonated with me to this day. I am grateful to the so many survivors who spoke up when it was difficult to talk. Your resistance is not just political; it is existential, and it is human.

On the scholarly front, thank you to my department and the University of Bonn for creating an institutional environment in which this project could be born. And I am thankful to the faculty, staff, and grad students who agreed to read drafts of this project in skeptical detail at early stages of development. I thank all my friends from Myanmar and the rest of the world, thank you for standing in solidarity with Myanmar. Last but not least, I thank my family, none more important than the colossal spirit and the neat quiet strength in supporting me tirelessly and unwaveringly during this long arduous journey. And to all who continue the fight for freedom, humanity, and federal democracy in Myanmar — this is respectfully dedicated.

May it serve, in some way, the vision of a just, inclusive, and peaceful Myanmar!

List of Maps, Tables, Diagrams and Figures

List of acronyms

AA	Arakan Army
AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
ALD	Arakan League for Democracy
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BIA	Burma Independence Army
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CNF	Chin National Front
CPB	Communist Party of Burma
DNDP	Dawei Nationalities Development Party
EAO / EAOs	Ethnic Armed Organization(s)
ECA	Ethnographic Content Analysis
HCA	Heidelberg Conflict Analysis
ICNCC	Interim Chin National Consultative Council
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
KIA / KIO	Kachin Independence Army / Kachin Independence Organization
KNDO / KNU	Karen National Defence Organization / Karen National Union
KNLA	Karen National Liberation Army
KSPP	Kayah State Progressive Party
MNDP	Mon National Democratic Party
MON	Mon ethnic group or political unit
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NLD	National League for Democracy
NMSP	New Mon State Party
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF / PDFs	People's Defence Force(s)
PNO	Pa-O National Organization
PRCF	Pa-O Regional Coordination Force
SAA / SAAs	Shan State Army (South) and other variants
SAC	State Administration Council
SNLD / SNSP	Shan Nationalities League for Democracy / Shan Nationalities Socialist Party
SSKDP	Shan State Kokang Democratic Party
UNA	United Nationalities Alliance
UWSA	United Wa State Army
ZCD	Zomi Congress for Democracy

Glossary of Burmese, Pali language terms

Ar Nar Thein	Sudden seizure of country's sovereign & loss of national pride And autonomy.
Amyotha Hluttaw	House of Nationalities (Upper House in Myanmar's parliament)
Attadīpa	"Self-lamp" or "self-reliance"; a term from Buddhist scripture urging self-guidance
Bamar	The majority ethnic group in Myanmar
Burmanization	Assimilationist policy promoting Bamar dominance
Dhammarāja	"Righteous King" or "King who rules by the Dhamma"
Min Aung Hlaing	Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's armed forces, leader of 2021 coup
Myawaddy	Military-run state TV channel in Myanmar/Border Town
Panglong	Historic agreement of federal promise (1947)
Sayar	Teacher; term of deep cultural respect
Tatmadaw	The official name for the Myanmar military
Theravāda	Orthodox Buddhism practiced in Myan

Introduction

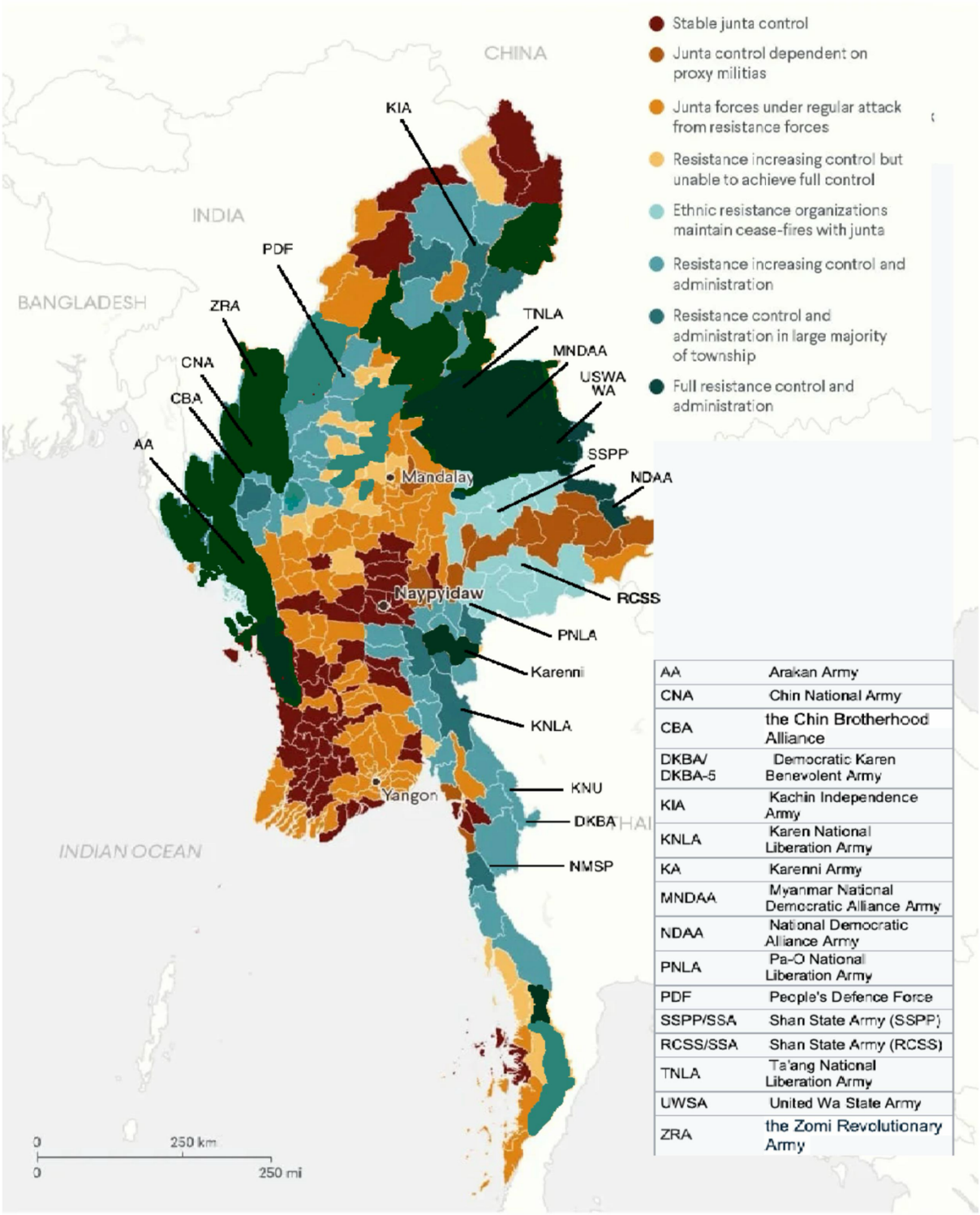
Myanmar at a Crossroads: Fragmentation or Federal Rebirth?

When I was writing this thesis, Myanmar found itself mired in an escalating, protracted civil war (2022-2025). The 1 February 2021 coup d'état unleashed the darkest side of the country, filled with violence, repression, and great uncertainty, and disrupted the fragile democratic transition. The military regime sought to re-consolidate the deeply rooted authoritarian order that has dominated Myanmar for decades. But the post-coup calculus of the military regime did not result in the intended concentration of power. Rather, it initiated a nationwide civil war of unmatched scale and severity. More than two million people were forced into exile, thousands were killed, tens of thousands of houses were burned down, and the economy was eroded. Rather than reasserting control, his junta's violent actions have plunged Myanmar into an ever-deepening humanitarian, political, and economic crisis.

After 4 years of civil war, the future of Myanmar remains uncertain. Meanwhile junta has lost control of more than half the country as shown in the Map 1 below. One possibility is that a protracted and irresolvable civil war ensues, like the decades-long carnage in Syria. Another, of course, is the reimposition of an even more brutal authoritarian order, and who knows, we could be looking at a Myanmar-style authoritarian ruler returning with darker evil. A third, potentially more destabilizing result would ignite territorial or political fragmentation of the state–much as we've seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Sudan. But between these dark scenarios lies a narrow but significant alternative: the potential for a transformative rebirth as a unified federal democratic country. In that more optimistic future, Myanmar will become a true federal union-a union based on equality, reciprocal recognition, and shared power. However fragile and fraught it may be, such an outcome would represent not merely a political transition but a fundamental reimagining of the state's social contract. Will Myanmar continue to fragment or fail, or is there still a chance to reemerge as a federal union where equal rights reign supreme?

As a citizen of Myanmar, a series of pressing and seemingly unresolvable questions propel this thesis: Can the Tatmadaw—the Myanmar military—sustain a murderous regime of terror indefinitely without confronting the structural causes of opposition? Is it possible for any of the main actors—the National Unity Government (NUG), ethnic armed groups (EAOs), popular defense forces (PDFs)—to have a clear victory on this very murky and chaotic battlefield with multiple actors all acting in their own interest but without unity? More critically, can Myanmar effectively resolve the interdependent challenges of

Map 0.1. Myanmar civil war and Areas controlled by different Militia groups, as of July 2025



Source: Map compiled by the author using data from the Myanmar Peace Monitor, IISS Armed Conflict Survey, ACLED, Data for Myanmar, and major media reports (e.g., *The Irrawaddy*, *Myanmar Now*, *Frontier Myanmar*) as of 1 July 2025. "Resistance control" denotes areas without SAC military presence or administration. EAO/PDF zones are not individually demarcated. Data remains indicative given conflict fluidity and limited access. The Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) mentioned above are illustrative, though in reality over a dozen more groups exercise varying degrees of territorial control; due to space constraints, not all are individually listed.

fragmentation and tenacious civil conflict, which could amplify poverty and instability throughout the nation? As has been noted by Andrea Fleschenberg[1], while the figure like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi embodied moral authority and democratic resistance for long, her governance shows both inextricably linked concepts of political legitimacy and identity politics as a framework of understanding alongside the limitations of symbolic power in a deeply fractious society. What about the politics unfolding beyond Daw Aung San Su Kyi? And beyond that conflict, what might the future look like for reconstruction, reconciliation, and recuperation?

Will it be possible for the country to move into a democratic federal system that acknowledges the different aspirations held by various ethnicities in Myanmar, as well as promotes national unity and sustainable governance based on shared rights? To answer these profound and most important questions, this thesis thoroughly observed, analyzed, and examined Myanmar's current conflict from various points of view with the help of original empirical data.

This research argues that the present dire situation in Myanmar is a consequence of decades of systemic failure, not merely the consequences of a single coup in 2021. The country's ethnic conflicts originated after it gained independence in 1948, when the Karen insurgency challenged the Burman-majoritarian authority. Over many decades, the Tatmadaw has enforced a policy of militarized nationalism, commonly referred to by most ethnics in Myanmar as "Burmanization," creating a singular national identity with authoritarian enforcement while undermining the diverse cultures, languages, and religions that define Myanmar's authentic identity.[2] This policy of exclusion has entrenched cycles of violence, creating what the World Bank describes as a "conflict trap"—a vicious cycle in which state failure perpetuates civil war, poverty, and underdevelopment.[3] To delve into the complexities of the issues from a grassroots perspective, this thesis mainly engaged with a qualitative approach. In the traditions of political ethnographic inquiry and direct engagement, it draws upon first-hand interviews with key stakeholders—including grassroots leaders, activists, educators, healthcare professionals involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), resistance fighters, opposition figures, representatives of ethnic communities, and leaders of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). By employing multiple theoretical frameworks such as democratic backsliding,[4] federalism theory,[5] social movement theory,[6] and conflict dynamics.[7], the thesis critically examines the ongoing civil war, the barriers to national reconciliation, and Myanmar's potential pathways to peace.

1. Fleschenberg, Andrea. "Women Politicians in Myanmar: Navigating Cultural Stereotypes and Political Realities." Women, Politics, and Democracy in South Asia, edited by Nizam Ahmed, Routledge, 2020, pp. 65–83. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429025815-4.
[2] Tønnesson, Stein. Myanmar in Crisis: Challenges of Nationhood. Routledge, 2021, pp. 95–128.
[3] Collier, P. & Sambanis, N., *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, 2005., pp. 15–45.
[4] Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D., *How Democracies Die*, 2018, pp. 102–130.
[5] Elazar, D., *Exploring Federalism*, 1987, pp. 67–89.
[6] Tilly, C., *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 1978.
[7] Kalyvas, S., *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 2006, pp. 91–115.

Myanmar's Crisis: Fragmented Resistance and an Overbearing Military

The current conflict in Myanmar is markedly defined by profound fragmentation. The Tatmadaw's strategy of "domination by devastation"[8] and "preemptive repression"[9] has ruined lives and burned down communities; however, it is still very hard to consolidate effective control. The other side, the resistance camp of NUG, EAOs, and PDFs, is riven by division and disunity although they battle a common enemy. In post-2023, some EAOs have held control of almost one-third of Myanmar; however, there is doubt regarding their territorial ambition, as most do not aspire beyond their ethnic regions and often prioritize their territorial autonomy over national unity. With decades of ethnic grievances against Myanmar's central political authority, many of these EAOs view the NUG as little more than a continuation of the Bamar-majoritarian institution that has long excluded them.[10] On the other hand, the PDFs are new in the game, and most of the scattered groups suffer from a lack of resources, a problem of not having a chain of command, and organizational discipline to effectively challenge the Tatmadaw, bearing the resemblance to post-colonial conflicts, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo's disorganized resistance movements.[11]

With overwhelming experiences and seizing the country's resources, the Tatmadaw has capitalized on these divisions within the resistance, employing a "divide and rule" strategy. Certain EAOs enjoy selective ceasefires, while others face relentless assaults and continuous bombing by fighter jets. From afar, Myanmar's struggle should have been over by now after three years of brave resistance against the mighty military by the civilians countrywide, but the lack of unity among resistance factions is probably the gravest threat to Myanmar's future. However, after four years of the conflict, there is no sign of winning on either side and no sign of resolution with perpetuating a prolonged, low-intensity conflict; only death and destruction of civilian lives prevail across the country.

Drawing on the discussion and findings of empirical chapters, this thesis argues that Myanmar's most viable path to stability lies in unity and federalism—to establish an institutional framework capable of embracing ethnic diversity while ensuring equitable power-sharing. The findings of the research show that it is not just the grievances of all parties after the 2021 coup; the root of the problem lies with the Tatmadaw's craving for a singular national identity that has systematically sidelined ethnic minorities, excluding them from political and economic decision-making, ignoring the promise of the Panglong federal agreement, and fueling decades of rebellion and unrest. Although federalism is not the only answer, if inclusively implemented, it can bring these protracted civil wars and

[8] Kalyvas, ibid.
[9] Davenport, C., *State Repression and the Domestic Democratic Peace*, 2007, pp. 75–103.
[10] Tønnesson, ibid.
[11] Nzongola-Ntalaja, G., *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila*, 2002, pp. 243–267.

longstanding grievances to an end by acknowledging the autonomy and cultural rights of Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups.

Nevertheless, the realization of this vision is easier said than done, and it depends upon the resolution of several profound challenges:

1. Trust Deficit: Myanmar's resistance movement is largely fragmented, and if we have to generalize the core problem, it will be the 'trust' issue among actors. While the main actors in the conflict, such as the National Unity Government (NUG), call for a federal democratic framework, it has struggled to earn the trust of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). Many of these groups saw the NUG as a continuation of the former government, the National League for Democracy (NLD) which seemed to ignore ethnic issues during its time and failed to put ethnic aspirations at the center, just like every other Myanmar central government before it.
2. Resource Sharing: For decades, the Tatmadaw and its elites have monopolized the country's lucrative resources for personal gain, neglected regional development initiatives, and hardly shared resources with ethnic groups, deepening inequalities and exacerbating tensions. It is extremely essential to distribute Myanmar's natural wealth equitably, especially in long-forgotten ethnic areas, as part of any federal arrangement.
3. Religious Freedom: Myanmar needs to establish absolute religious freedom in order to form an inclusive federal state. Condemning minorities because of their origin of religion can never foster national cohesion and justice. If we look particularly at the Rohingya case, therefore, it must be granted recognition and protection to foster national cohesion.[12]
4. Unified Federal Army: Although it is very difficult and very fragmented right now, incorporating EAO forces under one force with civilian oversight is probably one of the most important aspects to end the Tatmadaw's monopoly on violence and to have fair oversight of ethnic rights. Such a restructured federal army would ensure national security and enforce the principles of shared governance.

The Risk of Fragmentation

Without unifying federal democratic norms, Myanmar faces a perilous future of permanent fragmentation. EAOs might establish their territorial control, functioning as a de facto independent state, where development as a country falter. This path of Balkanization would only amplify regional instability and worsen the nation's humanitarian crisis. Evidently, Somalia's similar fragmentation was striking, where the collapse of central authority has brought out only chronic insecurity and persistent underdevelopment.[13]

[12] Tønnesson, S., 2021. Ibid.

[13] Menkhaus, Ken. "Somalia's Fragmentation." Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007, https://www.csis.org/analysis/somalias-fragmentation.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the current debate on the future of Myanmar by examining these challenges in detail. And it underscores the urgent need for a well-organized federal structure that would meet the aspirations of different ethnics and at the same time hold the country together. This paradigm, in turn, would pave the way for a stable and all-inclusive polity, and that, perhaps, would bring an end to this protracted civil conflict.

Purpose, Research Questions, and Significance

As I have already stated, Myanmar is at a crossroads, a protracted civil war weighing on decades of military dictatorship, ethnic grievances, and a deeply divided society. The 2021 military coup has exacerbated these divides, brought Myanmar's arduous democratic transition to an end, and cast the country back into mass violence and anarchy. The root cause of the conflict in Myanmar lies in its decades-long unresolved questions of identity, trust, the feeling of belonging and sharing resources, weak constitutional guarantees, and governance. How can Myanmar escape this vicious cycle of authoritarian traps? Is it possible to rebuild the country based on a federalism that acknowledges multiethnic aspiration and a history of marginalization? If so, how can state-building efforts address inclusion and sustainable peace while addressing the legacies of military dominance and ethnic exclusion? These questions form the core of this thesis. The primary purpose of this political ethnographic study is to explore the lived experiences of Myanmar's people—both civilians and leaders of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)—and bring out the grassroots perspective to better understand how ethnic identities have been marginalized within this turmoil of civil war.

This thesis attempts to determine state-building strategies that can integrate Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups into an inclusive federal democratic system by observing and analyzing the voices and perspectives of those directly involved in the conflict. To find out how ethnic identity and state design are connected in Myanmar, the study uses a qualitative, grounded approach that includes interviews, ethnographic analysis, content analysis, and participant observation.
The primary research question that motivates the present endeavor is as follows:

> ***How can Myanmar's anti-military resistance movement reconcile ethnic grievances and address the legacies of protracted civil war in order to construct a viable federal system that safeguards against democratic backsliding and fosters an inclusive, multi-ethnic, and stable political future?***

This broad inquiry is further deconstructed by the following sub-questions:

1. *What type of federal state and constitutional order model for post-authoritarian state-building will satisfy the imperatives of ethnic balance, political inclusion, and democratic governance?*
2. *Why has anti-junta resistance in Myanmar struggled to unite, and what are the institutions or historical factors underpinning this division?*
3. *What do ethnic armed organizations and anti-military resistance actors in Myanmar imagine as the political future of the country, and how can different visions coexist for a common, inclusive federal democratic framework?*

The thesis argues that Myanmar's present conflict is unlikely to be resolved without directly addressing historic ethnic grievances and the military's grip on politics that are deeply embedded within the institutional governance of Myanmar. The Tatmadaw's centralist and assimilationist philosophy, which underpins military domination, has demonized ethnic identities and destroyed Myanmar's national cohesion. As a matter of fact, the peace-building agenda, like NCAs (National Cease-Fire Agreements), risks perpetuating cycles of violence, as temporary ceasefires do not address the fundamental mistakes that drive conflict.

Research Gaps & Contributions

Most of the existing literature on the crisis in Myanmar heavily relies on structural analysis—regime typologies, institutional decay, elite behavior, and so on. For example, Turnell's Myanmar's Fifty-Year Authoritarian Trap (2011)[14] offers a longue durée structural account of how military rule became endemic in Myanmar, situating elite reproduction and institutional sclerosis at the heart of the state's pathologies. Similarly, *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multiethnic Union of Myanmar* (Kivimäki & Pasch 2009)[15] presents a conflict-mapping and structural conflict-sensitivity framework that foregrounds structural cleavages, institutional fragilities, and external interventions. Another influential structural lens is the typology of regime transitions used in work such as *Taking Stock of Myanmar's Political Transformation since 2010*[16], which emphasize regime types, institutional erosion, and path dependencies. Although these models are analytically illuminating, they also risk being armchair models, describing conflict from a distance, without the lived experiences and inner dynamics of the resistance. These approaches all show the shadow but not the substance of the conflict. The dissertation fills this gap by tackling the lived experience of resistance fighters, displaced civilians and marginalised ethnic voices—bringing to the forefront questions of moral ambivalence, adaptive strategies for survival and flexible alliance formations that structuralist models of the war tend to overlook.

14. Turnell, Sean. *Myanmar's Fifty-Year Authoritarian Trap*. Routledge, 2011. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829381.
15. Kivimäki, Timo, and Birte Pasch. *The Dynamics of Conflict in the Multiethnic Union of Myanmar*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2009. https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/07808.pdf.
16. Egreteau, Renaud. "Taking Stock of Myanmar's Political Transformation Since 2010." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2020, pp. 331–354. https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420905140.

This void in the literature is a result of two primary reasons. First, the logistical and ethical difficulties of the lack of access to firsthand accounts from some members of rebel participants or revolutionaries or war victims or their allies create significant barriers to obtaining such narratives as noted by Selth and Callahan (Selth 2018[17]; Callahan 1994[18]). Second, there exists a longstanding tendency among scholars to view dissidents and insurgents as unreliable sources of information (Selth 2009)[19]. Therefore, much of the literature on civil wars, such as Myanmar's, relies on elite narratives or abstract ideological frameworks, often leaving little space for grassroots actors who are directly engaged in or shaped by the conflict.

This fieldwork is the outcome of months of observation discussions, interviews, and participant observations, stemming from the very realization that the voices from ethnic minority perspectives are underrepresented in the research on the protracted conflict in Myanmar. Looking at the research from a transformative standpoint enabled me to foreground and amplify voices that are too often overlooked in the academy while providing a platform for people whose perspectives are crucial for conceptualizing the intricacies of Myanmar's journey towards nationhood. Based on interviews, observations in the field, and comparing theory, the study exposes the internal contradictions and logics in motion of a revolution that evades classical classification. These underrepresented perspectives are crucial to conceptualizing Myanmar's fractured journey toward nationhood.

This research also addresses three notable gaps in the existing literature:

1. While much has been written on the causes of ethnic conflict and the dynamics of Myanmar's civil war relying on structural analysis—regime typologies, institutional erosion, or elite behavior-there is limited analysis of social movement and regime changes, the lived experiences, and the inner dynamics of the resistance.
2. The issue of state-building in Myanmar has been dominated by elite discourses at the expense of the potential voice of the most marginalized, such as the revolutionaries and grassroots.
3. The potential new theoretical framework for social movements, suggested by this thesis, will go beyond the episodic frame of social movements by integrating historical institutionalism, macro-structural analysis, and micro-level grassroots perspectives to create a multidimensional model that could better explain the recurring cycles of authoritarianism, institutional fragility, and ethnic fragmentation that underpin social movements and conflicts such as in Myanmar.

17. Selth, Andrew. *Myanmar-Watching: Problems and Perspectives*. Griffith Asia Institute, Regional Outlook Paper No. 58, 2018, https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0034/272959/Regional-Outlook-Paper-58-Selth-web.pdf.
18. Callahan, Mary P. "Burmese Research Days, or: A Day in the Life of a Nearly Extinct Life-Form: A Foreign Researcher in Burma." *Southeast Asia Program Bulletin (Cornell University)*, Spring 1994, pp. 1–4, https://ecommons.cornell.edu/items/88d3ebb3-5f96-4a35-a612-5edff154ccf6.
19. Selth, Andrew. "A Reply to Des Ball: Burma's Nuclear Programs: A Need for Caution." *Security Challenges*, vol. 5, no. 4, 2009, pp. 133–137, https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/server/api/core/bitstreams/afec6771-57b9-5b5d-8b1e-4b0e6d89df2c/content.

This thesis has also contributed to its originality. It included original interviews with ethnic mid-level leaders and ex-parliamentarians, activists, ex-PDF (People's Defence Force) soldiers, and borderline NGO workers, each bringing perspective from the region, biography, and how they remain part of the pro-democracy movement. These interviews, from regions including Mandalay, Yangon, Shan, Karen, and Mon States, highlighted how the fight against the junta had impacted all layers of civic society. The participants aired not only their most pressing grievances but also much older ones, deeper reasons for the conflict, and deep-seated ethnic animosities that the central authorities of the country had long ignored. Equally important, these dialogues also revealed the daily realities of life under revolution: a world of fear, poverty, homelessness, and constant adjustment. Activists revealed how communities had maintained grassroots resistance amid such a life-threatening annihilation by the state, boycotting state institutions, and organizing local defense groups, and underground education networks. Former combatants and NGO workers described both the strategic shifts in the decentralized resistance and the emotional toll on those involved. The calls of ethnic representatives resonated the need to recognize past marginalization and establish authentic power-sharing arrangements. Altogether, the interviews not only charted the practical and ideological challenges of Myanmar's resistance; they also offered glimpses of the human side of revolution—tales of resilience, solidarity, and a collective desire for a peaceful, pluralistic future. This research expands upon typical top-down perspectives by drawing from the lived experiences of people on the frontlines of Myanmar's revolutionary movement. It explores the motivations, ambitions, and challenges of these players and gives a better idea of Myanmar's political struggles and the continuing attempts to rebuild a divided country.

While federalism is offered as a normative answer to Myanmar's "ethnic conflict," few studies have theorized its actual emergence within nondominant resistance and institutional void. This thesis fills that gap by conceiving of federalism not as an architecture but as an improvised, negotiated practice—fraught with contested authority, precarious alliances, and dilemmas of survival. Examining the dynamics of very long-term tension between symbolic legitimacy and material exhaustion, and between unity and fragmentation, it provides a frame for understanding both the potential and limitations of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. In the process, this work will contribute not just to Myanmar studies, but also to wider literatures on revolution, state failure, and resistance in disrupted post-colonial orders.

Practical Implications

This study found that it is essential to form inclusive federal institutions in developing a credible multinational state in Myanmar. Its findings are particularly important for politicians, academics, and international organizations who aspire to create real democracy in Myanmar, peace, and state-building. The dissertation details a process by which ethnic

marginalization births political mobilization and ultimately violence and provides a roadmap for institutional reforms that might engender peace and reconciliation.

In addition, the results also highlight the risks. Without significant federal reforms, Myanmar will risk heading toward extended, low-intensity conflict, entrenching cycles of violence and poverty. In contrast, a comprehensive federal arrangement, including transitional justice and facilitation from other countries, as this thesis proposes, could build a foundation for long-term stability and inclusive governance. This thesis suggested the practical application of a new border-contentious political theory framework, mainly for the challenges of democratic transitions in deeply divided societies.

Structure and Argument of the Thesis

First, this thesis systematically explores the historical roots of Myanmar's crises, the dynamics of resistance, the current civil war, and the potential pathways to a sustainable federal union. Beginning from Chapter 5, each subsequent chapter builds upon empirically grounded understandings—examining Myanmar's civil conflict—and a theoretical framework for the concluding argument: Myanmar needs a federal state for its long-term stability and inclusivity. The thesis proceeds as follows:

The first chapter opened by outlining the political landscape of Myanmar, describing years of flawed democratic transition, and operationalizing the 2021 military coup as a symptom of structural demise. It critically observes a historical and analytical perspective for understanding Myanmar's contentious politics, identity crisis, ethnic cleavages, and nation-building. Its analytical foundation is setting the stage for a better comprehension of Myanmar's fragmented ethnic politics. It traces Myanmar's diverse ethnicities and political cleavages through four main periods and pinpoints critical junctures. It explores where ethnic divisions might have begun and how they have perpetuated cycles of conflict and hindered nation-building. In its second part, it implements an extensive Myanmar's current conflict analysis of Myanmar based on the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis Framework and integrates the qualitative perspectives of stakeholders. It provides an analytical dive into the roles of the various players in the present-day Myanmar conflict–the Tatmadaw, NUG, People's Defense Forces (PDFs), and EAOs. After describing their strategies, alliances, and limits, this chapter highlights the danger of protracted slow-burning conflict and the potential for further fragmentation of the country.

Chapter 2 provides the methodological blueprint of the study by discussing political ethnography and qualitative techniques and the analytical strategies to which I adhere when discussing, interviewing, colleting, and analyzing the data. It emphasizes how I conduct in-depth interviews and participant observations and do ethnographic content analysis, which serves as the grounded approach to comprehending Myanmar's crisis. The chapter also reflects on the ethical and logistical challenges of my research while

conducting fieldwork in a high-risk conflict environment and details my positionality, including the advantages and limitations of being an Indigenous researcher. This chapter also discusses strategies for data validation and risk mitigation.

The third chapter details the conceptual framework and theoretical insights that I mainly used to analyze and to frame Myanmar's crisis through the lenses of democratic backsliding, contentious politics, federalism, and conflict resolution. It critically examines the impact of the Tatmadaw's authoritarian governance on ethnic identity politics. It also argues for philosophical ideas and the relative merits of federal models that could address the aspirations of Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups. It sets the stage for later discussions and suggestions on federal models tailored to Myanmar's unique context.

The fourth chapter starts an empirical analysis of my interviews and begins the analysis of Myanmar's 2021 coup d'état and its consequences. It determines its causes, dynamics, and consequences. It applies theories of social change and contentious politics to understand the uprising and its evolution into armed resistance. The analysis argues that the military coup and its cruelty have pushed the political belief of the general population that armed resistance was the only way while shrinking the political opportunity for a peaceful resolution. The chapter delves deeper into those aspects of mobilization, state repression, and the shift from non-violent activism to armed struggle.

The fifth chapter delves into the understanding of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) within Myanmar's resistance, employing an analysis of personal narratives. This chapter offers a qualitative analysis of the CDM and its effects on the lives of people and communities. It examines the CDM's position in a wider context of social movements and contentious politics unfolding across the country. A critical evaluation of the CDM's effectiveness in the face of brutal state repression was analyzed. The chapter ends with reflections about the resilience of the CDM and its wider significance for Myanmar's future direction.

The sixth chapter relies on secondary data and performs an ethnographic content analysis of the visions of EAO leaders and ethnic communities for their place in the future Myanmar. The chapter expands on the ethnic leaders' visionary future federal models—confederation, asymmetrical federalism, and cooperative federalism—and applies them based on the views of the interviewed EAO leaders. It goes further to analyze the pragmatic and ideological obstacles osmotically embedded in the pragmatism of turning such federalist notions into feasible realities, alongside the pivotal tenets of transitional justice infrastructures, distributive resource-sharing arrangements, and inclusion. In its second part, it systematically evaluates federal models in the context of Myanmar's political complication, discussing their conceptual foundations, practical applications in diverse

contexts around the world, and their limitations or suitability within the specific context of Myanmar. It thoroughly discusses distinct federal models and subsequently proposes two hybrid democratic federal frameworks meticulously tailored to Myanmar's unique challenges.

Chapter 7 adds a discussion of the findings and potential avenues for a new, broader theoretical framework for social movements. As we have seen through the previous chapters, Myanmar's generations-long ethnic grievances stem from systemic exclusion and military domination, which have resulted in intractable conflict and instability. Finally, the second half of this chapter presents a new theoretical framework called 'Broader Contentious Political Theory (BCPT)'. In its synthesis of controversial political theory, historical institutionalism, state-building theory, identitarian politics, and populist perspectives, BCPT provides a nuanced and holistic explanation for Myanmar's long-lasting civil war. Applying this analytical framework to the case of Myanmar and the evolution of its institutions, this paper identifies these inflection points, which include independence (1948), the military coup of 1962, the 1988 popular uprising, and the 2021 coup, as critical moments that determined the path of institutionalization. That process is best understood through a combination of macro-structural analysis (which sheds light on the fracturing of governance and the logic of mobilization and state violence) and grassroots observation (which documents the myriad forms of dissent through which local communities are confronting authoritarianism). Beyond the academic scope, BCPT also seeks to contribute to sound and actionable policy research in a conflict-affected country like Myanmar.

Conclusion

This thesis ends with the admonition of how pressing is Myanmar's unfinished national question. The nation is currently at a critical juncture, with prospects for federal reform and inclusive government competing with ongoing risks of renewed authoritarianism and conflict. And even an internal trajectory, on which more hopes are often placed, would be fraught with tensions: the legacies of suspicion between ethnic groups; the asymmetries in power among center and periphery; the practical difficulties of creating functional institutions. On the other hand, the danger of political retrenchment and fragmentation always looms – not as a pure another political option, but as an option that can intersect with and ever infiltrate moments of change.

By bridging the views of grassroots actors with existing theoretical frameworks, this study points to opportunities and limits of political change in Myanmar. It is not offering a binary between peace and repression, but by putting on full display the multifaceted layers of resistance, negotiation and compromise that will guide this country's path. The study thus calls for sustained scholarly and policy engagement with the structural, relational, and

everyday dimensions of conflict transformation in Myanmar—understanding that the future will yield unequal, contingent and contested; yet no less urgent for it.

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Making of a Fragmented State - Historical Fragmentation and the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis Approach

Is Myanmar's political system just institutionally deficient, or is it structurally and inherently incapable of supporting a democratic political order? This question—though often addressed in theoretical terms within political science and institutional analysis—is, in fact, deeply personal for me and for fifty million citizens. For us, it is not a theoretical question, but an embodied truth forged in decades of authoritarian consolidation. The pattern of repeated military coups in Myanmar is not a result of episodic failure but of a system constitutively structured to produce authoritarianism. With every coup, the military gets better at consolidating its own power, stifling criticism, and hollowing out democratic institutions. The deeper one digs into this history, the clearer it becomes that repression is not a temporary but a deeply embedded structural characteristic of the state. For those of us who were born under its authoritarian mercy, governance is less theoretical than quotidian—whether through coercion, daily brutality, corruption, precarity, or the overwhelming absence of political accountability. Therefore, the answer to the above question, painful as it may be, is unavoidable: Myanmar's political system is not broken; it has been deliberately constructed to resist democratic transformation.

In the beginning of my ethnographic interviews, one evening after an hour-long conversation, an old friend of mine who sat across from me, an exiled political activist now living in Mae Sot, made an overwhelming claim. As I unfold my analysis of the country's crisis—of its fractured ethnic relations, of the military's hegemonic grip on power, of the unresolved tensions in its social structure, and of the institutional weaknesses that plague any attempts at true democratization—he simply smiled at me.
Then, with a quiet certainty, he said:

> *"No offense, my friend, but I think you're overcomplicating it. There's really just one problem in our country: the military and its authoritarian mindset. Nothing else. Take that out of the equation, and most of Myanmar's political problems will eventually resolve themselves. You know Myanmar people. We are not wild, lawless creatures. We have a strong and lovingkindness moral culture, a deep sense of community. If we had the space to govern ourselves—without the Tatmadaw's interference—we could shape a democracy in our own way, one that actually works for us. Without the military standing in our way, peace and prosperity wouldn't be impossible."* (Interview #2)[1]

1. Burmese Activist, Yangon, Interview #2. See chapter 2 for how I interview them.

I sat in silence, letting his words settle. He was not denying that there were complexities to Myanmar's struggles, but he was slicing through the academic layers I had been building in my mind. It was a simple yet profound truth: the military is not just a part of the problem—it is the problem. The cycles of instability, the suppression of movements, and the ethnic conflicts were exacerbated for political gain—all of it traces back to the military's omnipresence in Myanmar's political life.

On the other hand, experts like Marco Bünte [2] and Mary Callahan [3] have, for a long time, maintained that Myanmar has never known a genuine democracy but only a form of oscillation that surrounds authoritarianism, military dominance, and quasi-civilian rule. The notion that Myanmar's political development is at all similarly situated under the framework of classical democratic theory—a concept rooted in Western liberal thought—is probably akin to trying to fit Cinderella's glass shoe on a Burmese girl who has only ever known to wear a slipper. And the incoherence in the conceptual juxtaposition is evident; Myanmar's socio-political fabric is shaped by different historical experiences, cultural influences, and normative frameworks that do not neatly mirror Western understandings of democratic transition. Theravāda Buddhism is probably the most influential in the political psyche of modern Myanmar and shapes most of its social and political norms.

Some may contend that this religious tradition has fostered a rigid caste-like hierarchy; however, it would be reductive to suggest that the Buddhist ethos inherently predisposes Myanmar toward authoritarianism. In contrast, Buddhist philosophy is fundamentally concerned with the notion of individual agency, ethical governance, and the rejection of tyranny. For example, a doctrine was preached by the Buddha himself in his *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* (DN 26), in which he stressed the moral obligations of leaders and warned of the dangers of despotic leadership. The just ruler—dhammarāja—must rule through dhamma (righteousness) and not with force, which aligned with the spirit of democratic rule[4]. Furthermore, in Mahāparinibbāna sutta (DN 16), the Buddha clearly spoke against autocracy and endorsed consensus-based decision-making, a form of decision making supported by some scholars to be similar to deliberative democracy [5].

This provides a counterargument to the notion that authoritarianism is hardwired into Myanmar's political DNA. In fact, Myanmar's Theravāda-derived Buddhist tradition offers, when observed through the lens of its philosophy, a mode of ethical governance that is much more compatible with liberal values than with military dictatorship. The notion

2. Bünte, Marco. "Myanmar's Protracted Transition: Arenas, Actors, and Outcomes." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2016, pp. 27–55.ResearchGate+1https://jstor.org+1
3. Callahan, Mary P. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Cornell University Press, 2003.
4. Gokhale, Balkrishna Govind. "Early Buddhist Kingship." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1966, pp. 15–22.
5. Keyes, Charles F. "Buddhism and National Integration in Thailand." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1967, pp. 551–567.

of 'you are your own light' is also particularly well expressed in the Attadīpa Sutta (SN 22.43) by the Buddha himself and emphasizes the significance of self-assertion, self-determination, personal autonomy, individual agency, and personal freedom; this is perfectly congruent with the principles of liberal democracy. [6]

So, if Myanmar's political culture isn't rooted in authoritarianism, where does the Myanmar military regime's deep-seated autocracy originate? That answer does not probably rest in culture or in religion but in specific institutional and individual actors—most saliently, the Myanmar military known as Tatmadaw. For decades, the Tatmadaw has established itself as a predatory institution enshrined in a self-legitimating cycle of authoritarian power. The military is not just a state apparatus in Myanmar but a hegemonic force that consolidates power through coercion, nationalist narratives, and infiltration of institutions[7]. Like every archetypal villain in mythology, the Tatmadaw has cast itself in the role of the unyielding antagonist in Myanmar's democratic effort.

However, we also need to scrutinize Myanmar's authoritarianism in its regional context. Across Southeast Asia, democratic consolidation, as theorized by Samuel Huntington[8] , has remained an elusive goal. Countries in the region have various hybrid regimes characterized by the presence of nominal democratic institutions alongside deeply entrenched authoritarian structures. Thailand has experienced a pattern of military coups; Cambodia has yet to escape a form of one-party rule; Vietnam and Laos are one-party communist states; and even Indonesia and the Philippines, for some regarded as success stories of democratization, are trending toward consolidation of power through populist or illiberal rule[9]. Then, it raises an important question: Are Myanmar's political struggles to be understood in isolation, or are they part of a larger regional phenomenon in which authoritarian resilience is the norm, rather than the exception?

Indeed, this thesis had no desire to delve into a comparative regional study, as it remained primarily concerned with Myanmar's political trajectory and current crisis. What is clear, however, is that Myanmar's democratic deficit is not a cultural or religious inevitability. Rather, it is the result of deliberate actions by an entrenched military elite whose power relies on subjugation rather than governance, coercion rather than consensus, and repression rather than representation. If Myanmar is to genuinely democratize, the ultimate challenge will not simply be institutional reform but the toppling of an authoritarian military apparatus that for decades has been the greatest impediment to democracy.
Currently, Myanmar has been thrown back into a deeper crisis of military coup and very

6. Keyes, Charles F. Ibid.
7. Taylor, Robert H. *The State in Myanmar*. Hurst & Company, 2009.
8. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.
9. Case, William. "Stress Testing Leadership in Malaysia and Thailand: The 1MDB Scandal and the Death of King Bhumibol." *The Pacific Review*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2017, pp. 152–170.

intense civil war again, as I have mentioned in the introduction. The country's authoritarian trap is probably not a result of societal culture or failure of its dominant religion, but a structure produced by institutional failures with a structurally embedded system driven by militarized domination. As my fieldwork progressed (see details in chapters 2,4,5 & 6), it has become increasingly apparent that Myanmar's divided opposition is not simply a tactical stratagem but lies deeper in historical roots with unresolved ideological cleavages and suspicion. Despite their loathing of military rule, many EAOs largely demurred from participating in the wider anti-coup struggle or joining forces with central resistance—seeing them as a continuation of the ex-NLD political order that had long promised, but failed to deliver, federated and inclusive politics. These reservations popped up again and again in my interviews. Realizing it, I had to make a methodological transition: if I were to understand the crisis, I had to inquire about not just the current crisis but the historical roots of ethnic division. By examining the historical origins of interethnic distrust, especially in the context of contentious politics, one is able to reveal how colonial policies, postcolonial state formation, and majoritarian nationalism have reproduced an environment in which ethnonational grievances are never addressed. What now looks like political disintegration is rather an expression of historical processes of marginalization, state violence, and contested sovereignty. The section that follows takes us beyond institutional critique to speak to the historical and theoretical roots of Myanmar's ethnic cleavages—without which no sustainable political future can be envisioned. At the end of my research trip to Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son along the Thai–Myanmar border, in combination with online interviews, I conducted 46 in-depth interviews (as shown below in table 1.1 and 1.2) that foreground grassroots voices and perspectives which are otherwise absent in the dominant literature.

Table 1.1: Participant Lists of in-person Interviews (From March 2023 to May 2023)

No.#	Participants	Interviewing Area	Interviewees Original region	Male/Female /. Diverse	Date	Language Conducted
1	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Mandalay	M	April 2023	Burmese
2	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Yangon	M	April 2023	Burmese
3	Burmese CDM teacher	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Yangon	F	April 2023	Burmese
4	Shan/Da Nu Ethnic	Mae Hong Sog (Thailand)	Taunggyi/Shan State	F	May 2023	Burmese
5	Shan Ethnic	Mae Hong Sog (Thailand)	Taunggyi/ Shan State	M	May 2023	Burmese
6	Burmese NUG shadow government officer	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Pegu	M	April 2023	Burmese
7	Burmese NUG shadow government officer	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Karen States	F	April 2023	Burmese

8	Karen Ethnic	Mae Hong Sog (Thailand)	Karen States	F	May 2023	Burmese
9	Karen Ethnic Fighter (Officer)	Mae Hong Sog (Thailand)	Karen States	M	May 2023	Burmese & Karen language Interpreter
10	Burmese NUG shadow government officer	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Ayerwaddy	M	April 2023	Burmese
11	Burmese CDM doctor	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Yangon	F	April 2023	Burmese
12	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Monywa	F	April 2023	Burmese
13	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Monywa	M	April 2023	Burmese
14	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Myaung Mya	M	April 2023	Burmese
15	Former PDF solider	Online	Yinmapin	M	May 2024	Burmese

Table 1.2: Participant Lists of online Interviews (From August 2023 to August 2024)

No. #	Participants	Interviewing Area	Interviewees Original region	Male/ Female/ Diverse	Date	Language Conducted
16	Burmese Activist	Online	Mandalay	M	Jan 2024	Burmese
17	Burmese Activist	Online	Yangon	M	Jan 2024	Burmese
18	Burmese Activist	Online	Yangon	F	Jan 2024	Burmese
19	Burmese Activist	Online	Taunggyi/Shan State	F	May 2024	Burmese
20	Burmese Activist	Online	Taunggyi/ Shan State	M	May 2024	Burmese
21	Burmese Activist	Online	Sagaing	M	April 2024	Burmese
22	Burmese Activist	Online	Mon region	F	April 2024	Burmese
23	A Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) official	Online	Karen States	M	May 2024	Burmese
24	Burmese Activist	Online	Karen States	M	May 2024	Burmese
25	Burmese Activist	Online	Ayerwaddy	M	Feb 2024	Burmese
26	Burmese NLD ex-parliamentarian	Online	Yangon	F	Feb 2024	Burmese
27	Burmese Activist	Online	Monywa	F	Feb 2024	Burmese
28	Burmese Activist	Online	Monywa	M	May 2024	Burmese
29	Burmese Activist	Online	Myaung Mya	M	May 2024	Burmese
30	Burmese Activist	Online	Hinthata	M	May 2024	Burmese
31	Burmese Activist	Mae Sot (Thailand)	Hinthata	M	April 2023	Burmese
32	Former PDF solider	Online	Sagaing	M	May 2024	Burmese
33	Karen Ethnic (EAO) Middle Ranked Officer	Online	Hpaan	M	March 2024	Burmese
34	Shan Ethnic	Online	Taunggyi	M	March 2024	Burmese
35	A Chinese born in Mandalay and a Myanmar citizen	Online	Mandalay	M	December 2023	Burmese
36	A Businessman in Yangon (a small trading firm owner)	Online	Yangon	M	December 2023	Burmese

37	Mon Ethnic Leader	Online	Mon State	M	March 2024	Burmese
38	Burmese Activist	Online	Bagan	M	March 2024	Burmese
39	Burmese Activist	Online	Bagan	M	March 2024	Burmese
40	Burmese Activist	Online	Myingyan	M	March 2024	Burmese
41	Burmese Activist	Online	Myingyan	M	March 2024	Burmese
42	A Businessman in Mandalay (a small trading firm)	Online	Mandalay	M	March 2024	Burmese
43	NGO worker at the Borderline , Maesot, Thailand	Online	Yangon	M	March 2024	Burmese
44	NGO worker at the Borderline , Maesot, Thailand	Online	Yangon	M	March 2024	Burmese
45	NGO worker at the Borderline , Maesot, Thailand	Online	Yangon	M	March 2024	Burmese

1.1 Historical Analysis: The Roots of Ethnic Cleavages, and the Struggle for Nationhood

This section introduces the central assumption of the project: that any rigorous exploration of the contemporary political chaos in Myanmar needs to start from a historically informed examination of ethnic fragmentation. Ethnic division in Myanmar constitutes the central axis along which its contested nationhood has been shaped, negotiated, and violently resisted. Absent this analytic footing, later discussion of armed resistance, democratic collapse, or political mobilization is in danger of being ahistorical and analytically superficial.

From my field interviews (see details in chapters 4 to 6) with exile political actors in Myanmar's periphery emerges one decisive argument for emphasizing ethnic fragmentation. Some of my ethnic interviewees offered many hints at unspoken grudges or suppressed grievances and withheld narratives—intimations that behind the facade of diplomatic or ideological alignment stand unhealed historical wounds. And yet this guardedness, seen over and over, speaks not to indifference but to a larger political calculus: that ethnic grievances remain the primary vector through which both collaboration with and resistance to central state actors are articulated.

The becoming of Myanmar’s Tatmadaw, its colonial mindset and its continuity cannot be understood without analyzing the British colonial and postcolonial development of ethnic relations in Burma and how Bamar nationalism emerged, including the current landscape

of resistance and revolutionary struggles. The colonial ethos of ethnic categorization, selective recruitment, and politicization of identity—characteristics of the British 'divide and rule' policy—did not vanish after independence. Instead, they ossified into the state architecture, making nation-building a site of contestation rather than consolidation. The absence of the development of a real federal approach to governance under successive governments (despite such promises as the 1947 Panglong Agreement) has bred a deep distrust of the center. These early policy disasters, combined with the military coup of 1962, deepened the divide between the ethnic state and everyone else. Federal aspirations were cruelly crushed; ethnic armed organizations emerged, not as spatially confined insurgencies, but as enduring political entities challenging the legitimacy of the state. The expectations of a federal state have been brutally dispelled; ethnic armed organizations emerged as ongoing political actors to the state's own legitimacy. This analytical framework further provocatively challenges the predominant paradigms of conflict and state-building studies of Myanmar, which all too often treat ethnic identities as pre-existing and stable and democracy's path to consolidation as straight and linear. Semi-majoritarian democracy (2011-2020), instead of resolving inter-ethnic tensions, has more often than not reinforced them and has resulted in the empowerment of the majority group and marginalization of the minority. In this way, Myanmar stands as an embodiment of the contradictions of democratization within multiethnic postcolonial states, where formal political reforms often skirt ruled questions of representation, autonomy, and historical justice.

1.1.1 The First Cleavage (1886–1945): Ethnic Separation and Colonial Militarization

Colonial Conquest and Administrative Division

To understand modern Myanmar's fractured state, we must begin with British colonial rule. The British conquest over Myanmar (which was called 'Burma) unfolded in three phases (1824–1885), ending with annexation in 1886. The British imposed a dual administration: "Ministerial Burma" under direct rule and "Frontier Areas" governed by local elites. This setup weakened Burman resistance by empowering ethnic minorities and Indian troops.[10] The outcome was classic 'divide and rule.' In "Upper Burma," indirect governance allowed minority leaders to retain influence; "Lower Burma" faced harsh colonial rule. This chapter identifies four methods the British used to fracture the state: (1) Administrative separation of minorities and Burmans. (2) Official classification of 135 ethnic groups. (3) Selective military recruitment of minorities. (4) Massive Indian immigration that worsened economic and ethnic tensions.[11]

Ethnic Categorization and Fragmentation

Ministerial Burma, dominated by Burmans (60–70%), also included Mon, Karen, and

10. Selth, A. *Colonial Intelligence and the Origins of the State in Burma*, Griffith University, 2015, pp. 12–14.
11. Callahan, Mary P. *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 73–75.

Rakhine groups. “Frontier Areas” contained Shan, Kachin, Chin, Karen, and Karenni peoples.[12] British ethnic classifications turned flexible identities into rigid categories. Recognizing 135 ethnic groups helped execute divide-and-rule and fragmented national unity.[13] Therefore, British-drawn administrative lines broke traditional ethnic and religious bonds. Indian-born colonial officers imposed alien structures, while Victorian-era maps ignored local realities.[14] The Frontier Areas, which include Shan, Kachin, Chin, and Karenni States, were administered separately. The “chiefs” pledged allegiance to the colonial state, which overthrew the monarchy.[15] Feudal structures in these regions deepened ethnic divisions that shaped post-colonial politics. The Karenni retained nominal independence until 1948. The Shan and Kachin had partial autonomy. This setup fueled identity-based politics and later conflict over federalism and self-rule.[16,17]

Colonial Militarism and Ethnic Nationalism

British military policy embodied divide-and-rule. Ethnic minorities joined the army; Burmans were excluded. This built separate nationalist sentiments among minorities.[18] Favoritism extended into politics and education. Christian Karens were given state jobs and status, deepening cultural and territorial divides. As Callahan[19] notes, “simplifications along racial and territorial lines” created boundaries that still divide Myanmar. Central Burmans had little interaction with the legally distinct Frontier Areas (see Map 1). By 1931, the impact of the colonial recruitment policy was clear. Although the Burmans accounted for 75 percent of the population but just 12 percent of the armed forces, and the Karen, scarcely over 10 percent of the population, made up almost 38 percent of the armed forces. [20] The disproportion of ethnic minorities contributed to a sense of perceived colonial collaborators, which evoked resentment and fueled ethnic divisions. At the same time Burman nationalists demanded greater access to higher education and the right to local self-government but failed to realize.

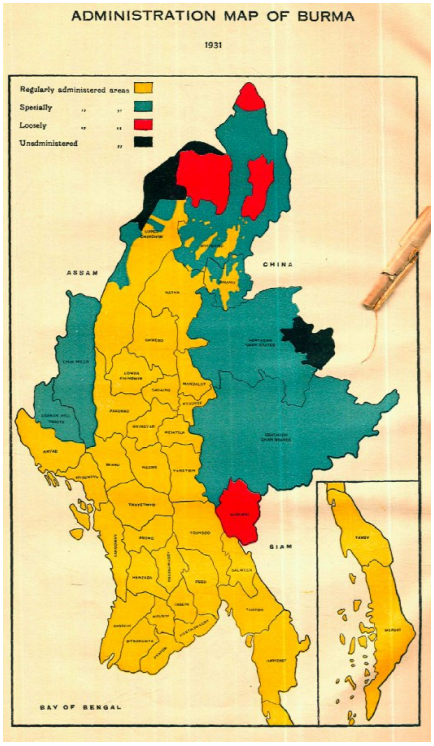
Contentious Politics and the Sayar San Uprising

The Sayar San Movement and nationalist uprisings were essential in challenging colonial rule. Ethnic tensions were inflamed by recruitment policies and economic disparities, especially Burman hostility toward Indian landlords and laborers, which erupted into anti-

12. Smith, M., *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, 1999, p. 109.
13. Gravers, M., *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma: An Essay on the Historical Practice of Power*, Curzon Press, 1999, p. 56.
14. Smith, M., *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, 1999, p. 115.
15. Thant Myint-U, *The Making of Modern Burma*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 165.
16. Crosthwaite, C.H.T., *The Pacification of Burma*, Frank Cass, 1912, p. 5.
17. Ibid., p. 21.
18. Smith, M., *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, Zed Books, 1999, p. 42.
19. Callahan, M., *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*, Cornell University Press, 2003, p. 45.
20. Myanmá thamàin hpyityap ahman-myà yèithàpyúzú ahpwé [Myanmar Historical Commission]. 1990. Tàin’yìnthà lumyò-myà ayèi hnín 1947 acheigan úpadei [The Indigenous Races and the 1947 Constitution, Vol. 1]. Yangoun-myó: Tekkatho-myà pounhneiptaik [Rangoon: Universities Press].

Indian riots in 1920, 1924, and 1931.[21] Despite ideological differences, nationalist groups united against foreign influence and preferential treatment of minorities. Buddhist monks led the resistance, particularly in the Sayar San rebellion of 1930–31.[22]it was preceded by the 1920 Rangoon University boycott—commemorated as National Day—protesting British education policy. This paved the way for limited reforms: the diarchy constitution and Legislative Council. Yet these excluded frontier areas, like the Shan states, show the limits of colonial concessions. A national martyr, monk U Wisara, died on hunger strike in 1929 for anti-colonial activism, symbolizing the strength of resistance.[23]

Map 1.1. Loosely administered British Burma map in 1931



Source: quoted in Thant Myint U 2023, https://x.com/thantmyintu/status/1049662126304837635

Burma, once the world's top rice exporter due to the Suez Canal and the U.S. Civil War, saw this prosperity come at a cost. Farmers faced high taxes and interest from Indian Chettiar lenders after the British denied public agricultural financing.[24] The 1930 Sayar San-led uprising, provoked by economic crisis and tax pressure, mobilized ~10,000 peasants. Harsh taxation spread unrest from Shwebo to other areas. Over 18 months, more than

21. Silverstein, J., *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation*, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 211.
22. Lewy, G., "Militant Buddhist Nationalism: The Case of Burma," *Journal of Church and State*, 14(1), 1972, pp. 19–21. & 19 Hayward, S., & Frydenlund, I., "Religion, Secularm, and the Pursuit of Peace in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 17(4), 2019, pp. 5–7.
23. Egreteau, R., "Burma (Myanmar) 1930–2007," *Mass Violence & Resistance*, 2009, pp. 17–19.
24. Scott, J. C., *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 120–27.

3,000 rebels were killed; 128 were hanged.[25] Sayar San's declaration expressed a focused opposition to colonial oppressors rather than ethnic minorities, stating:

> *"I must declare war for the advantage of Rahan (monks), religion, and the populace." My intention is not to subjugate the populace. Only the English are our adversaries. We will just suppress the adversaries. We do not intend to subjugate Indians, Chinese, Shans, and Karens. A pardon will be granted upon your surrender and the relinquishment of your weapons. Those who concede and acknowledge their mistakes will receive clemency.[26]*

But British repression—which relied largely on the recruitment of ethnic minority forces—only fueled distrust between Burmans and the minority groups. [27] The Sayar San revolt and nationalisms are indicative of the complexity of contestational politics in colonial Burma. Bureaucratic segregation and colonial repression cemented these divisions, and legacies continued after independence as an ethnically divided postcolonial Burma with never-ending violence. These events generated a lasting mistrust and hampered nation-building in Myanmar.

Rise of Burman Nationalism under Japanese Occupation

The early 20th century saw surging nationalism across Southeast Asia. Political awakening followed in Burma on the heels of World War I. Western-educated elites led this movement. It had been emboldened by the likes of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in 1906 and, three decades later, the Rangoon University Students' Union in 1931. 28 Influences from Gandhi's Indian Congress and campaigns for Irish independence inspired and organized resistance. The economic collapse and the Great Depression in the 1930s shattered Burma's rice economy, worsening resentments. After the 1930 Indo-Burman riots, the Dobama Asiayone ("We Burmans Association") was born, advocating cultural revival through dress, language, and literature. Inspired by Irish and Indian models, they viewed native collaborators as betraying Burmese identity. As Kei Nemoto notes, they drew a line between "Our Burma" and "Their Burma."[29] Burman resentment grew as Karen troops suppressed major protests: the 1936 student strike, the 1938 general strike, and Sayar San's revolt. Ethnic minority military units were increasingly seen as colonial enforcers.

WWII, Japanese Invasion, and Ethnic Militarization

The outbreak of WWII in 1939 provided Burmese nationalists an opportunity with Britain.

25. Leong, J., "Whose Nation is This? Conceptualizing Burmese National Identity Through Case Studies of Inter-Ethnic Conflict," *Honors Theses*, 2022, pp. 57–58.
26. Ibid., p. 59.
27. Ibid. p. 61.
28. SALEM-GERVAIS, N., & METRO, R. (2012). "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building: The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar." *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 27–78.
29. Nemoto, K. (2000). *The Nationalist Movement in Burma, 1920–1940.* Kyoto University Press, pp. 65–68.

But Thakin leaders, like Aung San and U Nu, refused to support the war and were expelled from Rangoon University. In 1939, Aung San co-founded the Communist Party and the People's Revolutionary Party (later the Socialist Party), joining the Freedom Bloc with student groups and monks.[30]

Fleeing British surveillance, Aung San traveled to China but was intercepted by Japanese agents. Colonel Suzuki's Minami Kikan offered him support, and he recruited 29 men—the "Thirty Comrades"—to train in Japan. In December 1941, as Japan invaded Burma, the Burma Independence Army (BIA) was formed.[31] The Japanese, aiming to cut supply lines to China, used the BIA—composed mainly of Burmans—to penetrate Burma. Meanwhile, the British armed minorities like the Karen. BIA recruitment focused on Lower Burma's Burman majority, excluding the overrepresented Karen from the colonial army.

The disparity had resulted in a widespread mayhem inflicted by BIA forces upon Karen villagers, including the torching of 400 villages and the deaths of nearly 1,800 civilians in early 1942.[32] On the eve of independence, Karen leader Saw Tha Din singled out wartime atrocities as the fundamental issue between the Burmese and Karen. The Burman majority-dominated BIA's absorption into the post-independence army repelled minorities and strengthened separatism. Political fragmentation and militarization followed. The Japanese occupation (1942–45) further fractured identities and prioritized militarization over unification.[33]

British colonialism had already fostered a fractured plural society with administrative structures that encouraged ethnic segmentation. Like in Indonesia, colonial Burma institutionalized political division by geography and ethnicity**.** Upon returning in 1945/46, British officials encountered a countryside saturated with arms from Allied dumps and insurgent groups. Karen militias retained weaponry and were emboldened by Britain's unfulfilled promises of self-rule.[34]

Contemporary theories that relate the exclusion of ethnic non-Buddhists from Myanmar's military hierarchy to colonial legacies are compelling. [35] British "divide-and-rule," combined with ethnic classification and selective military conscription, created the basis for militarized nationalism. These inherited structures still haunt Myanmar's ethnopolitical cleavages. Even as the dominant nationalist entity, the Dobama Asiayone was distrusted in the post-colonial period by the minority ethnic groups from the colonial era,

30. Manager, S. (2014). "The Burmese Nationalist Elite's Pre-Independence Exploration of a National Development Road." *Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia*
31. Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity.* London: Zed Books, pp. 57–58.
32. Callahan, M. P. (1990). *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 108–110.
33. Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung (2012). *The "Other" Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle Without Arms.* Lanham: Lexington Books, p. 95.
34. Clarke, S. L., Sein Myint, S. A., & Siwa, Z. Y. (2019). *RE-EXAMINING ETHNIC IDENTITY IN MYANMAR.* https://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Re-Examining-Ethnic-Identity-in-Myanmar.pdf
35. Ibid

and nationalist rhetoric further antagonized relations between ethnics for decades. These rifts hindered reconciliation and contributed to a weak political landscape post-independence in Myanmar.

1.1.2 The Second Cleavage (1945–1948): Federal Promise, British Retreat

A key question in Burma's political evolution is whether British or Japanese governance made militarization more likely. Both used divide-and-rule—Britain favored minorities, and Japan allied with majority Burmans—amplifying ethnic cleavages. While prewar administrative systems enabled tax and judicial functions, these did not guarantee a stable state. Although the AFPFL emerged as a major nationalist actor, the rise of military dominance was not inevitable. [36]

British Withdrawal

The AFPFL pursued independence through a pragmatic, elite-driven approach rather than radical reform, weakening Britain's attempt to restore prewar leadership. Communist elements strengthened the AFPFL's influence, escalating strikes and weakening British control. By late 1946, the AFPFL had unified its factions, increasing its leverage.[37] During major labor strikes in 1946, the AFPFL blamed British policy. In contrast to Marxist agitation in Malaya or Singapore, Burma's unrest reflected radical nationalism**.** With mass support through rallies and street protests, the AFPFL was invited to form an interim government. This led to the Aung San–Attlee Agreement of January 1947, paving the way for independence in 1948.[38]

The Panglong Agreement: Federal Ideal and Broken Commitments

The 1947 Panglong Agreement became a symbolic but flawed attempt at federalism. Intended to integrate ethnic minorities into a unified state, it was marked by vague commitments, missing groups, and rising mistrust.[39] A major issue was the exclusion of the Karen, whose KNU refused to sign, fearing Burman dominance. This set the stage for long-term conflict.[40] Another problem was ambiguity in key terms like "autonomy." Though promising "full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas," the agreement lacked detail. The Burman-led government interpreted it narrowly, leaving minorities feeling betrayed.[41]Aung San, AFPFL leader and federalist advocate, pushed for voluntary ethnic unity, famously promising, "one kyat for every kyat Burma received."[42] After his assassination in

36. Slater, D. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 263–266.
37. Silverstein, J. (1991). *Burmese Nationalist Movements, 1940–48*. University of Hawaii Press, pp. 188, 226.
38. Ibid., p. 235.
39. Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books, pp. 42–46.
40. Walton, M. J. (2008). "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong." *Asian Survey*, 48, p. 896.
41. Schein, J. K. (2013). *Ethnofederalism and the Accommodation of Ethnic Minorities in Burma: United They Stand*. Naval Postgraduate .
42. Maung, M. *Aung San of Burma*. Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1962, p. 188.

1947, the military filled the leadership vacuum with a less federal vision.[43] Ethnic selection further harmed the agreement. Groups like the Karenni, Mon, and Arakanese were excluded. The Karen attended as observers, pursuing independent talks with the British—showcasing stark societal divisions.[44]

The Federal Dilemma and Its Aftermath

While Panglong laid the groundwork for ethnofederalism, its implementation faltered. Promises of autonomy were not realized, fueling insurgencies among groups like the Karen and Shan. Silverstein argues Panglong's vision was compromised by Bamar centralization of power.[45] The ideals of Panglong are still calling for an aspiration towards federalism and inclusiveness. But its failure—through exclusions, vague assurances, and the loss of Aung San—ignited enduring suspicion and violence. [46] Today, a "spirit of Panglong" informs peace endeavors such as the National Ceasefire Agreement. However, reconciliation requires addressing the root causes of Panglong's collapse and the enduring power struggles. [47]

1.1.3 The Third Cleavage (1948–1962) Post-Independence: Chaos and Militarization

The early years of Myanmar's independence were characterized by instability in its nascent parliamentary democracy. Years immediately after the country gained independence in 1948 from British colonial rule were marred by internal fighting, most notably a civil war involving three key groups.[48] Yet while distinct ethnic Union States were created under the subsequent 1947 constitution for the Shan, Kachin, and Karenni people, as well as the establishment of the Chin Special Division, Aung San's vision of an integrated Myanmar, as set out in the original 1947 Panglong Agreement, was never fully realized because the 1947 constitution lacked explicit federal provisions. Compounding these issues was the assassination of Aung San before independence, followed by increased ethnic tensions, which set the stage for ongoing conflicts between the Bamar majority and various ethnic nationalist groups. Promised autonomy for different ethnic groups and the inclusiveness of Panglong Agreement itself were later largely unfulfilled; therefore, this led to armed resistance from the marginalized ethnic groups as well: Arakanese, Karen, Karenni and Mon.[49]

43. Taylor, R. H. (2009). *The State in Myanmar*. C. Hurst & Co., p. 89.
44. Houtman, G. (2007). "Aung San's lan-zin, the Blueprint and the Japanese Occupation of Burma." In Kei Nemoto (ed.), *Reconsidering the Japanese Military Occupation in Burma (1942–45)*. Tokyo: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, pp. 179–227.
45. Silverstein, J. (1959). "The Federal Dilemma in Burma." *Far Eastern Survey*, 28(7), p. 100.
46. Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books, pp. 110.
47. Jervis, R. (1997). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Political Science Quarterly, 112(2), pp. 307–308.
48. South, A. (2008). *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. Routledge, 26–27.
49. Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books, p. 138; For more details on the communist struggle, see Lintner, B. (1990). *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB)*. Southeast Asia Program Series 6. Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program.

Civilian government's failure to contain ethnic unrest led to militarization

The failure of civilian institutions to adequately manage rising regionalist insurgencies after independence justified military engagement in Myanmar's political sphere.[50] The contentious and unruly political landscape before the absolute authoritarian takeover enabled the formation of a unified elite alliance, mostly focused on the military establishment. Burmese urban elites and military leaders lacked shared interests and did not view one another as essential allies against external or internal challenges, so undermining the possibility of a robust central state or a comprehensive ruling party. The military solidified its control over power chiefly through forceful methods, maintaining an authoritarian regime lacking substantial societal or institutional backing. Exploiting the prevailing fear of national disintegration, the Tatmadaw entrenched itself in the political sphere, especially as non-Bamar ethnic groups became increasingly sidelined in governmental positions.[51] These processes highlight the saliency of elite collective action in the face of broad-based contentious politics as a key feature of military rule in Myanmar. The second was the Tatmadaw's construction of the state as an eternally threatened entity, entrenching permanently its monopoly on politics and the military's lasting drama in the country's political theater. There were perceptions of an impending attack on the country that began to arise inside the Tatmadaw, which had backed the AFPFL. [52] This period established the foundation for Myanmar's path to militarization, as we would later see how the military consolidates its control over the nation and how it exerts its authoritarian influence over the political and social landscape of the country.

Separatist Movements: A Challenge to Burmese Institutions

The secessionist movements—especially that of the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing, the Karen National Defense Organization (KNDO)—imposed unique challenges from day one of independence and became the distinctive problems that have indelibly shaped the country's institutions. The separatist wars were far less manageable than the communist insurgencies and had a profound long-term effect on the state-building initiatives. The Communist Party of Burma (CPB) became a predominantly Maoist-inspired insurgent force that focused on rural struggle and was largely indifferent to urban areas. The state's response was to arrest its leaders in Rangoon and to retreat to rural enclaves where the party continued to operate independently but with limited urban presence.[53] The insurrection led by KNU was marked by ethnic self-determination rather than a direct challenge to the central authority in Rangoon. The KNDO's strategic initiatives, such as the seizing of the Twante Canal, endangered Rangoon, the significance of which was

50. Callahan, M. P. (1990). *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma*. Cornell University Press, pp. 66.
51. Callahan, M. P., Ibid.
52. Steinberg, D. I. (2001). *Burma: The State of Myanmar*. Georgetown University Press, p. 185.
53. Smith, M. *Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History*. p. 35.

not lost on Rangoon, as it underscored how serious the KNU was about achieving territorial autonomy. The Karen insurrection in 1948 and 1949 produced a temporary flaring up of elite collective action in Burma. When the armed Karen troops were in Rangoon's backyard, Prime Minister U Nu gave General Ne Win a free hand, and the general did suppress. This consolidation of coercive power sought to suppress internal discord and strengthen central authority, displaying a temporary unity among Burmese elites against perceived existential dangers. This military accomplishment temporarily alleviated the immediate threat to Rangoon, thus reducing the necessity for ongoing elite collective action in defense of the central state.[54]

Institutional Consequences and Military Expansion

Despite intermittent threats from the Karen in urban areas, the reorganization of the Tatmadaw as well as its brigades' successful military operations in the late 1940s and early 1950s had significantly improved its organizational integrity and political strength. This period also witnessed important institution-building in the military, unlike the relatively weakening civilian bureaucratic powers under the parliamentary system. All of these developments showed the firm hand of the Tatmadaw in the business of establishing control and influence, irrespective of any civilian institutional progress. The twin threats of communist insurgencies and separatist movements throughout post-independence Myanmar propelled diverging paths and institutional development. The way the Tatmadaw identified itself as the only savior and the only institution that can solidify internal cohesion set the stage for its enduring authoritarian control of the political scene in Myanmar. [55]

Coup and Permanent Control

In 1958, at U Nu's request, General Ne Win assumed temporary control in order to quell the minority rebellions and restore stability as a prelude to the national elections that were scheduled for 1960. In this caretaker period, the military also meticulously placed its officer ranks in key administrative organs, strengthening its structural grip around the governmental framework. This initial instance of military engagement highlighted the Tatmadaw's aspiration to assume a more prominent position in Burma's government, citing apprehensions regarding the ineffectiveness of elected officials in preserving national unity.[56]Notwithstanding societal concerns, General Ne Win's regime conducted the democratic national elections of 1960, which failed to garner much public endorsement for military-supported political endeavors. The election results were a triumph for U Nu's Pyi-daungzu party, denominated as anti-military, over the AFPFL sponsored by the military, signalling widespread dissatisfaction with the military in politics. [57]

54. Callahan, M. P. (2004). *Making Enemies*, p. 175.
55. Smith, M. *Ethnic Politics and Citizenship History*. p. 30-45.
56. Alamgir, J. (1997). *Burmese State Consolidation*. Cornell University Press, p. 338.
57. Callahan, M. P. (2004). *Making Enemies*., p. 228.

1.1.4 The Fourth Cleavage (1962–2010) Military Authority Became Permanent

The transition of Myanmar from parliamentary democracy to military rule in the 1950s and early 1960s was greatly influenced by the Tatmadaw's reaction to regional insurrections and its strategic accumulation of political authority. The coup d'état of March 1962, led by General Ne Win, was widely seen, as scholars have argued, as the pivotal point of separatist movements intersecting with military internal solidarity and practical needs. Unlike the authoritarian backlash that occurred in its neighboring Southeastasian states, the military coup in Myanmar was not the result of the broader consensus amongst the elites but of the internal unity of the military. [58] The 1962 coup perpetuated the Tatmadaw's political monopoly, terminated civilian governance in Myanmar, and gave way to a military regime. Military cohesion was critical to the regime for maintaining power and thwarting external pressures for democratization.

Legacy of Colonial Division and Military Rule

The legacy of British colonial policies of "divide and rule," privileging some ethnic groups over others, was taken to extremes by the Myanmar military in its decades of power after it seized control in 1962, in turn deepening ethnic animosities. The Tatmadaw, as the military is known, drafted men by ethnicity, and administrative power remained in the hands of largely Buddhist Burmans. Institutionalizing ethnic divisions is what made Myanmar's post-colonial conflicts much worse. The military and central government since post-colonialism continued to put Burman elite's interests first, often behind the facade of nationality and protection of the Buddhist religion. The persistence of military governance in Myanmar is due to the Tatmadaw's robust institutional unity. When political institutions were not functional, the military grabbed that void. Unlike other authoritarian regimes, Myanmar's military made no effort to nurture a strong civilian bureaucracy or credible political party to adequately represent the country's diverse citizenry. [59] Since then, Myanmar's political landscape has been largely dominated by the Tatmadaw. Autonomous political institutions were in short supply. The Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) exemplifies the military's unsuccessful endeavors to create a civilian façade. The BSPP was dissolved during mass uprisings in late 1988.

Myanmar's development had been affected by the legacy of colonial divide-and-rule and the military's concentration of power. Though, to some degree, the British contributed to the fracturing of Myanmar, nationalist narratives and a Burman-Buddhist chauvinism were promulgated under Burman-ruled regimes and the Tatmadaw. It has been able to maintain

58. Ibid. p. 200-232.
59. Steinberg, D. I. (2021). *The Military in Burma/Myanmar: On the Longevity of Tatmadaw Rule and Influence*. ISEAS Publishing. Retrieved from http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg, p. 122.

authoritarian rule because of the Tatmadaw's institutional coherence and the power to crush dissent, setting Myanmar apart from other Southeast Asian nations.[60]

Contentious Politics: Suppressing Dissent and Student Movements

Student activists in support of democracy pressing for liberalization, from time to time, challenged the regime's legitimacy. The Tatmadaw's suppression was aimed at student activists, and its refusal to negotiate politically further isolated young people. In 1988, a national uprising sparked by economic crisis and the one-party system was led by students, which was crushed brutally, most famously at the Rangoon massacre.[61] Nevertheless, military rule continued—from the BSPP (1962) to the SLORC (1989) and then the SPDC.[62] Than Shwe's junta used both violent repression and a propaganda campaign to depict the democratic activists as communists or extremists and the military as national saviors. Secessionist fears were invoked in an effort to justify military unity and prevent defection.[63] Political activity by Aung San Suu Kyi—including her attempts to form a multiethnic alliance—was perceived as a threat. [64]

Contested Faith: The Tatmadaw and the Sangha

Although the Tatmadaw and Sangha were at times symbolically conflated, they were two very different kinds of power. After the coup of 1962, the Revolutionary Council tried to control the Sangha, including by requiring monks' registration, which was a common source of resistance. The regime's actions, including invading monasteries, led to bloodshed and alienated religious communities. Monks who resisted registration have since been punished severely. Under military rule, monks who demonstrated against the government were met with violence. Following the protests of 1990, following the victory of NLD (National League for Democracy), 300 monks were arrested by the regime, demonstrating the regime's campaign to quell religious descent. [65] In one hand, the Tatmadaw tried to appropriate Sangha authority to consolidate its authority. But on the other, the clergy's moral guardianship came into tension with authoritarianism. This dynamic returned in 1988 when monks joined pro-democracy protests.

The Emergence of the Principal Opposition Leader: Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

At some points after the 1989 coup, the regime was pressured by the international community to hold multiparty elections. The NLD, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, scored a landslide victory. But the military refused to cede power, setting the stage for an extended

60. Steinberg, D. I. (2021). Ibid.
61. Lintner, B. (1999). *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*. White Lotus Press, pp. 130–140.
62. Steinberg, D. I. (2001). *Burma: The State of Myanmar*. Georgetown University Press, pp. 185–187.
63. Smith, M. (1991). *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books, pp. 139–143.
64. Htoo, S. E., & Waters, T. (2024). *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-1270-081.
65. Lintner, Bertil, and Human Rights Watch. "The Resistance of the Monks: Buddhism and Activism in Burma." *Human Rights Watch*, 22 Sept. 2009, pp. 34-36.

standoff was marked by peaceful protests and the house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi. Aung San Suu Kyi, who is nationalist in a transcendent sense: inclusive politics not limited to any single ethnicity. Her wearing of various ethnic costumes–the Karen htamein and Shan khamauk–was an expression of national solidarity. [66] The NLD's deployment of these symbols struck a chord for the marginalized. SLORC saw her as a threat to the state's Burman-centered identity and began a campaign to discredit her.

Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and Ceasefire Agreements (1988–2011)

Ceasefire agreements with EAOs marked the political landscape. These agreements, partly driven by China's withdrawal of support from CPB-aligned groups and EAO incentives to access resources, led to deals with groups like the PNO (1991) and NMSP (1995). Many ceasefires allowed groups to retain arms and territory. EAOs were incorporated into the National Convention, which drafted provisions for Self-Administered Areas (SAAs). The 2008 Constitution granted SAA status to six ethnic groups—four of which were signatories of ceasefire agreements. While these ceasefires gave a measure of peace, the military frequently employed them to undercut and weaken ethnic resistance, rather than promote genuine power-sharing. [67]

The 2008 Constitution and Entrenched Military Control

The junta used the National Convention process to design a constitution ensuring military supremacy. Democratic voices like the NLD and EAOs were excluded. After Cyclone Nargis, the junta orchestrated a referendum for a new constitution—resulting in the 2008 Constitution. [68] It had reserved 25% of parliamentary seats for Tatmadaw officers as well as control over certain ministries. Ethnic representation was a gesture, ensuring continued centralized rule and securing military impunity. International responses, in the form of sanctions, were largely ineffective. The junta circumvented them via alliances with resource-hungry states like China. By centralizing control over natural resources, the regime deepened inequality, contributing to what scholars call Myanmar's "resource curse."[69] Military narratives of instability further justified cohesion and resistance to reform. Economic and political networks under elite patronage systems altered internal dynamics. Senior officers advanced through the border. conflict experience remained suspicious of democratic movements, equating dissent with insurgency.[70]

66. Houtman, Gustaaf. "Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy." *Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa*, 1999, pp. 199-202.
67. Kramer, Tom. "Neither War Nor Peace: The Future of Cease-Fire Agreements in Burma." *Transnational Institute*, July 2009, pp. 1-3.
68. *Impunity Prolonged: Burma and its 2008 Constitution.* (2009). Retrieved from https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Myanmar-Impunity-Constitution-2009-English.pdf.
69. Vijge, M. J., Metcalfe, R., Wallbott, L., & Oberlack, C. (2019). Transforming institutional quality in resource curse contexts: The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in Myanmar. *Resources Policy*, 61, 200–209. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2019.02.006.
70. Staniland, Paul. "Crony Militarism in Myanmar." *Paul Staniland*, 17 Sept. 2021, https://paulstaniland.com/2021/09/17/crony-militarism-in-myanmar/.

This period illustrates a precarious balancing act. The junta retained power and repressed dissent while temporarily accommodating ethnic minorities. The NLD became a mantle of democratic aspiration while EAOs maintained their demands for autonomy. The military reaffirmed in the 2008 Constitution its intention to dominate, sabotaging Myanmar's chances of a transition to democracy.[71]

1.1.5 The Fifth Cleavage (2011–2020) Myanmar's Contentious Transition

Power Struggles, Further Ethnic Cleavages, and the Fragility of Democracy

Four actors have shaped the multi-layered complex politics of Myanmar in the period from 2011 to 2020: the Tatmadaw, the National League for Democracy (NLD) under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) as well as the reformist leadership of President Thein Sein within the confines of the 2008 Constitution. The military still presided over unelected parliamentary seats and also controlled the ministries of defense, home affairs, and border affairs. Thein Sein's government began a managed liberalization under the banner "disciplined democracy," a transitional concept that had been designed to cater to both domestic reformists and external constituencies while safeguarding vested military interests. The NLD, for all its commitment to democratic change, functioned within an institutional structure that was designed to maintain military hegemony. Meanwhile, EAOs continued to press for federalism, often with deep skepticism toward both the NLD and the military. [72]

EAOs, meanwhile, continued to demand federalism—often with profound suspicion towards both the NLD and the military. [72] The military designed the 2008 Constitution to solidify its grip, entrenching impunity for its members and powers for administrative and legislative control with 25% reserved places in the Parliament. And it guaranteed that as Myanmar transitioned to democracy, military privileges would be left unscathed. The 2010 elections were rigged in favor of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). Yet President Thein Sein introduced previously unthinkable changes—meeting with opposition groups, allowing labor unions and websites, free press, economic liberalization and, freeing political prisoners, and so on. [73]

These reforms came as a surprise to many who thought any changes would come from outside the regime. Thein Sein's government also allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to return to public life. In 2012 the NLD was allowed to participate in by-elections and won 43 out of

71. Maizland, Lindsay. "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 31 Jan. 2022, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya

72 McCarthy, S. N. (2010). *From coup d'etat to 'Disciplined Democracy' : the Burmese regime's claims to legitimacy*. *23*, 1–26. https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/handle/10072/34646

73. *Impunity Prolonged: Burma and its 2008 Constitution.* (2009). Retrieved from https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Myanmar-Impunity-Constitution-2009-English.pdf.

the 45 seats contested. Yet the 2008 Constitution stayed the same. The military retained significant control over security and the government, which limited prospects for inclusive governance. [74] Although reform began to take hold, ethnic conflict remained unresolved. Thein Sein's administration struck truces with some EAOs and eventually signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. Not all ethnic groups were part of the process, however. Main stakeholders such as the Kachin Independence Army and the Arakan Army boycotted, saying they had been excluded and had little trust in the process. Some groups have continued to fight, particularly in Kachin and northern Shan states.[75] The 2015 general election was a great moment for democracy. Independent observers said that they were free and fair. The NLD scored a landslide, and Aung San Suu Kyi became state counsellor, the country's de facto head of government, while a military-drafted clause prevented her from taking the presidency. The NLD's victory meant hope of democratic deepening, even if within the constraints of the constitution. [76]

However, trust in the newly elected administration swiftly evaporated, especially among the ethnic minorities. The NLD did not agree to make their representatives state-level chief ministers, despite having won majorities in those. In 2017, the government's decision to unilaterally name a bridge in Mon State after General Aung San prompted demonstrations. [77] The ceremony represented continued Burman nationalism and heightened the sense of cultural domination among non-Burmese. This has been further fuelled by intensified fighting in Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine states. Reports recorded mass displacement—more than 98,000 internally displaced people in 2016 alone. [78] The army's ruthless crackdown on the Rohingya in 2017 was widely condemned as a form of genocide. More than 24,000 were killed, and 69,000 escaped to Bangladesh. [79] In the face of all these horrors, the NLD was silent, and Aung San Suu Kyi even appeared in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to defend the military. Disillusionment deepened. Ethnic leaders, including those from the Arakan Army, have openly said they have lost faith in the NLD's promise of federalism. [80] As the NLD became increasingly integrated with the central state, EAOs grew more distant and toughened their positions. What these events exposed were the paradoxes at the core of Myanmar's democratic experiment. Ceasefire deals remained superficial. The inability to deal with the Rohingya crisis, festering ethnic divisions, and stalled constitutional reform

74. Than, T. M. M. (2015). Myanmar's Economic Reforms: Hard Choices Ahead. *Social Research*, *82*(2), 453–480. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44282112
75. McCarthy, S. N., p 15
76. Simpson, A., Farrelly, N., & Holliday, I. (2018). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*. Routledge. http://books.google.ie/books?id=ONZCDwAAQBAJ&pg=PT661&dq=Myanmar+Futures,++A.+Simpson,+N.+Farrelly+and+I.+Holliday&hl=&cd=5&source=gbs_api
77. Coconuts Yangon. 2017. 'Controversial Bogyoke Aung San Bridge opens today', , available at https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/controversial-bogyoke-aung-san-bridge-opens-in-mon-state/, Nyan Hlaing Lynn, 'Union minister criticizes own daughter, NLD over Mon bridge name dispute', *Frontier*, 16 March 2017. https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/union-minister-criticises-own-daughter-nld-over-mon-bridge-name-dispute/
78. USAID (2016), Burma – Complex Emergency, in: *USAID*, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/09.30.16%20-%20USAID-CHA%20Burma%20Complex%20Emergency%20Fact%20Sheet%20%234.pdf (12 March 2017).
79. OHCHR (2017), *Interviews with Rohingyas Fleeing from Myanmar since 9 October 2016*, OHCHR,
80. Mendelson, Allegra &McCready, Alastair. 2021. 'We are not naive anymore': Myanmar EAOs skeptical about federal army. **https://southeastasiaglobe.com/myanmar-federal-army/**

all underscored how fragile the democratic edifice is and how much still needs to be done. While the NLD functioned in a militarized framework, its inaction—particularly on minority rights—tarnished its democratic credentials. [81]

By the end of the decade, certain EAOs like the UWSA had become de facto autonomous, with military and economic infrastructures rivaling state control. Meanwhile, smaller EAOs remained trapped between military aggression and geopolitical marginalization. With power dynamics breaking down even more, the military weaponized an apparent disorder as an excuse for their ultimate restoration of order. Finally, the democratic opening in 2011-2020 did not conclude with institutional consolidation but with the military coup of 2021, a sign that a tenuous and incomplete transition imploded. [82] Of course, the legacy of colonial rule and deep cultural dynamics in Burma have been the factors that have contributed significantly to the fashioning of modern nationhood, but they alone are not sufficient to explain the perpetuation and intensification of ethnic fragmentation in the postcolonial period and especially the current military coup. The five structural cleavages mentioned above clearly explain the Myanmar military's authoritarian mindset and its colonial practice, which laid the groundwork for the chronic instability that culminated in the military coup of 2021. These chasms, sown in colonial days and hardened by successive rulers, established the foundation for the perpetual instability. But normative critique is not enough: a more systematic conflict analysis is needed.

In this case, the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis (HCA) framework provides such an analytical lens, enabling us to move from the moral and philosophical debates on the democratic deficit in Myanmar to empirical analyses of the structures and actors involved in conflict, the issues at stake, and the level of intensity of conflict. Building on this framework, it provides a useful unpacking of Myanmar's fragmented political terrain—stretching from the Tatmadaw and the EAOs to newer resistance formations—since the 2021 coup. It embodies contested themes around territorial power, legitimacy, autonomy, and resource access. Such an approach means that HCA enables us to not simply plot conflict but to question how authoritarianism is unleashed, how the crisis has been perpetuated, what the forces are that prop it up, and where the potential de-escalation or transformation of the crisis might lie.

1.2 Conflict Analysis of the Myanmar Crisis through Heidelberg Framework

The 2021 military coup made it evident that the Myanmar conflict resembles a complex spider web hanging in the dungeon of authoritarian resilience, ethnic division, and socio-

81. Selth, Andrew. "Myanmar's Armed Forces and the Rohingya Crisis." *United States Institute of Peace*, 2018, p. 10.
82. Ganesan, Narayanan. "Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup, Its Impact on Domestic Politics, and the Future." *Seoul National University Asia Center*, 2023, p. 15.

political fragmentation. The scope of the crisis raises significant analytical and policy challenges for international relations scholars and practitioners trying to grapple with it. A relevant analytical tool is the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis (HCA) framework, which offers a rigorous, structured methodology grounded in conflict actors, items, intensity levels, and measures. This structured approach provides the basis for a rich understanding of the conflict and tools for identifying paths toward sustainable peace[83].

This is particularly applicable in Myanmar, where HCA[84] is compatible with multiple conflict actor analyses, potential solutions, and their interactions. The crisis is a complicated tangle of players—from the repressive Tatmadaw to the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and local resistance movements such as the People's Defense Forces (PDFs)—with varying and sometimes conflicting ideologies, from ethnic autonomy to the overthrow of military rule. The conflict's core "items"—territorial control, political legitimacy, and access to resources—are deeply rooted in the historical and institutional framing of Myanmar and demand a more nuanced analysis.

It is thus particularly well suited to map levels of conflict intensity by the HCA model, providing a nuanced picture of the progression and recession of violence. That is crucial in Myanmar, where intensity varies widely, from cities where there are mass protests and crackdowns to ethnic regions with protracted insurgencies. Additionally, HCA's attention to the metrics of conflict—enhancing mediation and military intervention—provides a way to measure both local and international responses. Through the application of the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis framework as shown in table 1.3, this section of the thesis seeks to understand the complexities of the Myanmar conflict, reveal its intractable dimensions, and propose conscious paths towards peacebuilding. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the broader field of conflict studies by demonstrating the utility of structured methodologies like the HCA in addressing multidimensional crises.

1.2.1 Conflict Actors: Direct and Indirect Agents in Myanmar's Power Struggle

The HCA methodology requires a differentiation between direct and indirect actors to delineate their roles in perpetuating or influencing the conflict. In Myanmar, as shown in Table 1, this distinction helps clarify the dynamics among the military, opposition groups, and international actors.

83. Pfetsch, Frank R., and Christoph Rohloff. *National and International Conflicts, 1945-1995: New Empirical and Theoretical Approaches*. Routledge, 2000, pp. 45–67.
84. Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research (HIIK). *Conflict Barometer 2020: Global Conflict Analysis*. HIIK, 2020, pp. 12–34.

Table 1.3. Conflict Analysis of the Myanmar Crisis through the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis Framework

1. Conflict Intensity:

- **Level: War**
  - **The Myanmar conflict meets the criteria for a war-level intensity due to sustained armed confrontations involving over 1,000 battle-related deaths annually.**
  - **Key actors include the Tatmadaw (Myanmar military), ethnic armed groups, and the People's Defense Forces (PDF), with violence escalating post-coup.**
  - **Widespread atrocities, including indiscriminate bombings, mass killings, and targeted attacks on civilians.**

2. Conflict Items (Issues at Stake):

- **Governance and Political Control:**
  - **The core dispute is over political power following the military coup in February 2021, which ousted the democratically elected National League for Democracy (NLD).**
- **Ethnic Autonomy:**
  - **Long-standing demands for autonomy or independence by ethnic groups, such as the Karen, Kachin, Shan, and Rohingya.**
- **Identity and Marginalization:**
  - **Historical exclusion of ethnic minorities and Rohingya from national politics and citizenship rights.**
- **Resources:**
  - **Control over natural resources, including jade, timber, and other minerals, fuels financial incentives for conflict.**

3. Actors:

- **Primary Actors:**
  - **Tatmadaw (Myanmar Military): Seeks to retain control of the state and suppress dissent.**
  - **National Unity Government (NUG): A shadow government opposing military rule, supported by pro-democracy movements.**
  - **People's Defense Forces (PDF): Armed groups formed to resist the military junta.**
- **Secondary Actors:**
  - **Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs): Groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) with historical grievances.**
- **External Actors:**
  - **China: Interested in stability for economic projects like the Belt and Road Initiative.**
  - **ASEAN: Attempting to mediate but criticized for lack of effective action.**
  - **International community: Mixed responses with sanctions and humanitarian aid.**

4. Structures and Dynamics:

- **Structural Causes:**
  - **Historical ethnic divisions and colonial legacies.**
  - **Institutionalized exclusion of minorities, such as the Rohingya genocide.**
- **Triggers:**
  - **2021 military coup served as the immediate trigger for escalating nationwide resistance and civil war.**
- **Conflict Dynamics:**
  - **Multi-front fighting between Tatmadaw, PDFs, and ethnic armed groups.**
  - **Increased polarization within society, with economic collapse, exacerbating grievances.**

5. Means of Conflict:

- **Military Violence:**
  - **Heavy use of force, including airstrikes, artillery, and ground offensives.**
- **Non-Violent Resistance:**
  - **Civil disobedience movements, strikes, and protests opposing the coup.**
- **International Sanctions:**
  - **Economic sanctions targeting the junta, though with limited impact on violence levels.**

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6. Consequences:

- **Humanitarian Crisis:**
  - **Over 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs).**
  - **Rising poverty, food insecurity, and collapse of public health and education systems.**
- **Regional Instability:**
  - **Spillover effects into neighboring countries, including refugee flows into Thailand and Bangladesh.**
- **Human Rights Violations:**
  - **Widespread reports of mass killings, sexual violence, arbitrary detentions, and suppression of free speech.**

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7. Conflict Transformation Potential:

- **Barriers:**
  - **Entrenched positions of the military junta and fragmented opposition.**
  - **Weak international enforcement mechanisms and lack of unified global action.**
- **Opportunities:**
  - **Growing unity among ethnic groups and pro-democracy factions.**
  - **Continued pressure through international sanctions and diplomatic isolation of the junta.**
  - **Grassroots and civil resistance movements maintaining momentum despite repression.**

Direct Actors

There are three main actors as follows; The Tatmadaw (Myanmar Military): As the key protagonist, the Tatmadaw lays claim to national power, supported by decades of military supremacy and its self-identified role as the nation's guardian [85]. The February 2021 coup is an archetype of the military's unwillingness to relinquish power, relying on its constitutional impunity, its campaigns of terror, its control over economic resources, and its alliances with China and Russia to maintain its grip[86].

National Unity Government (NUG) and People's Defense Forces (PDF): The NUG was created in opposition to the coup, calling for democratic rule, and the PDF leads an armed resistance against the Tatmadaw. Despite insufficient resources, the PDF has demonstrated incredible flexibility via relationships with Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs).[87] Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs): Groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) are among the long-established EAOs striving for autonomy against the Tatmadaw's centralization policies over six decades. Their

85. Taylor, Robert H. *The Armed Forces in Myanmar Politics: A Terminating Role?* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, pp. 45–47.
86. International Crisis Group. *Responding to the Myanmar Coup.* Crisis Group Asia Briefing No. 166, 2021, pp. 3–5.
87. United States Institute of Peace. (2022, November 3). *Understanding the People's Defense Forces in Myanmar.* https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/11/understanding-peoples-defense-forces-myanmar

temporary alliances with the NUG reflect the shared goal of resisting military rule, though long-standing grievances complicate full alignment[88].

Indirect Actors

International and Regional Players: The Western powers and United Nations (UN) have sanctioned and condemned the coup in Myanmar, but they have a limited impact on the regime. By contrast, ASEAN non-interference, together with Chinese and Russian backing for the Tatmadaw, is buttressing the military's strength.

1.1.2 Conflict Items: Ideology, Autonomy, and Control of State Power

HCA identifies conflict items as the material or ideological goals contested by direct actors. In the Myanmar crisis, these items include:

Authority Over the State: The coup has highlighted the Tatmadaw's willingness to control state institutions at whatever the cost, and on the contrary, all the resistance forces seek to restore democracy.
Ideology and Governance: The military's vicious nationalism starkly opposes the Resistance's democratic platform and promise of federalism, widening the ideological divide.
Ethnic Autonomy: The Tatmadaw's drive for centralization is at odds with the EAOs' demands for self-determination and autonomy, and it is a major point of contention. Most ethnic armed groups have, for decades, called for autonomy or federalism as a means for redressing historical grievances. The Tatmadaw's insistence on central control, however, directly clashes with these aspirations, serving only to exacerbate longstanding tensions and localized conflict.
Identity and Marginalization: The military dominant system always has elements of the systemic exclusion of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, from national politics and citizenship rights. The Rohingya genocide exemplifies the deep-seated marginalization driving ethnic discontent, making identity and recognition critical conflict items.[89]
Resources: Control of natural resources, including jade, timber, and other minerals, both drives and perpetuates the conflict. Areas rich in these resources (e.g.: Kachin and Rakhine states) have recently experienced heavy fighting, as control of these commodities serves as an economic incentive for both sides (the Tatmadaw and EAOs) to maintain their engagements.

88. Myanmar Peace Monitor. The KIO/KIA: Political Unknowns. Accessed July 19, 2025. https://mmpeacemonitor.org/en/cover-story-eng/the-kio-kia-political-unknowns/
89. Human Rights Watch. (2023, August 24). *Myanmar: Rohingya anniversary marked as genocide crimes continue.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/24/myanmar-rohingya-anniversary-genocide-crimes-continue

1.1.3 Conflict Measures: Actions Sustaining Hostilities

HCA's classification of constitutive and corollary conflict measures sheds light on the strategies employed by conflict actors[90].

Military Repression: The Tatmadaw employs systematic violence—mass killings, bombings, and village destruction—to maintain control, using terror as a central strategy.

Armed Resistance: The PDF groups practice guerrilla warfare, adopting armed insurrectionist ideology from nonviolent demonstration in response to the Tatmadaw's intransigence.

Legal Suppression and Censorship: Laws enforced by the Tatmadaw criminalize opposition, while censorship of news and social media stifles opposing narratives.

1.1.4 Conflict Intensity: High-Intensity War

The HCA framework classifies conflicts by their intensity and distinguishes between conflicts and high-intensity wars. The violence in Myanmar meets the HCA's definition for intensity at the level of war with sustained, large-scale violence and with annual death tolls over 1,000. The country's armed confrontation between the Tatmadaw, Ethnic Armed Organizations, and People's Defense Forces has been on the rise since the military coup in February 2021. It is a multidimensional conflict; Kayin, Kachin, and Sagaing all experience the highest violence. Airstrikes and heavy artillery by the Tatmadaw have torn apart villages, and systematic repression has terrorized urban centers. These acts do not just exacerbate the urgent humanitarian crisis; they intensify societal fractures and entrench the conflict further. [91]

1.1.5 Structures and Dynamics

Structural Causes

Myanmar's conflict has its roots in that country's colonial history, as seen in 1.2, which sowed ethnic divisions and helped lay the groundwork for systemic exclusion. As previously discussed in chapter 1, the colonial administration implemented a "divide and rule" policy, promoting specific ethnic groups, like Karen and Kachin, to administrative and military roles while sidelining others like the majority Burman population. This move nurtured mistrust among the various ethnic groups that still exist today. After independence, successive governments adopted policies of "Burmanization," favoring the language, culture, and religion of the Burman majority and diminishing ethnic minorities, whose identities were sidelined. These policies deepened inequalities and fostered resentment among marginalized groups, with explosive consequences in the form of violence and ethnic cleansing, such as the Rohingya genocide that has been described by

90. HIIK (Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research). *Conflict Barometer 2020*. HIIK, 2020, pp. 22–65.
91. Human Rights Watch (HRW). *Myanmar: Escalating Atrocities Following Military Coup*. Human Rights Watch, 2022.

the United Nations as a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing”[92].

Historical Roots of Tatmadaw’s Violence

The Tatmadaw has a historical record of systematic human rights abuses and directed violence against civilians since the 1960s, all with impunity. The majority of such abuses, including mass killings, forced displacement, rape, burnings of villages and destruction of property, were committed against ethnic minority groups, such as the Karen, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine, Shan and Rohingya.[93] The 2021 coup has only added fuel to the violence, leading to further conflict, indiscriminate bombings, and mass atrocities. It grows further hatred between the two factions, contributing to the conflict and subsequent suffering of the Myanmar population[94].

Triggers

The proximate trigger for the current conflict was the 2021 coup that prompted nationwide resistance and conflict. Unwilling to relinquish its stranglehold on power, the Tatmadaw nullified the National League for Democracy’s (N.L.D.) landslide victory in the elections. It has been largely opposed by a range of different groups, including lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and all walks of life, which then formed the NUG,and PDFs, and later on, EAOs joined. This spontaneous eruption of mass anger soon became national protests and people’s resistance, in the face of which the Tatmadaw unleashed a brutal crackdown that killed thousands and displaced millions[95]. This crackdown transformed peaceful protests into an all-out civil war.

1.1.6 The Dynamics of Myanmar's Civil Conflict (2021-Present)

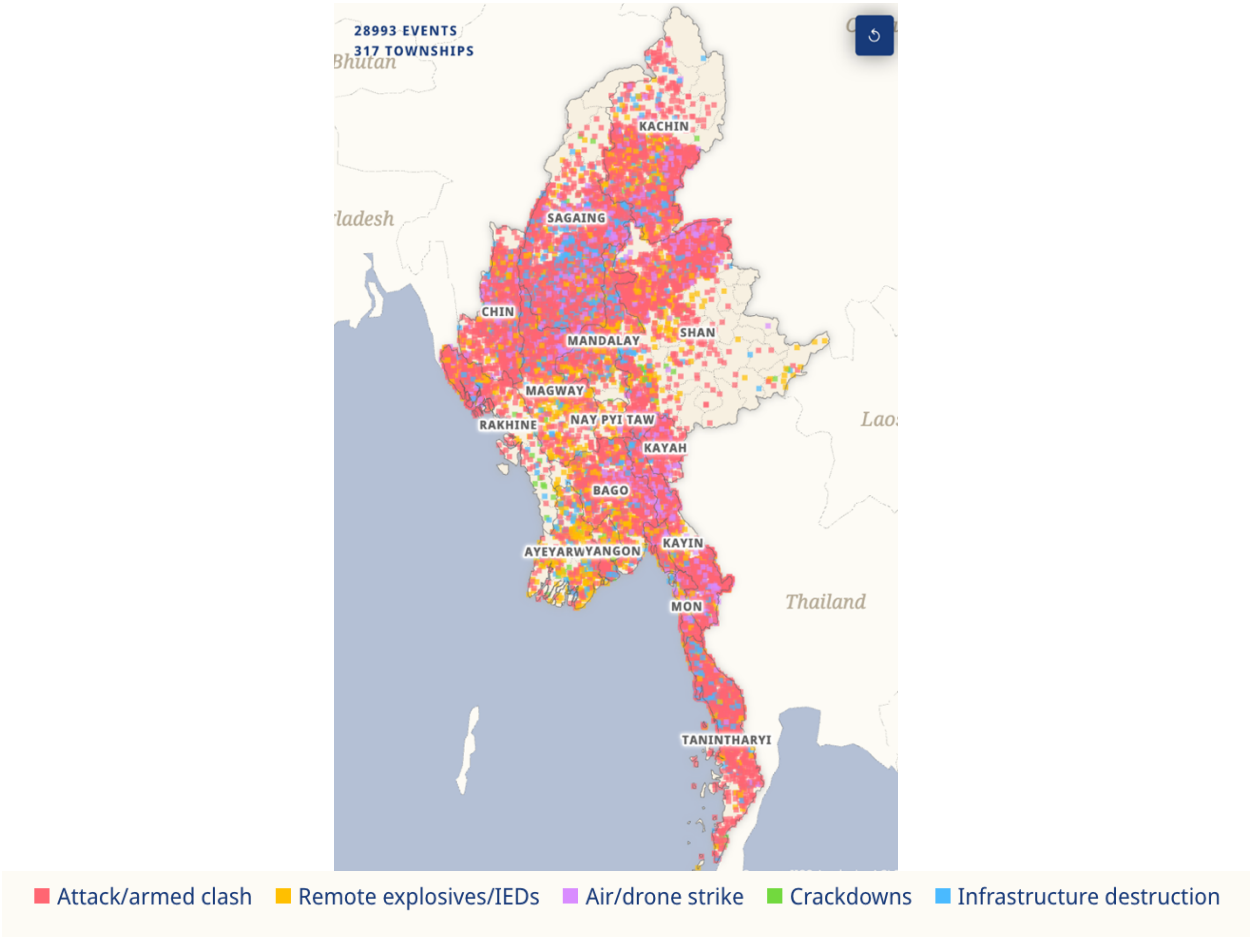
The Myanmar Civil War is rooted in an ideological conflict between the forces of resistance and the Tatmadaw. The NUG, EAOs and PDF are the expressions of resistance against militarism and the struggle for a federal democratic order. The Tatmadaw, however, sees itself as the only defender of national sovereignty, which it endeavors to maintain by repression. Such divergence of ideology has sown the seeds of enduring and costly struggle [96]. The war itself is defined by ferocious, multi-front fighting. The Tatmadaw is resisting from all sides, facing attacks from the PDFs but also from longstanding EAOs, such as the Karen National Union (KNU), the Kachin Independence Army, and three brotherhoods. These groups have demonstrated surprising adaptability, forming alliances to counter the

92. The Irrawaddy. “The Rohingya Genocide and Myanmar’s Ethnic Tensions.” *The Irrawaddy*, 10 Dec. 2020, www.irrawaddy.com/news-analysis/rohingya-genocide-analysis.
93. Council on Foreign Relations. "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." Council on Foreign Relations, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya.
94. Amnesty International. "Myanmar 2023." Amnesty International, 2023, https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/.
95. Maizland, Lindsay. "Myanmar's Troubled History: Coups, Military Rule, and Ethnic Conflict." *Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 February 2022, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/myanmar-history-coup-military-rule-ethnic-conflict-rohingya.
96. Maizland, Lindsay. Ibid.

military's superior resources. From February 2021 through to the end of 2023, Myanmar experienced nearly 28,993 instances of political violence (see Map 1), leading to an estimated 50,000 deaths (civilians and combatants). Sagaing and Magway regions were particularly hard-hit, with southeastern Myanmar alone accounting for 6,500 confirmed deaths, or about 20 percent of the casualties overall (ACLED, 2024)[97]. Nearly 96% of Myanmar's townships have been directly affected, illustrating the nationwide scope of the conflict (IISS, 2024)[98].

At the grassroots level, civil disobedience movements, led by students, workers, community leaders, and medical care professionals, have disrupted the Tatmadaw's attempts to consolidate power. The banking system collapsed while the currency value dramatically fell; economic sanctions and boycotts exacerbated economic hardships and exacerbated public grievances—aggravating even more already existing resistance [99]. A

Map 1.2. Myanmar Conflict Map from Feb 2021 to December 2023



Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

97. ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project). *Myanmar Political Violence Report, 2023*. ACLED, 2024.
98. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). *Armed Conflict Survey 2024: Myanmar Chapter*. IISS, 2024.
99. Ibid.

tactic of the Tatmadaw has been the burning of villages, targeting of civilians, and employing of airstrikes, which has only served to alienate the population and draw international criticism [100]. Although the struggle is portrayed as a binary war between the military and opponents, the resistance is far from homogenous. The resistance is spearheaded by the NUG (a shadow government comprised of lawmakers deposed in the coup) along with more than 300 PDF battalions as well as several EAOs. Major operations have included "Operation 1027," on 27 October 2023, when ethnic groups launched almost simultaneous attacks on military outposts in northern Shan State. These offensives demonstrate the ability of ethnic forces to challenge the junta, although their actions remain largely uncoordinated with the broader opposition movement[101].

However, the absence of coordination lays bares the fractured state of Myanmar's resistance, complicating the prospect of bringing down the junta. The conflict has also exposed deep urban-rural divides. Though urban centers, the movements in Yangon and Mandalay, are leading protests and underground resistance, but rural areas, particularly along ethnic minority areas and central Barman areas like Sagaing and Magwe areas, are under heavy fire and in a humanitarian crisis. The dual nature of this has created a vicious cycle: economic ruin and polarization worsen existing grievances, fueling resistance, which, in turn, provokes further military crackdowns.[102]

Critical Juncture

The civil war that has consumed Myanmar since the military coup of February 2021. It is one of the country's historic moments in the contemporary political history of the nation. Advocates of the coup in the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) frequently justify their actions as necessary to protect national sovereignty and consolidate a military-imposed nationalist ideology[103]. This ultra-nationalist vision, however, has faced unexpected pushback from unlikely sectors of Myanmar's diverse society, including ethnic minorities, students, professionals, and business leaders. Far from uniting the country, the coup has revealed the Tatmadaw's failure to extend its ideology beyond the confines of its barracks. For months of the conflict, the ongoing violence has ripped apart Myanmar's social and economic fabric, creating an ever-more-broken state in its wake.

1.1.7 Consequences

Humanitarian Crisis & Human Rights Violations

Myanmar is experiencing a profound humanitarian emergency, with over 1.5 million

100. BBC News Myanmar. "Myanmar's Economic Collapse Deepens amid Ongoing Conflict." *BBC News*, 15 Mar. 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60746947.
101. International Crisis Group. (2023, November 7). *Myanmar's multiple conflicts explained*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmars-multiple-conflicts-explained
102. Human Rights Watch. (2023, June 22). *Myanmar: Junta escalates mass killings, war crimes*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/22/myanmar-junta-escalates-mass-killings-war-crimes
103. Ye Myo Hein. "The Challenges of a Fractured Resistance in Myanmar." *Journal of Southeast Asian Affairs*, vol. 36, 2022, pp. 112–134.

internally displaced persons (IDPs) and widespread poverty, with state services in health and education collapsing[104]. It has also some spillover effects, with a heavy refugee influx into Thailand and India, putting overwhelming pressure on regional resources and exacerbating tension[105]. Mass killings, widespread sexual violence, arbitrary detentions, and the stifling of free speech have been broadly reported, underlining the devastating human toll of the conflict.

The Economic Burden of Myanmar's Civil War

Civil wars impose devastating economic costs. In Myanmar, these costs are evident in the misuse of resources away from productive activities and in violent conflict. The Tatmadaw spends much state revenue on armed forces, while the resistance is supported by local contributions[106]. This constitutes a double economic burden: the destruction of resources during conflict and the opportunity costs of foregone public investment in essential services such as education and healthcare. The spread of weapons also erodes civil rights, encourages crime, and causes displacement as civilians escape threats of robbery, rape, and murder. Rural and urban economies are having to caveat from the impact of the conflict, with many thousands displaced.

1.1.8 Prospects for Resolution: Challenges and Impediments

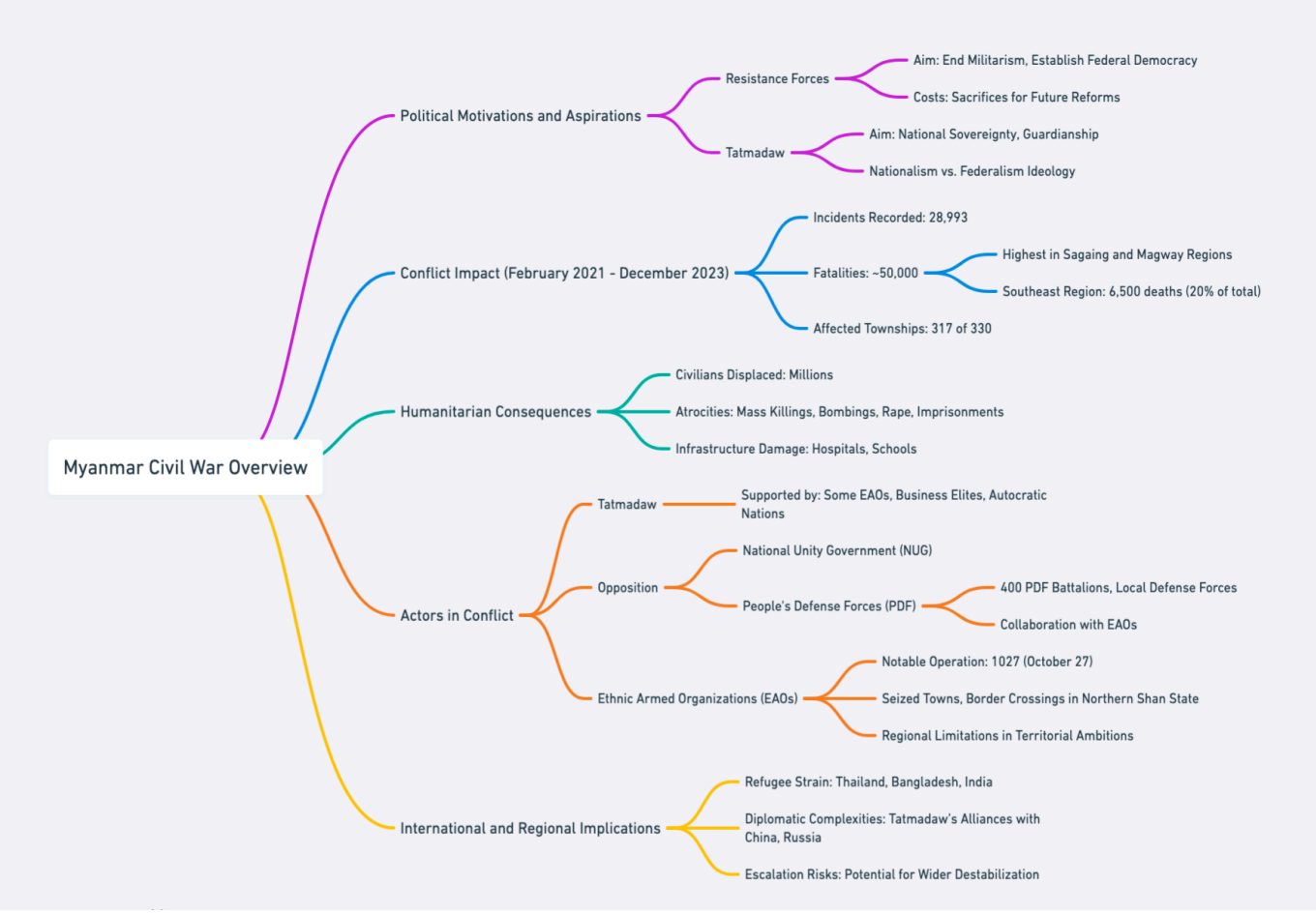
The prospects for a settlement to the conflict also appear dim, due to the structural and ideological divisions underpinning civil war dynamics as presented in Diagram 1. The Heidelberg Conflict Analysis (HCA) focuses on such cleavages as key obstacles to conflict resolution and a lens through which to see the challenges and possibilities that might lead the route to peace. The deeply rooted positional divergence between the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) and opposition forces, particularly the National Unity Government (NUG) and various Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), poses one of the central challenges.

One of the central challenges lies in the military's habituated power holding for decades and reinforced by its ultranationalist ideology, which prioritizes centralized power and a homogenized national identity. In contrast, the resistance forces, NUG and EAOs, are waging a battle to install a system of democratic federalism, grounded in decentralization, ethnic autonomy, and inclusive governance. This fundamental ideological schism sets up a considerable impasse, with neither side ready to compromise on its vision for Myanmar's political future.

104. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Myanmar: 2023 Humanitarian Crisis Report*. UNHCR, 2023.
105. The Irrawaddy. "Myanmar Refugees Create Regional Tensions in Thailand and Bangladesh." *The Irrawaddy*, 15 Apr. 2023, www.irrawaddy.com/news/refugee-crisis-thailand-bangladesh.
106. Crisis Group. *Myanmar's Worsening Civil War and the Economic Cost of Conflict*. International Crisis Group, 2022, pp. 18–35.

Adding to this challenge is the limited ability of international actors to influence the Tatmadaw's actions. Though international sanctions and other diplomatic measures—especially by Western countries and ASEAN—have attempted to put pressure on the military junta, they have had little success. The Tatmadaw's alliances with major international actors such as China and Russia offer a vital buffer against global isolation. These ties guarantee a steady supply of military supplies and diplomatic backing that keep the junta in power, allowing it to continue its repressive practices despite its isolation and

Diagram 1.1. Myanmar Civil War Overview



condemnation.

ASEAN's inherent doctrine of non-interference and relatively unsuccessful efforts to negotiate the situation make the international community all the more impotent in making a real difference. Equally, humanitarian imperatives further muddy the path to resolution. While perhaps a necessary measure to prevent civilian deaths, it does little to actually address underlying political grievances, which are driving the conflict. The catastrophe of zero-sum thinking further undermines dialogue between the parties in a conflict

characterized by mass displacement, poverty, and the collapse of public services. The emphasis placed on immediate humanitarian relief often obscures the necessity of serious political negotiations, ignoring the structural problems.

Several obstacles further make resolution difficult. In the short term, negotiations are improbable due to the Tatmadaw's reliance on violence and its ingrained authoritarian ethos. At the same time, the division among the opposition weakens the soundness and efficacy of the pro-democratic movement. The NUG faces major challenges in its goal of uniting resistance forces under one strategy, given its fragmented support base and considerable competing interests, as well as the lack of coordination with EAOs—some of which refuse to acknowledge the NUG and the decentralized nature of the PDFs.

1.1.9 Opportunities

Despite these daunting challenges, emerging opportunities may serve to change the trajectory of the conflict. One of those opportunities is unity among ethnic groups and pro-democracy factions. Resistance to the Tatmadaw has enabled unprecedented levels of collaboration between the NUG, PDFs, and various EAOs in the past two years. This unity, though shaky and intermittent, is a possible route for collective resistance that could sap the junta's hold on power. Moreover, sustained international pressure—through targeted sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and support for grassroots resistance movements—may drain the Tatmadaw's resolve in the long run. Countries aligned against the junta could also focus on strategic support for opposition groups, including technical assistance, training, and resource allocation, to strengthen their capacity for sustained resistance.

This unity, however shaky and episodic, is a potential path to collective resistance that potentially could erode the junta's grip on power. Furthermore, relentless international pressure—via targeted sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and backing for grassroots resistance movements—could sap the Tatmadaw's determination over time. Other countries opposed to the junta could also work more strategically to help opposition groups by providing technical assistance, training, and resource development to build up their capacity for long-term resistance. From the grassroot level, civil resistance on the ground still holds the potential for a durable change. Even as the Tatmadaw has deployed brutal repression, local communities have demonstrated remarkable resilience in their protest mobilization, boycott campaigns, and development of parallel governance institutions. Crucially, these initiatives demonstrate a mounting demand for systemic change and strive to eliminate militarism forever.

Critique of HCA Framework and Toward a Deeper Understanding of Myanmar's Conflict

The HCA approach provides a powerful tool to understand Myanmar's conflict in its warlike, structural, and interrelated nature of actors at play. It highlights the resilient obstacles to peace—principally the Tatmadaw's authoritarian delusion and the dispersed opposition—but also points to dormant pathways for change in democratic cohesion, grassroots defiance, and relentless international pressure. The insights provided a valuable roadmap for understanding the broader dynamics of Myanmar's conflict.

Yet, the human toll is severe, and resources are pumped into destruction while neglecting development. At integration efforts like Operation 1027 prove that organized ethnic resistance is possible, and on the other hand, non-violent models like Daw Aung San Su Kyi's way of political change exist. But so far, those tactics have failed to deliver the lasting political change needed unless they can identify a way to solve the underlying inequalities and ethnic grievances within Myanmar.

However, it is also important to recognize the limitations of the HCA approach as well. There are considerable methodological challenges in analyzing Myanmar's civil war, especially with respect to the reliability of casualty data. Organizations like ACLED, ISP, and DATA Myanmar rely extensively on reports from local media, including outlets like Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Labor News, and Democratic Voice of Burma. NUG and Tatmadaw statements on casualty figures are often unverifiable and politicized and subject to propaganda manipulation. While the framework excels in dissecting the quantitative and structural dimensions of conflict—actors, items, intensity, and dynamics—it falls short in uncovering the subjective experiences, motivations, and perspectives of those directly involved. Understanding why the coup occurred, how it unfolded, and what drives the ambitions and strategies of key actors requires an exploration of the conflict's human and psychological dimensions, which the HCA framework does not address and fails to even acknowledge.

Conclusion: Toward a Genealogy of Authoritarian Resilience

This chapter has argued that Myanmar's political crisis cannot be understood through culturalist or religious explanations. It is not Buddhism, nor any supposed essential authoritarianism in the Burmese social psyche, that explains the state's democratic failure. On the contrary, as shown through Buddhist texts, Theravāda Buddhism contains strong ethical and political currents aligned with autonomy, accountability, and even democratic ideals. To treat Myanmar's condition as culturally predetermined is to obscure the historical processes and institutional structures that have actively prevented democratic transformation.

This chapter began by rejecting those reductive assumptions and located the origins of Myanmar's fragmentation in a more complex historical field. Drawing on political ethnography and critical historiography, Section 1.2 traced the roots of state violence and authoritarian centralism to the colonial and postcolonial eras. The "making of a fragmented state" was not merely a reaction to modern conflict but a project of historical engineering: British "divide and rule" strategies, the failed promises of Panglong, militarized Burman nationalism, and elite consolidation through the Tatmadaw formed the core building blocks of Myanmar's statehood. These historical cleavages—ethnic, ideological, and institutional—have sedimented over decades into structural fault lines that shape today's civil war.

Overlaying this history with the Heidelberg Conflict Analysis (HCA) framework has allowed us to structure and map the crisis in its contemporary form: identifying key actors, conflict "items," intensities, and systemic dynamics. The value of the HCA approach lies in its ability to illustrate the formal mechanics of conflict—its intensification, fragmentation, and transformation potential. But this chapter also contends that structural analysis, while necessary, is not sufficient.

The HCA model is insufficient for explaining why adversaries seeking the same goals continue to fight amongst themselves, why citizens take up arms after decades of submitting to masters, or why specific agendas endure while others wither. These are matters not of structure but of meaning, not of data but of discourse. The evolution of resistance in Myanmar is complex, with a delicate interplay between historical resentments, differing ideology, and fragmented leadership. And while the Tatmadaw's ruthless methods have unified opposition to its rule, they have also laid bare the fault lines of a fragmented resistance.

The resistance in Myanmar is deeply fragmented, with the main actors being the NUG, People's Defense Forces (PDFs) several Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) (see Diagram 2). It faces a formidable challenge in unifying these disparate factions under the NUG, which the military and its supporters mockingly dubbed the "air government," given its lack of a tangible presence on the ground. Many PDFs operate autonomously, outside the NUG's chain of command, which has led to operational inefficiencies and, in some cases, morally ambiguous practices such as illegal logging, mining, and extortion. These actions risk alienating the civilian population and echo the resource exploitation tactics of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front [107].

In the absence of a concerted effort to unify resistance forces, to bridge ethnic distrust, and to provide a credible federal framework, Myanmar risks continuing conflict and ever-

107. Reno, William. *Warlord Politics and African States*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998, pp. 89-104.

deepening fragmentation. Hence, this chapter finds that to move from descriptive adequacy to analytical depth, one must complement conflict analysis with ethnographic insight, ideological critique, and inductive reasoning**.** Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will take up this challenge directly, drawing on in-depth interviews, lived experiences, and resistance narratives to excavate the symbolic, psychological, and moral dimensions of Myanmar's protracted crisis. Only through such an approach can we begin to theorize the internal logic of authoritarian reproduction and resistance in postcolonial Myanmar.

The next chapter turns to questions of methodology and researcher positioning. To conduct fieldwork amid state collapse and civil war is to enter not a neutral space of observation but a contested site of knowledge production. It will consider the epistemological and ethical paradigms informing this research: how I negotiated issues of ethnic and grassroots voices, with risk, with insider-outsider positioning, and of ethical responsibility and in working amidst political traumas. Only by clarifying this foundation can we approach the empirical chapters with the rigor and reflexivity they demand.

Chapter 2

Methodology

2.1 In-depth interviews

When I began my field research along the Thailand-Myanmar border in mid-March 2023, I had a suitcase full of preconceptions of what it is like to be in the conflict areas, in contrast to Glaser's view of a researcher[1] going into the field with almost a clean slate, informed largely through local contacts, research papers, news, social media, and friends. I have deliberately chosen Mae Sot and Chiang Mai areas as places of study along Myanmar's borders (see in map 1). These locations serve as a base camp for Myanmar's 2021 social movement, hosting over a hundred thousand exiled activists, NGOs, leaders of the civil disobedience movement, members of the shadow government, and Karen and Mon ethnic

Map. 2.1. My research area map (Mae Sot and Mae Hong Son of Myanmar-Thailand border areas)

1. Glaser BG, Strauss AL. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine; 1967: p. 3.

fighters. During my research, I have managed to conduct 15 semi-structured interviews—11 in Mae Sot and 4 in Chiang Mai—and later, up until the end of 2024, I have had some more opportunities to conduct 36 more interviews online with individuals and ethnic groups from various parts of Myanmar (see table 1.1 and 1.2 in Chapter 1).

The primary discussions that we engaged in inquired into the lived experiences of my participants, as is consistent with David Fetterman's claim that interviews provide the background and personal narratives for what the ethnographer observes and experiences[2]. I collected deeply personal, yet richly detailed, stories that highlighted the resilience of Myanmar's people and the complexity of the continued crisis through listening closely and building trust. I organized conversations around wide thematic areas, such as Myanmar's long-lasting civil wars, views on the exiled government, and the common dreams among those who oppose the military regime. Participants were invited to discuss these moments during one or two hours for each interview.

One of the key parts of the way I approached these stories was looking at how subjects' experiences intersected with the country's political upheavals—especially when I came to a problematic part of the story or coverage. Discussions were about the family background, their struggles, previous studies, and broader worldviews that combined the personal and political in constituting their agency. In an effort to try to help them think more reflectively, I encouraged them to think about counterfactuals—how their lives and the path of Myanmar might have been different if the coup never happened. These speculative accounts provided a glimpse of both the immediate ramifications of the crisis and the higher stakes of Myanmar's quest for democracy.

My First Interview and the Challenge of Sensitivity

The first interview of my research journey became a profound lesson in the dynamics of sensitivity and the need for adaptability. My first participant was my host, a close friend, and a Mandalay-based former leader of the Myanmar Spring Revolution. It was an inspiring and harrowing narrative. Once a full-time translator, he had been organizing protests against the military regime for close to a year when he became the target. Forced to escape under threat of persecution, he and his family first found shelter with the Karen National Union on the border and later in a small Thai village near Mae Sot. The following interview, held while I was only five days into my stay there, illustrates the difference between academic readiness and the actual nuances of fieldwork. Although my friend was willing to share and discuss aspects of his experiences, my carefully prepared approach quickly revealed its limitations. I was armed with an academically grounded protocol and a meticulously crafted list of questions; I was confident, and I felt ready.

2. Fetterman, D. M. (1998). *Ethnography: Step-by-Step* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. *pp 120*

However, the emotionally charged context of the conversation illuminated the inadequacy of my methods. One particular question epitomized this challenge: “Do you think the democratic period of the country was better than the military-led period in Myanmar?” His immediate response—a sharp yet restrained critique accompanied by an intense, discerning gaze—conveyed a discomfort that was impossible to ignore, probably looking at me like, “Are you crazy? That should not even be a question, especially coming from you.”

Later, in a candid conversation, he reviewed my questions and compared their style to the interrogation techniques employed by Myanmar’s secret police. As a former jailed and tortured victim of the military regime, his comparison was chilling and a stark reminder of the emotional stakes at play. It was a crucial turning point in my research process. Though his feedback was blunt, it was also invaluable.

It made me rethink and recraft my approach and reevaluate how I framed politically sensitive questions. I realized that my academic preparation was thorough, but it had not taught me how to manage the very real ethical and human issues I would face while interviewing people who had suffered extreme and profound trauma as a result of the Myanmar civil war. This, in turn, made me reconsider my approach, and I loosened up, and I began to adopt an approach that prioritized empathy, emotional sensitivity, and a conversational tone over the academic framework I forced onto the work. This first interview taught me a lot about the importance of humility in science. For my part, it was a cautionary tale about how fieldwork, particularly in politically charged settings, demands more than methodological rigor but also a keen sense of the experiences and vulnerabilities of participants. This was a humbling and transformative experience that shaped the trajectory of my future scientific endeavors. From that point forward, I was much more conscientious going into interviews, being more sensitive and flexible, as well as protective and respectful toward the voices I sought to amplify.

Adjusting My Approach to Interviews

After struggling through my early interviews, it became evident that I had to take a better, more flexible, and compassionate approach. In subsequent conversations with others, I refrained from asking direct or probing questions about politics; instead, I let the discussion unfold naturally. I found that trust was never a given but rather had to be carefully constructed, sometimes after more than an hour of rapport-building before something remotely sensitive was broached. Many of the participants were initially hesitant to discuss their experiences, but as trust developed, they told grim stories, stories so wrenching, and a few even revealed their aspirations for Myanmar’s uncertain future.

Over months along the Thai-Myanmar border, I caught up with old revolutionary friends and forged new ones, all the while conscious of the precarious nature of each exchange. I

was very aware that my being there and the questions I asked could be seen as intrusive or even threatening. This awareness guided me to listen more than I spoke, sometimes just sitting back, observing, and altering my approach with verbal and nonverbal feedback. It reminded me that flexibility in methodology was not merely a practical consideration but an ethical necessity.

Anonymization of my participants

All of the subjects in this research have been thoroughly anonymized to safeguard their identities under the life-threatening threats that accompany Myanmar's contemporary political context. At no point in the process or in any of the resulting outputs have any real names, locations, or labels been disclosed. Specific care was exercised for groups such as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), such as teachers and medical professionals in the CDM and former members of ethnic armed groups and ex-PDF fighters, whose enumeration might result in direct harm or harassment from the military regime. Anonymization steps adhered to sound ethical considerations: all information is secured, and reported contextual information is modified or left out to prevent identification of individuals.

A Conversation with a Shadow Government Deputy Minister

One of my most impactful interviews was with a deputy minister in Myanmar's shadow government, a leading figure in the resistance to the military junta. I asked him and a friend to come for an evening with dinner and drinks, a gesture aimed at demonstrating respect and fostering trust according to Myanmar custom. I opened the conversation by emphasizing my solidarity with the resistance and sharing with participants in street demonstrations pictures I had taken and scenes I had witnessed in the protests on the streets of Mandalay. This gesture-built trust assured him that I was no friend of the junta nor of any other competing interest.

Our conversation lasted nearly half the night. During our conversation, he provided profound insights into the operational as well as the ideological aspects of the shadow government's efforts. He detailed the enormous challenges of coordinating a decentralized resistance network in a landscape of acute resource scarcity and constant danger. His vision for Myanmar's future—particularly the establishment of a unified federal army and a federal system guaranteeing equality and justice for all ethnic groups—was inspiring. His account shed light on both the practical obstacles and the ideological dedication that drive the movement. This interview also highlighted a fundamental challenge in my research: balancing scholarly neutrality while navigating the co-construction of narratives influenced by my presence and the circumstances of my interviewee. It required constant self-reflection and a conscious effort to maintain the integrity of the research process.

Voices of the Civil Disobedience Movement and Others

Another particularly touching interview was with a middle-aged woman, whom I will call Ma Aye Thin to protect her identity. A former primary school teacher, she had joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) since the coup and was now living in exile, waitressing at a small Thai restaurant. Her experience was representative of the displacement, impoverishment, and pervasive fear faced by thousands of CDM workers who had come to Thailand after fleeing the military junta's annihilation and often worked in labor-intensive, lower-paid jobs. But nevertheless, Ma Aye Thin spoke with quiet resolve about her ongoing dedication to the CDM, which she felt was crucial in bringing down the military regime. She explained how teachers and students across Myanmar held fast in their resistance, boycotting state-run schools or ignoring government-issued curriculums. Along with others in the movement, she thought federalism was the solution to Myanmar's long-simmering political problems, a map to a more peaceful future. Her life was one of determination and strength, although she faced tremendous brutality, symbolizing the efforts of the CDM movement.

In addition to the unique testimonies of the 46 featured figures, the input of the wider number of participants provided a multidimensional portrait of Myanmar's resistance landscape. Those lived experiences through the age of resistance under the tough authoritarian regime extended from ethnic leaders and former parliamentarians to educators and ex-PDF soldiers to ex-NGO workers on the Thai border and beyond; each brought a unique lens based on their regional roots, personal history, and their continued involvement in the pro-democracy movement. These interviews, from regions as varied as Mandalay, Yangon, Shan, Karen, and Mon States, showed how the fight against the junta had seeped into every layer of civil society. Participants spoke not only of their immediate struggles but also of long-standing grievances, the deeper causes of the conflict, and deep-seated ethnic animosities that had long been neglected by the central authorities.

All these generations; all of these political stances; all the different actors of the democratization movement and EAOs—among them, a pattern began to emerge: a shared dream of a decolonized, federated Myanmar, one that fully embraced diversity on the principles of justice, equality, and self-determination for the minority nationalities. But these conversations also help illuminate the day-to-day realities of living in a revolution-dominated age, a life filled with fear (the regime might knock on your door), poverty (life has grown so expensive), displacement (your city might be bombed next), and constant recalibration. Activists described how communities persisted with acts of resistance from the grass roots, boycotting state institutions to establish local defense groups and underground education networks. Former combatants and NGO workers said that such tactical adjustments were typical of the decentralized resistance and that they were part of

an exhausting, emotional toll on those involved. Ethnic representatives' demands struck a chord, leading us to recognize the history of marginalization and the necessity to create a genuine power-sharing model. Taken together, all the interviews not only sketched an account of the practical and ideological obstacles of Myanmar's current resistance but also made sense of the human aspect of revolution—stories of tenacity, solidarity, and a shared dream of a peaceful, pluralistic future.

2.2 The Ethnographic Approach

I took a qualitative approach based on ethnographic methods to immerse myself into the insider perspectives of Myanmar's post-coup revolutionary forces. My method involved dwelling and engaging among diverse people whom the conflict affected directly. In trying to embed myself in their worlds, I wanted to understand political culture at the micro level. This approach enabled me to examine how individuals from diverse social backgrounds understand the current civil war and how these understandings mediate their political practices and desires.

I selected ethnography as a good meta-method with which to frame my investigation because it contextualizes wide-ranging processes—like ethnic conflict and democratization—that unfold over a huge range of perspectives within the lived experiences of individuals[3]. In contrast to quantitative surveys or polls, ethnographic methodologies offer an opportunity to dig deeper into the participants' unfiltered perceptions, free from the constraints of rigid predefined categories. I found that the best way to truly experience their daily lives (and understand their beliefs and day-to-day challenges) was just to be with them—wherever they were, in a war or peaceful area alike, in a natural setting.[4]

2.2.1 Political Ethnography and Its Rationale

Political ethnography, an emerging subfield that has stressed the importance of ethnographic approaches to understanding political life, shaped the framework of my research. Edward Schatz, one of the leading advocates for methodological pluralism in political science, describes ethnography as a mode of inquiry predicated on direct, person-to-person contact that roots itself in the perspectives and meanings of insiders[5]. To Schatz, ethnography is a process involving techniques like interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—and a product that attempts to gain a granular understanding of political phenomena.

3. Walsh, D. (2009). *Doing Ethnography*. In Seale, C., Gobo, G., Gubrium, J. F., & Silverman, D. (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Practice*. London: Sage Publications, pp.87.
4. Schatz, E. (2007). *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 45-70-
5. Schatz, E. (2007). Ibid, pp 112.

Political ethnography provides a critical turn towards micro-level interactions in gross categories of analysis, embedding abstract theoretical claims in the lived experiences of the individuals most affected by power. This approach offered a normative basis for my research for engaging individuals whose voices are often phased out of academic and policy discussions. It also allowed me to investigate public opinion and political behavior in ways that enhance the more profound understanding of grassroots-level political involvement.

Research Example & Insights from Political Ethnography

Through political ethnography, this research was undertaken with the intention to bridge the gap between micro-level experiences and broader theories of state building and conflict management and intended to produce broadly applicable insights into political and social life while preserving the insider perspectives of participants. For instance, Schatz references Alissa-Pisano's use of ethnography to challenge prevailing theories of post-Soviet economic transitions by incorporating grassroots narratives[6]. Likewise, I have tried to harness ethnographic approaches to critically engage with conflict management theory, as the antidote to which I draw from the lived experience of Myanmar's disenfranchised groups. I have also tried to design with a commitment to hearing the voices of those involved in Myanmar's revolutionary movement. Using a transformative and political ethnographic lens, my goal was to capture the complexity of their experiences and add to a more nuanced understanding of state and nation-building in Myanmar. This approach not only filled important gaps in the literature but also centered the perspectives of those most profoundly affected by the country's ongoing conflicts. I wanted to provide contextually grounded yet theoretically valuable insights that will contribute to broader debates about conflict, state building, and democratization.

2.2.2 Participant Observation

Immersion Through Participant Observation

I used participants' contributions to improve my understanding of insider viewpoints and observation for complementing other data collection methods. Recognizing the limitations of purely verbal inquiry, I volunteered as a translator with the Justice Department of the National Unity Government (NUG), the shadow government resisting Myanmar's military regime. The position entailed riding along with community members to see what happened in a typical workday. By becoming a part of their world, I could develop relationships and gather insights that would have been impossible to obtain through interviews alone. When you are in an organization of revolutionaries, a tight-knit community, trust is a foundation. Members are constantly vigilant of the threat of infiltrators, since the Myanmar military routinely employs undercover agents who try to penetrate opposition networks. This new

6. Schatz, E. (2007). Ibid, 198.

layer of vulnerability created huge challenges for my research. Emerging from this learning experience, I made sure I was completely aware of their legitimate concerns and tried to be open and transparent in all dealings. I recounted my history, including my role in the revolution before leaving Myanmar, with assistance from personal photographs and connections to some of the former officials of the democratic government. I tried to set up my credibility by offering whatever information they required to alleviate their concerns; I mitigated any reservations about my presence.

The Value of Observation in Ethnographic Research

As Atkinson and Hammersley contend, all social research needs some form of participant observation because the object we are studying, namely the social world, is entangled with our participation in it[7]. This practice of simultaneously observing—and participating—people's everyday routines is crucial to understanding the context of their actions and experiences. Also, in the method described by Schensul and LeCompte[8], it is mentioned as a process of learning through exposure to and involvement in the routine practices of the population being studied. In line with this approach, I conducted research by embedding myself within the community to gain insight into the unwritten rules and assumptions that were guiding their behavior, in keeping with the guidance of Charmaz[9]. Just being there altered how they see and behave, so I had to balance participation with passive observation, which constantly required a self-awareness of myself as an instrument. Polsky's advice for the fieldwork was invaluable: "Keep your eyes and ears open, but keep your mouth shut." [10] Before I asked any questions, I made listening to my primary agenda, and I focused on acclimating myself to the rhythms of their lives, knowing that my every act and attitude was being observed.

2.3 Secondary Data: Ethnographic Content Analysis

To complement the original interviews and participant observations with the help of secondary data from media, this study also adopts Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)[11] as one of the core methodological frameworks. It extracts secondary raw data from media. I found ECA particularly suitable for analysing Myanmar's ongoing conflict and the perspectives of leaders from Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). Given the challenges of accessing key actors during an intensifying civil war and the constraints on traditional ethnographic research, ECA provided a flexible and reflexive tool for engaging with both primary and secondary data. By integrating the qualitative depth of ethnography with the analytical rigor of content analysis, by combining the detailed insights of ethnography with

7. Atkinson, P., & Hammersley, M. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice* (3rd ed.). London: Routledge. 55-59
8. Schensul, S. L., Schensul, J. J., & LeCompte, M. D. (1999). *Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. 70-73
9. Charmaz, K. (2008). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage Publications. 48-59
10. Polsky, N. (1967). *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*. Chicago: Aldine. 72
11. Altheide, D. L. (1987). "Ethnographic Content Analysis." *Qualitative Sociology*, 10(1), p. 66.

the careful examination of content analysis, ECA helped to find new themes, patterns, and focuses in the available data, making it suitable for the complicated political situation in Myanmar.

Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) as a research technique has gradually grown in importance as well as in its claim to be counted in a fine methodological lineage of studying social phenomena where the conditions of traditional fieldwork are restricted, for example, when research needs to be conducted in areas experiencing conflict or political sensitivity. This notion has been fine-tuned and the Scholars have tested this approach, demonstrating its versatility and applicability even under the most challenging conditions. As an illustration, David L. Altheide (1987)[12], utilized ECA in his seminal research of the Iranian hostage crisis; he analyzed television news coverage as well as public opinion, showing how visual and story elements manipulated the public's perception of the crisis.

In much the same way, the edited volume Fieldwork Under Fire, by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C. G. M. Robben (1997)[13] assembles the efforts of anthropologists conducting research during violence and unrest, many of whom used ECA to negotiate the possibilities of data collection under duress. In a different, yet relevant application, Kameel Ahmady (2021)[14] engaged ethnographic cinema and ECA in his study of youth in Mahabad, Iran—a politically contentious region—which provided insights into audience practices around media consumption, social conformity, and resistance practices. Through these studies, it has been demonstrated that ECA presents a flexible yet robust solution for researchers looking to ethically and effectively engage with narratives in hard-to-access settings.

2.3.1 Theoretical Foundations of Ethnographic Content Analysis

ECA varies from traditional quantitative content analysis, as in ECA, there is a dynamic, iterative relationship between theory and data. Although quantitative methods are typically deductive and characterized by predetermined categories, ECA approaches are reflexive and interpretive, enabling ongoing comparison and refinement[15]. This flexibility was crucial for navigating the restricted access to primary subjects, such as EAO leaders and ethnic community representatives in Myanmar. ECA builds on the ethnographic principle that document analysis is a form of fieldwork, positioning the researcher as an active participant in interpreting texts. Cicourel, Johnson, and Hammersley, and Atkinson assert that all research is participatory, involving the researcher's reflexive engagement in selecting topics, collecting data, and conducting Analyses[16]. ECA embraces this reflexivity,

12. Ibid, pp. 65–77.
13. Nordstrom, Carolyn, and Antonius C. G. M. Robben, editors. *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*. University of California Press, 1997.
14. Ahmady, Kameel. *Conformity and Resistance in Mahabad – Media Consumption, Conformity and Resistance: A Visual Ethnography of Youth in Iranian Kurdistan*. Scholars Press, 2021.
15. Altheide, D. L. (1987). Ibid. pp. 66–68.
16. Cicourel, A. V. (1964). *Method and Measurement in Sociology*. New York: Free Press, p. 25; Johnson, J. M. (1975). *Doing Field Research*. New York: Free Press, p. 41; Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Tavistock, pp. 88–90.

enabling the analysis of documents like televised interviews and news reports as windows into nuanced human actions and interpretive patterns[17]. It allows for the organic emergence of themes, a vital feature for exploring Myanmar's ethnic heterogeneity and complex historical grievances, which often elude rigid coding systems[18].

2.3.2 Justification for ECA in the Myanmar Conflict

My decision to employ ECA arose from the specific challenges of researching Myanmar's ethnic conflict. While I initially intended to conduct direct ethnographic interviews with EAO leaders, the escalation of armed conflict rendered many key actors inaccessible. As seen in other conflict zones, such as Iran and Syria, barriers to direct interviews necessitate alternative approaches for capturing the perspectives of elusive decision-makers[19].

ECA's adaptability proved invaluable for analyzing secondary raw data, such as media interviews with EAO leaders and ethnic party representatives. This methodology enabled me to extract narratives and identify strategic framings. By conceptualizing document analysis as a form of fieldwork, ECA reconstructed the voices of actors despite their physical inaccessibility, making it an invaluable tool for conflict research[20].

2.3.3 Integrating Primary and Secondary Data

This research combined 46 original interviews conducted with ethnic community members along the Thailand-Myanmar border and from within the country with secondary data from televised interviews and news coverage. Participants included people from the Bamar, Shan, Karen, Danu, Mon and Chin communities, as well as mid-level representatives of EAOs and the shadow National Unity Government (NUG). Here, a reoccurring theme was the common dream of a federal democratic state and the subordination of the military under civilian rule. This vision embodied the principles enshrined in the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which had envisaged an all-inclusive federal union. A media content analysis provided additional perspectives on how EAO leaders such as the AA, the KNU, and the KIA make sense of the occurrences and imagine themselves. Overall, these data demonstrated ECA's capability of merging differing narratives while not distorting the essence of either viewpoint. This comprehensive framework allowed me to capture both the explicit demands of political actors, which were almost excluded in most Myanmar research, and the implicit cultural and historical underpinnings of their narratives.

2.3.4 The Merits of ECA in Myanmar's Context

Ethnographic Content Analysis offers a unique methodological lens for navigating the

17. Plummer, K. (1983). *Documents of Life: An Introduction to the Problems and Literature of a Humanistic Method*. London: Allen & Unwin, p. 12.
18. Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine, p. 34.
19. McCarthy, R. (2018). "Ethnographic Challenges in Conflict Zones." *Conflict Studies Review*, 24(3), pp. 118–120.
20. Altheide, D. L. (1987). Ibid., p. 69.

complexities of Myanmar's conflict because it combines the reflexivity of ethnography with the analytical depth of content analysis. Through the habituation of mediated data as a version of fieldwork, ECA allows for the reconstruction of subjectivities that may be left out of reach, illuminating the aspirations and grievances of Myanmar's ethnic communities in ways that can be appallingly underrepresented within the literature.

This approach deepened understanding of the Federalist movement and showcased the broader utility of ECA to help researchers study conflict—especially in contexts where direct access is limited, such as in other war zone actor analysis and so on. I bring up this approach to raise the voices of Myanmar's diverse communities to create a richer and more nuanced understanding of their collective struggle for autonomy and justice.

2.4 Data Analysis: Data Interpretation Techniques and Collecting Quality Data

2.4.1 Interpreting Ethnographic Data

Interpreting Ethnographic Data Once the fieldwork was over, I was faced with the still daunting yet rewarding task of interpreting the many pieces of ethnographic data I had collected. This process required me to ascend not only in methodological rigor but also in openness to the stories embedded within the narratives. I started with a close reading of verbatim transcripts of interviews, field notes, and other qualitative data artifacts. Although this manual process was labor-intensive, it enabled me to immerse myself in the richness and depth of participants' responses[21].

Here I have mainly employed manual analysis to facilitate the handling of datasets and coding. These served as a crucial foundation for flagging commonalities, motifs, and elements emerging across luminal stories. However, I was wary of the limitations of automated tools, particularly their tendency to strip context from qualitative data. Cultural and contextual nuances often require human interpretation to ensure authenticity[22]. Ethnographic data interpretation extends far beyond mere observation, requiring a contextual and nuanced approach. A particularly effective method is the customization of analytical categories—tailored insights designed to align with the specific objectives of the research. By systematically coding data into categories such as risks, challenges, or behaviors, researchers can extract highly targeted information from transcripts and field notes [23].

2.4.2 Ground-Up Methodology and Its Relevance to Complex Conflicts

The ground-up approach to data analysis was central to my work. I engaged in an iterative,

21. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), p. 87.
22. Silverman, D. (2020). *Interpreting Qualitative Data: A Guide to the Principles of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage, p. 102.
23. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 123.

deductive data collection method and analysis, which rewarded me with themes that emerged organically and encapsulated the lived realities of my participants. Grounded theory, using an iterative process of data collection and analysis to develop conceptual understandings directly grounded in the lived experiences of participants, presents a powerful approach for investigating this sort of complex social phenomenon.

This approach allowed me to relate micro-level observations to macro-level patterns, thus providing a fuller picture of the structures and processes of dynamics driving Myanmar's ethnic conflict[24]. By this methodology, I was able to situate the micro into the macro patterns and articulate a more comprehensive understanding of the structure and process of dynamics in Myanmar's ethnic conflict[24]. This iterative process proved particularly useful in a situation like Myanmar's, where we were trying to unpack the relationship between past resentments and contemporary challenges of conflict. For instance, participants frequently emphasized the enduring impact of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which promised but never delivered an inclusive federal system. Such patterns shed light on the structural causes of ethnic enmity, the resolution of which must be a central theme of peace-building[25].

2.4.3 Narrative and Thematic Analysis: Unlocking the Power of Stories and Patterns

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis offered a systematic and structured way of identifying repeating patterns within the qualitative data. I started by coding the transcripts and field notes and organizing them in grids to compare across them. This approach enabled me to identify such themes as resilience, marginalization, and common federal aspirations. This technique consists of applying careful coding and categorization of data within and across sources (transcripts, field notes, etc.) to reveal underlying themes and relationships. For example, to the extent that participants' descriptions of the military's impact on their lives converged, it was around notions of oppression and deprivation, but it also revealed unexpected moments of solidarity and hope[26].

With the help of matrix-based frameworks, researchers sort data into grids, which facilitate the cross-comparing of information and the extraction of salient insights [27]. When studying topics such as organizational communication, thematic analysis might provide insights that allow investigators to see "drivers of conversation" or "sentiment shifts," bringing structure or focus to complex social activity. This organized manner allows analytical rigor to be maintained and to be applied to qualitative data whilst being subservient to the richness and complexity inherent in interpreting dynamic social interactions.

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24. Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage, p. 45.
25. South, A. (2018). *Ethnic Politics in Myanmar: A Study of Federalism and Democratization*. London: Routledge, p. 66.
26. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp. 89–90.
27. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 127

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis, by contrast, emphasizes the interpretive depth of individual stories, the order, sequencing, and cultural context of shared experiences. This approach is of particular importance in ethnographic research due to the way it illustrates the subjective dimensions of the social world.[28] This approach allows me to dissect narratives to understand not only what is being communicated but also the implicit cultural and emotional undercurrents. The function of empathy and objectivity in narrative analysis is important in ethnography. For instance, in studying participant stories from conflicts in Myanmar, scholars could identify recurring narratives of resilience, marginalization, or resistance.

2.4.4 Inductive Coding and Thematic Analysis

Following my field research, I started on a meticulous process of data analysis, systematically working through documents, field notes, interview transcripts, and observations. I used an inductive coding process, so the themes flowed from the data rather than forcing data into a theme. This process included sorting the information into meaningful codes, which were then grouped into larger thematic units. [29]

By consistently coding data in discrete categories (eg, risks, challenges, behaviors), researchers can elicit highly specific information from their transcripts and field notes. I quickly realized that a superficial approach to data analysis would not adequately capture the intricacies of "Myanmar's revolutionary movement." Instead, with contextual tagging, which is a systematic way of categorically organizing data with risks, challenges, behaviors, and the like. This tailored system of analysis enabled me to extract highly specific insights from transcripts and field notes while preserving the broader narrative[30]

For instance, during interviews with ethnic leaders, tagging allowed me to isolate recurring themes such as distrust, visions for autonomy, and grievances tied to historical injustices. This analytical process allowed me to substantiate my findings more thoroughly (especially when combined with direct narrative analysis)[31], and was applied widely throughout the study to demonstrate how direct narrative analysis, coupled with descriptive insights, allows for producing actionable insights.

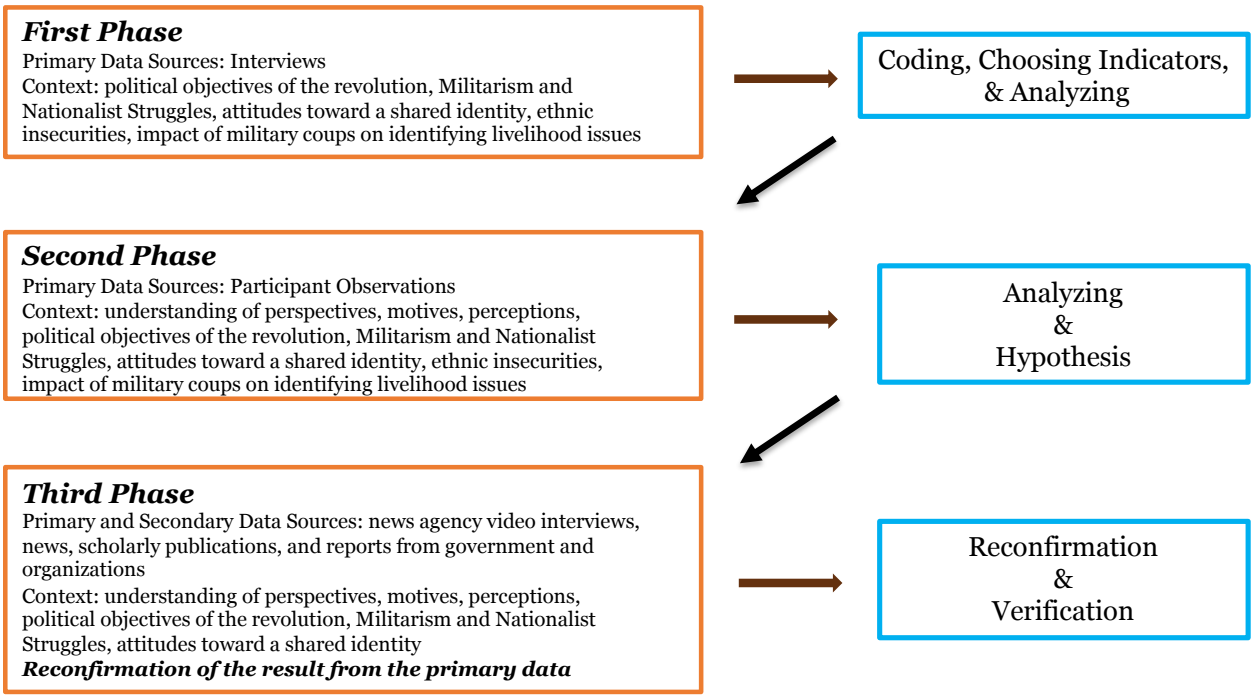
Moreover, the theme of **"cultural insecurity"** emerged from codes such as "negation of symbolic representations," "Bamar (Burmese) vision of history," "restrictions of language in education," and "demographic assimilation." Similarly, the theme of **"post-coup**

28. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Los Angeles: Sage, p. 42.
29. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 61.
30. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 123.
31. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design. Ibid. P. 35-45.*

economic hardship" consolidated codes like "sharing natural resources," "developing markets," "realities on the ground", and "lacking job opportunities." Instead of imposing a theoretical perspective on the data, I let the data itself suggest the contours of an analytical framework.

For example: the theme of ethnic insecurities I sub-thematized under cultural, economic, social, and political. These subcategories underscored the multidimensional nature of participants' fears, including concerns about Bamar language dominance in education and about demographic assimilation. Similarly, the theme of national aspirations illuminated shared demands for equality, economic access, political representation, and cultural autonomy.

Diagram 2.1. Three Phases of research data analysis and triangulation



As shown in Diagram 1 in my analysis, it conceptualizes the relationships among these themes. In this thesis, I do not simply highlight an ongoing conflict in Myanmar but question the reasons and means why and how Burmese and ethnic soldiers are not reconciling even though they share a common enemy. For the sake of coherence, I organized my findings around these broad themes while providing comparative observations about Burmese revolutionaries and EAOs experiences. And, in the end, I hope to propose alternative solutions, questioning the relevance of current ethnic conflict theories and federal institutional models to the specific case of the civil war in Myanmar. By presenting findings through visually structured diagrams and thematic narratives, I aimed

to offer both academic insights and practical recommendations for addressing the country's protracted civil war.

2.5 Validation Strategies

In order to increase the accuracy and validity of my research findings, I developed five strategies to discuss the scope of the study. These were informed by my dedication to protecting the integrity of my data and my awareness of the delicate context in which I was working. Drawing on Creswell's "accepted strategies,"[32] I implemented the following measures:

Participant Engagement and Ongoing Observation

My extended presence in the field allowed me to develop trust with participants, which was critical for verifying the accuracy of their narratives. It allowed for immediate course correction and for practice toward clarification and confirmation of understanding.

Triangulation

I used several data sources to triangulate and verify my findings. In addition to these interviews and participant observations, I also used secondary data, video interviews with ethnic militia leaders, news reports, and organizational documents, as well as academic literature. As presented in Diagram 1, this process led me to find common themes across disparate sources and confirm the accuracy of my findings[33].

Member Checking

Leveraging digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, I invited participants to review my interpretations and conclusions. This iterative feedback process validated the relevance of my findings and ensured that my classifications, particularly those related to national aspirations, aligned with participants' perspectives[34].

2.6 Positionality & Reflections

2.6.1 Critical Reflection on my own Assumptions

While researching Myanmar's revolutionary movement, one of the key things was critically judging my original assumptions. By reflecting on my positionality, I was able to question my biases and go into the subjective realities of my participants. This self-awareness was especially important in qualitative research, in which being aware of one's own cultural

32. Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 203.
33. Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, p. 129.
34. Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, p. 314.

practices and the participants' viewpoint[35]. Glaser argues that researchers should enter their field of inquiry with minimal preconceived notions to remain sensitive to the data and avoid filtering observations through existing biases[36]. But as a Myanmar native studying its politics, I brought a great deal of existing knowledge, preconceived assumptions, and cultural bias. My own experience, very much shaped by the struggles of Myanmar, both enriched and complicated my research. This duality required constant self-awareness to make sure my embedded knowledge became an asset and not a barrier to obtaining reliable and authentic insights.

2.6.2 Advantages and Disadvantages of Being an Indigenous (Native) Researcher

The fact that I was an indigenous researcher had various advantages and some disadvantages. Fluency in Burmese and cultural familiarity gave me the ability to understand complex social interaction and to read between the lines of social dynamics. That kind of cultural fluency was an invaluable resource—it gave me confidence in interpreting qualitative data correctly. Burgess highlights that "native" researchers possess unique advantages in forming natural connections within social contexts[37], a dynamic I experienced firsthand throughout my fieldwork. Logistic obstacles and financial systems at the Thai-Myanmar border were also mitigated by my insider knowledge. I was confident enough with this familiarity that it spared me from many of the pitfalls that foreign researchers frequently fall into when they conduct research in active conflict regions, such as in these places where the Tatmadaw and resistance groups are fighting. In contrast to other 'outside' researchers, I was not subjected to cultural disorientation and 'reverse culture shock' often depicted in the ethnographic writing[38].

However, being an insider had its drawbacks as well. There were times that cultural obligations and family obligations drew my attention away from my research, as I was expected to "make rounds" to see friends and their family. And then, being Burmese, I was sometimes shielded from sensitive information. For example, when I had requested an interview with a Karen rebel leader, my identity had raised suspicion. In the civil war environment of Myanmar—where espionage is common—I faced multiple layers of vetting and, ultimately, was denied the opportunity. This situation also highlighted a wider issue for Indigenous researchers: the tension between insider knowledge and the need to challenge deeply rooted suspicion by participants[39].

2.6.3 Managing Risks in a Conflict Environment

Doing fieldwork along the Thai Myanmar border at that time required strict risk

35. Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, pp. 33.
36. Ibid, pp. 15.
37. Burgess, R. G. (1984). *In the Field: An Introduction to Field Research*. London: Routledge, p. 77.
38. Devereux, S., & Hoddinott, J. (1993). *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, p. 48.
39. Burgess, R. G. (1984). *Ibid,* p. 92.

management. When I arrived in March 2023, fierce fighting was going on between the Myanmar military and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the People's Defense Force (PDF) coalition. In just one month, the violence had forced around 10,000 refugees into Thailand[40].

In a context where infiltration is a perpetual worry, NUG members and EAO leaders are understandably wary of outsiders. In response to these concerns, I used a candid approach, sharing my background and explicitly stating the purpose of my research. Early conversations were more focused on rapport-building. Eventually, as I became increasingly visible within the community and built a reputation by associating with trustworthy individuals who were known throughout the area, I established some credibility. I also prioritized protecting the confidentiality of my participants. People were afraid to speak out at first because it could result in military raids or monitoring. I gave them hard ethical rules and guaranteed the anonymity of all parties involved.

2.6.4 Navigating the Emotional Dimensions of Insider Research

Immersion in my participants' struggle is an overwhelming emotional weight. As someone from Myanmar herself, the familiar stories of displacement, loss, and resilience struck home for me, making it hard to keep the analytical distance. This emotional involvement increased my sense of obligation but also produced some guilt, as I recognized the limitations of my role as a researcher in offering tangible support. Naples observes that insider researchers often struggle with the balance between empathy and objectivity[41], a tension I navigated throughout my work. The idea of reflexivity became central to my methodology, allowing me to critically assess just how much of my positionality influenced this interaction and subsequent interpretation. I strived to maximize the contributions of this insider perspective through an iterative process of questioning and self-evaluation.

The experience of being an indigenous researcher informed every aspect of my fieldwork, from the relationships I cultivated to the kinds of data I generated. But despite that peer recognition that made me a cultural insider, my inside status was also double-edged. By leaning into both the benefits and difficulties of my position, I was able to capture nuanced, authentic perspectives on Myanmar's revolutionary movement, helping enrich understanding of the conflict and its implications.

2.6.5 Navigating Researcher Dilemma

As an insider in terms of engaging with the struggles in Myanmar, I was sharply conscious of how my positionality might have implications for how the findings were perceived.

40. UNHCR. (2023). *Myanmar Emergency Response*. Retrieved from UNHCR official website.
41. Naples, N. A. (1996). "The Insider/Outsider Debate in Feminist Research." *Feminist Studies*, 22(3), pp. 435–436.

Reflexivity became a primary part of my approach as I realized that objectivity is unattainable in interpretive research, and I accepted that my observations and conclusions would inevitably bear the imprint of my own perspective[42]. In light of this, I have tried to remain reflexive, challenging my assumptions and recording how I was impacted by the research process. Researchers studying political violence are faced with both exposure to physical risk, as they're investigating what constitutes political violence in the first place, as well as the emotional weight of engaging with trauma narratives. Unlike soldiers or humanitarian workers who intervene directly to relieve suffering, I had the role of an observer, documenting events without being able to offer tangible help. This alienation frequently left me with a sense of guilt, compounded by the knowledge that the individuals I encountered were enduring the immediate consequences of the violence I studied. Seeing the human cost of conflict up close added layers of emotional complexity to my work.

2.6.7 The Challenges of Access and Trust in Conflict Study

In politically delicate conditions—gaining access to participants and even just establishing trust is more often than not very challenging. Both the researcher and potential participants in conflict-affected communities were hesitant and fearful most of the time. It took negotiation, practice, and intention on my part to build trust.

I let participants choose the time and place for our interviews, which often took place at their homes or workplaces. Before starting each interview, I stated my research goals and highlighted my provision of anonymity. These steps proved essential to cultivating an atmosphere where participants were comfortable sharing experiences. Having positioned myself as an ally with the political landscape and prior involvement in the resistance eased these barriers. But I never lost sight of how innately vulnerable the people I spoke with were. The moral propriety of my research was predicated…on respecting their limits and acknowledging their agency. Prioritizing first-person accounts of those directly involved in the conflict, my aim here is to address a significant gap in academic literature, where the voices of individuals living with such struggles are often sidelined[43].

2.7 Ethics Reflection

2.7.1 Empathy and Selective Engagement

The dual reality of doing research amidst Myanmar's civil war and with people whose roles in the conflict spanned from the mundane to the brutal and pose serious ethical concerns. Political elites and political insurgents were among my participants, but so were those in grassroots activism and civilians whose lives shaped their narratives about the revolution in an era of upheaval.

42. Creswell, J. W. (2004). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. 89-98
43. Seth, S. (2021). "Grassroots Perspectives in Conflict Studies: A Critical Gap." *Journal of Peace and Conflict Research*, 58(4), 25–38.

In such cases, I would fully support Thomson (2010)[44] argues that researchers in conflict settings must move beyond the imperative to "do no harm," instead demonstrating empathy and prioritizing participants' emotional safety. However, I discovered that empathy in such contexts is rarely straightforward. I often struggled with selective empathy, a phenomenon in which I found my emotional connection to participants in the conflict. For example, I empathized deeply with resistance fighters and ordinary citizens displaced by the violence, yet I struggled to extend the same understanding to individuals implicated in recent acts of aggression.

I frequently suffered from selective empathy, a process whereby I identified with the people involved in the conflict and felt for them. I was able to do this, for example, for the resistance fighters and the citizens just going about their business and under the weight of the terrorist threat the violence has generated, but I found it more difficult to extend the same understanding to individuals implicated in recent acts of aggression.

2.7.2 Ethical Challenges in a Civil War Context

In researching Myanmar's revolution, I had to navigate a particularly volatile and mistrustful atmosphere. With the ongoing civil war came general suspicion and paranoia that actors, including the NUG shadow government, EAOs, and civilians, fear infiltration or espionage. In order to mitigate risks for myself and my participants, I followed ironclad ethical principles based on:

Confidentiality: Protecting the identities of participants was an unavoidable rule I followed. I avoided using real names or disclosing identifying details, recognizing the severe consequences of exposure, such as state retaliation or community ostracism. I did not use real names or identifying details, aware of the risk of exposure in the form of state retaliation or ostracism by communities.

Localized Ethics: I built on Kovats-Bernat's (2005)[45] principle of "localized ethics" to depend on my cultural knowledge to navigate risk and modify my approach to sensitive topics. For instance, I adapted my inquiries according to the level of comfort exhibited by participants and accounted for boundaries that may not be immediately obvious to non-native researchers.

Yet even with these precautions, the emotional burden of the research was enormous. My observation of the participants' day-to-day coping transformed the way I view Myanmar—

44. Thomson, S. (2010). "Ethical Dilemmas in the Study of Political Violence." *Qualitative Research*, 10(5), p. 561.
45. Kovats-Bernat, J. C. (2004). "Negotiating Dangerous Fields: Pragmatic Strategies for Fieldwork amid Violence and Terror." *American Anthropologist*, 106(1), p. 215.

not just as a "conflict-prone country" but rather as a "divided nation." The revolution, I began to understand, was not merely a battle for political control but a deeply rooted effort to challenge entrenched power dynamics between military elites and marginalized groups.

2.8 Limitation of the research

2.8.1 Addressing Methodological Challenges

Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) is a methodological framework with one central limitation: it specifies relying on mediated texts—news reports, social media posts, and publicly available media content—rather than engaging directly with research subjects. Although ECA is conducive to flexible, dynamic meanings in cultural texts, meanings are less immediate and contextualized than they would be in face-to-face interaction. This mediation between researcher and subject can engender interpretative distances that may be particularly apparent in the study of the complex socio-politics of Myanmar's resistance, which relies on nuance, emotion, and inarticulated cultural knowledge. ECA is also anchored to the editorial biases, constraints, and selectiveness of the media sources it examines, which in turn begs questions concerning representation and authenticity. In addition, this template runs the risk of homogenizing by concentrating only on dominant narratives (that is, those in more circulation) and thus excluding the voices of the marginal. Therefore, while ECA can be highly useful in determining certain practices and patterns that govern the discourse, it can always be combined with techniques of provoking interactive involvement with the participants for social life and thematic orientation.

Therefore, while the flexibility of ECA is arguably its main strength, it also creates some challenges, particularly around the reliability and validity of interpretations. To mitigate these concerns, this study employs triangulation, comparing themes identified in primary 46 interviews with patterns derived from secondary data. This methodological discipline guarantees that insights generated are not idiosyncratic but reflective of more general patterns across the resistance movements in Myanmar, rather than isolated narratives[46.] Reflecting upon my positionality as a researcher, I applied reflexivity to the analysis, realizing that my interpretations were influenced by my background, my views, and my experiences. I believe transparency in coding and interpretation also enhanced this study with the methodological standards of grounded theory and ethnography, which will somehow reinforce the reliability of its conclusions[47].

2.8.2 The Researcher's Burden

Over the course of my research, I have had the dual burden of recording the complexities

46. McCarthy, R. (2018). "Triangulation in Ethnographic Conflict Research." *Qualitative Methods Quarterly*, 19(2), pp. 45–48.
47. Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (1983). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. London: Tavistock, pp. 93–94.

of Myanmar's uprising and struggling with my helplessness to intervene. The business of interpreting the conflict as an insider and producing theory-driven insights from it seemed particularly relevant in a context where human suffering was ubiquitous—economic deprivation, psychological trauma, and systemic violence were everywhere evident. I was aware of the limitations of my role as a researcher, but I also understood the potential impact of my work. In documenting participants lived experiences and looking more deeply at the structural causes of the conflict, I hoped to contribute to a greater conversation that could, one day, inform policy and advocacy. Though researchers cannot alter the past, their work has the power to influence the narratives and strategies that define the future.

Conclusion

This methodology chapter was designed to reflect the methodological journey to understand the complexities of Myanmar's revolutionary movement and its common consequence of nation-rebuilding. Through an ethnographic grounded research paradigm, I aimed not only to study but also to engage actively with participants, ensuring their perspectives shaped the trajectory of this inquiry but, by implication, the potential to contribute to the social advancement of marginalized groups. The methodology of ethnography, and specifically the logic of political ethnography, was found to be particularly well-suited to this setting.

As Schatz notes, ethnography allows researchers to delve beneath surface-level observations and access the lived realities of those most affected by power dynamics[63]. It was a time in the field for me that was like an amazing learning opportunity, going out and interviewing resistance communities and living with folks day-to-day and doing volunteer work with the National Unity Government's Justice Department. These experiences highlighted central themes, including the revolutionary ideals of the groups, the persistent fears of ethnic minorities, and the vision of a federal Myanmar that they aspired towards.

As an indigenous scholar, maneuvering this work required ongoing contemplation of my positionality. Yet this insider status also required vigilant reflexivity to mitigate potential distortions and attend to my emotional investment in Myanmar's plight. This duality—of proximity and reflexive distance—shaped all my fieldwork decisions, from the questions I collected to the themes I incorporated during analysis. The analysis was guided by inductive coding; thus, themes arose by themselves from the data. After diligent reading and rereading of field notes, interview transcripts, and secondary documents, the analysis of the data revealed similar themes characterizing the phenomenon, such as "ethnic insecurities" and "national aspirations for equality and federalism." Presentation of the findings These findings were then recontextualized against the material through triangulation [67] and validated via member checking and affirmations. This careful procedure sought to ensure that the findings from the interviews both mirrored

participants' lived realities and also aligned with participants' own understandings of the challenges and hopes that characterize Myanmar's future. One of the constant battles was about how to tell these stories with empathy but also with objectivity, especially when, on either side of the border, I came face to face with so many diverse and often painful realities of the people living there. Beyond analysis of conflict, I hope that this research will push academia out of its comfort zone into new territories of knowledge that contribute ideas on the resolution of conflicts, on federalism, and on inclusive governance.

This chapter also lays a methodological foundation for the thesis that follows, which aims not only to deepen understanding, but also to challenge orthodoxies and inform policy development. The following chapter shifts the focus to the contours of this thesis's conceptual architecture centered on resistance to the Myanmar coup. Contentious political theory serves as a foundational theory of this thesis. This framework must be developed not simply to understand the empirical complication sketched out above but as part of recentering the struggle in Myanmar as a crucial site for reconceptualizing statehood, legitimacy, agency, and federal futures in post-authoritarian transition.

Findings from Participant Observation and Interviews

Drawing on months of ethnographic immersion across border zones, my own lived experiences, and digital networks, this section identifies key thematic findings that anchor the empirical chapters (4, 5 & 6) that follow.

These findings are not anecdotal remnants nor thematic syntheses but rather conceptual reductions from observation and 46 interviews of members of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), civil disobedience actors (CDM), shadow state officials, and displaced civilians. The emerging themes below expose the disputed imaginaries, cracked solidarities, and quotidian enactments that mark Myanmar's ongoing revolution. It was there that I had the opportunity of being involved in the day-to-day activities of a department of shadow government while interacting with its members, allowing me to become more acutely aware of the challenges they encounter. There were several major themes from these observations:

1. Exile, Sacrifice, and the Ethics of Resistance

Many participants shared dire stories about the harrowing experiences they faced escaping Myanmar, explaining how difficult it was to adjust to their lives as refugees and working for shadow governments. Economic hardships loomed large in their stories, with many pointing to the difficulty of finding steady jobs and supporting their families in strange and sometimes hostile places. Displacement was not merely a condition but a political modality. Participants narrated their exile as both personal trauma and national duty, emphasizing

sacrifices made to support the revolution from across borders. Financial precarity, statelessness, and family separation coexisted with a deeply moralized ethic of revolutionary labor. Many saw their exile not as passive suffering but as a necessary state of "limbo activism," sustaining resistance while navigating host-state hostility and resource scarcity.

2. Fragmented Fronts and the "Lone Ranger" Strategies of EAOs & PDFs

Participants provided in-depth descriptions of how insurgents and community organizers have made attempts at escaping the regime's oppression. Others also pointed to the precarious state of the shadow government, whose power and resources remain limited amid the grind of an entrenched and resourceful enemy.

However, a recurring tension concerned the strategic siloing among EAOs and most PDF fighters in this armed struggle. While participants expressed general opposition to the military junta, some diverged—especially ethnic and grassroots leaders—with what they decried as "lone ranger tactics": a tendency for actors to prioritize territorial control, resource self-reliance, or ethnic representation over unified military or political strategy. These approaches often undermined efforts at building a consolidated front and perpetuated what some described as the "fractured choreography" of the revolution. Internal divisions—whether over federal visions, command hierarchies, or strategic timelines—frustrated the goal of unified resistance.

3. The Persistent Politics of Ethnic Division

Despite rhetorical commitments to federalism, deep inter-ethnic distrust shaped the revolution's operational landscape. Multiple interviews revealed a profound asymmetry in how ethnic grievances were acknowledged, often along historical lines. While Bamar-majority actors within the NUG emphasized shared national reconstruction, many ethnic participants saw these overtures as conditional and instrumental. The revolutionary moment, for some, risked replicating prior centralization under a new guise—echoing past betrayals under successive Bamar-dominated governments.

4. Shadow Governance and Institutional Hybridity

Field encounters with actors embedded in the NUG and local administrative bodies illustrated a complex hybrid of institutional improvisation and fragmentation. Legal aid units, education cells, and township-level administration operated with minimal resources and ambiguous jurisdiction. Trust networks, diasporic funding, and informal legal norms often replaced centralized policy. In a way, these dynamics point to a proto-state architecture both empowered by its flexibility and hamstrung by its fragility. However,

while many respondents expressed commitment to resistance, their enthusiasm was often accompanied by ambivalence. Disillusionment with weak NUG leadership, donor dependency, and opaque decision-making was common.

5. Temporal Horizons and Revolutionary Fatigue

Across both CDM participants and ethnic activists, time emerged as an unstable axis. The imagined future—often marked by 2025 as a symbolic year for regime change or federal negotiation—produced competing affective registers: hope, anxiety, and exhaustion. While this horizon gave structure to action, it also induced burnout. Many interviewees described temporal compression, where days blurred under precarious labor, trauma exposure, and political uncertainty. Temporal dislocation—living for a "later" Myanmar—became both mobilizing and depleting.

6. Everyday Resistance and Micropolitical Agency

Participatory observation documented resistance as a quotidian event—whether in the practices of underground education, in encoded communication, in the smuggling of medicine, or even in shared silence during mourning. Such modest gestures, frequently ignored in studies of the military-dominated conflict, sent a message of perpetual defiance. They recast resistance not as episodic violence but as a mode of life lived under siege. Even with the vast challenges, participants frequently expressed hope about Myanmar's future. A common aspiration was the establishment of a federal union, one that guarantees equality for all ethnic groups.

Chapter 3. Conceptual Frameworks

Introduction

For a state divided by bitter ethnic divisions and frozen democratic hopes, then, the question of the relationship between democracy, identity, and federalism is less an issue of abstract theory than central to the very survival and reconstruction of the political community. Nowhere is this situation clearer than in Myanmar—a country once hailed for its fragile democratic opening in 2011-2020 but now pulled into the authoritarian quagmire that followed the military coup in February 2021. The political arc of Myanmar holds a paradigmatic illustration of the challenges that confront plural societies undergoing contested processes of state building, national integration, and democratic transition.

This chapter provides the conceptual and theoretical scaffolding for the thesis. By critically engaging with relevant theories, it aims to explain democratic breakdown as a process embedded within the interrelated reproduction of identity-based exclusion and institutional failure. The main purpose is to frame Myanmar's current political condition within broader scholarly debates—on the erosion of democracy, its contentious politics, the management of diversity, and the role of federal institutions in divided societies. It is important to note that this chapter outlines the tripartite analytical structure of the thesis, starting with a conceptual mapping of theoretical engagement with contentious politics (Part 1)—a framework I argue is particularly apt for capturing the dynamics of Myanmar's post-coup resistance. Building on the contributions from Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam[1], this section examines how political agency is reshaped under conditions of repression and how social movements emerge, evolve, and challenge dominant power structures in fragmented societies. Myanmar has experienced a rapid reconfiguration of political mobilization since the coup of 2021. Emerging protest coalitions, reinvigorating ethnic armed organizations, and even an explosion of localized resistance reflect changes in political opportunities and the reconfiguration of political identities. The theory of contentious politics offers the analytical devices to unpack these trends—highlighting the role of framing, resource mobilization, repression-response dynamics, and the spatial diffusion of protest.

Part 2 of the thesis draws upon key conceptual frameworks to situate Myanmar within the

1. McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. Dynamics of Contention. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

literature on democratic transitions and breakdowns. The central premise here is that Myanmar's post-2021 condition represents not a temporary setback, but rather a consequence of a fundamental crisis of democratic governance. Building on theorists like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (How Democracies Die)[2], I explore how these conditions of institutional fragility, elite collusion, and lack of democratic consolidation generated the conditions for the military to reassert power. These theories help elucidate why Myanmar's experiment with democracy was so susceptible to reversal and why the political settlement negotiated between 2011 and 2020 did not protect civilian rule from a military authoritarian coup.

Part 3 of this chapter and the last part of the thesis is dedicated to federalism—not merely as an abstract vision but as a real, institutional solution to Myanmar's overlapping challenges of identity, representation, and governance. This section connects literally to my empirical research that forms the foundation for Chapter 6 and the federal analysis for Myanmar. Based on interviews with ethnic leaders, activists, and constitutional theorists, I argue federalism is the most promising alternative as a way to reimagine the state to both acknowledge difference and promote unity. To anchor this discussion in practical terms, I introduce a typology of different dimensional approaches of federal models—ranging from consociational and centripetal to hybrid arrangements. These are mapped against Myanmar's specific ethno-political configurations and thoroughly analyzed in chapter 6, with attention to the risks and trade-offs inherent in each. While no model offers a perfect solution, the objective is to expand the horizon of institutional possibility—to demonstrate that federalism, if contextually designed and normatively anchored, can serve as a vehicle for both peace and democratic renewal.

What emerges from this conceptual framework is a clear sense that Myanmar's crisis cannot be resolved through piecemeal reform or the superficial restoration of pre-coup democratic arrangements. Myanmar's nation-building project, dominated by Bamar nationalism and shaped by a unitary logic of state control, has long excluded and marginalized minority groups. This structural exclusion has not simply been a cause of cycles of armed resistance, displacement, and mistrust, but has also fundamentally undermined efforts at democratic consensus. This framework also highlights the interdependence of structure and agency. In conceptual terms, this chapter has laid the groundwork for the thesis's central analytical arc.

2. Levitsky, Steven, and Ziblatt, Daniel. *How Democracies Die.* New York: Crown Publishing, 2018, pp. 91–93.

Part 1

3.1 Contentious politics: Concept, philosophy, applications, and main arguments

In this thesis I employed contentious political theory as the main analytical framework to understand post-coup resistance in Myanmar. Although it has broadly been deployed to analyze episodic events (uprising, protest, or revolution), its strength lies in its ability to reconnect these moments to larger political processes, agency, power dynamics, and structural conditions. This approach seems especially fitting for Myanmar, where the complexity and fluidity of resistance inside and outside formal systems cannot be reduced to traditional political theories—such as elite theory, democratization theory, or institutionalism—that often fail to answer why.

In this sense, contentious politics provides a more fluid analytical framework that highlights the ways that people on the ground mobilize, innovate, and challenge power in authoritarian contexts and is particularly useful for examining Myanmar's hybrid struggle over civil disobedience, armed resistance, and identity rebranding. Moreover, contentious politics intertwines well with my ethnographic approach, which is founded on the crucial importance of lived experiences, collective identities, and everyday forms of resistance. Through ethnography I have been able to see how people on the ground make sense of, perform, and sustain political contention in their particular cultural and social context. This frame does not mean that resistance is being weakened against abstract institutions or macro-level forces—instead, it is the shift of the center of gravity, of agency, voice, and practice of resistance from being in favor of those only loosely affected to those whose lives are already enmeshed or upended—which makes it a sound focus for our grounded, qualitative study of the Myanmar resistance movement.

3.1.1 The Concept of Contentious Politics

In political science, contentious politics is defined as the use of disruptive techniques by people or groups to voice their demands or opposition to authorities, social norms, or public policies. It is waged collectively in political battle, arising as ordinary people take on elites and authorities and opponents in ways that challenge the status quo. In contrast to institutionalized politics, which is conducted through the normal channels of political interaction such as elections, legislatures, or party systems, contentious politics takes place outside of these channels and is often expressed as protests, rebellions, strikes, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and even revolution[3]. It gained prominence in the fields of political science and sociology during the late 20th century, particularly in the work of Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam.[4] Their combined structure resulted in the development of a common framework for studying social movements,

3. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2006). *Contentious Politics*. Paradigm Publishers, pp. 4-5.
4. McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. Dynamics of Contention. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

revolutions, and other non-institutional politics. Tilly claimed that the same basic dynamics–which he labeled mobilization, political opportunity, and collective identity–apply to a wide range of political phenomena, such as peaceful demonstrations and violent uprisings[5] Contentious politics is, therefore, an adaptable matrix for considering the emergence and evolution of political contention. Its core is on the relationship among challengers, powerholders, and third-party audiences. They are context-dependent and reflect the sociopolitical context, resource availability, cultural narratives, and institutional structure [6].

3.1.2 The Philosophy Behind Contentious Politics

The philosophy of contentious politics is grounded on collective disruption, a tradition rooted in Marxist conflict theory and developed through post-structuralist critique[7,8.] Its approach to bottom-up disruptions as transformations in politics itself is a revolution in political thinking because it does not view political change, like other theories, as solely stemming from elite negotiations or institutional reforms. This perspective brings out the political agency of marginalized groups through informal means, often in uprising and resistance, and it challenges the dominant narratives of formal civic engagement or elite consensus. Post-structuralists, such as Derrida and Foucault, reinterpreted power and agency and drew more attention to non-institutional forms of resistance[9]. In the tradition of political liberalism, agency and power used to center around consensus and legality, but it has been challenged in this framework by non-institutional political agency [10].

A fundamental notion of contentious politics is that power is relational, not fixed. It is instantiated and contested in everyday practices with social space and discursive structures—an idea that echoes Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge. As Foucault explains, power does not belong to one actor or institution; it is diffused throughout society and manifests in what is accepted as truth and normality [11]. Hegemony, the idea propagated by Antonio Gramsci, works the same way—power is not simply enforced through violence but through cultural and ideological agreement. Hence, resistance must stand up to the physical and ideational pressures of power, delegitimizing contentious politics as a key site of contesting and renegotiating hegemony[12].

5. Tilly, Charles. *The Politics of Collective Violence*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 4–5, 20.
6. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press, pp 78.
7. Sotiropoulos, Giorgos. "Between Order and Insurgency: Post-Structuralism and the Problem of Justice." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2021, pp. 197–213. SAGE.
8. Newman, Saul. *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political*. Routledge, 2007, pp. 1–35. Taylor & Francis.
9. Choat, Simon. "Marx Through Post-Structuralism: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze." *Global Discourse*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2010, pp. 200–216. Bristol University Press.
10. Leggett, Will. "Restoring Society to Post-Structuralist Politics: Mouffe, Gramsci and Radical Democracy." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 39, no. 4-5, 2013, pp. 431–451. SAGE.
11. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 94–95.
12. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishers, 1971, pp. 12–13.

The emphasis on agency is another key philosophical pillar. Contentious politics acknowledges the ability of everyday people to mobilize, contest, and create new political signification, often against deterministic paradigms that cast people as passive subjects of structural force. This commitment to agency intersects with democratic and humanistic philosophies that argue for all people, and not merely elites or institutions, to be political subjects[13].

Finally, contentious politics directly engages with moral and ethical issues. It seeks to understand when disobedience is not just permissible but imperative. Thinkers like Henry David Thoreau have argued that people have a moral obligation to defy bad laws even if it exacts a personal cost. His landmark essay, Civil Disobedience**,** framed nonviolent resistance as a higher ethical duty, prioritizing conscience over legality[14]. We might cite, for parallel purposes, John Rawls' admission that civil disobedience can have a legitimating role within a sufficiently just society if it makes an appeal to the common sense of justice of its members and helps to generate institutional reform[15]. In the context of contentious politics, such moral reasoning lends legitimacy to the approaches of protesters, activists, and dissidents who frequently operate at the margins—or beyond—of legal boundaries, especially in authoritarian or semi-authoritarian settings.

Together, these philosophical underpinnings inject analytical depth into contentious politics—not only as an analytical tool for modeling episodic events but also as a normative framework, centralizing people's capacity to resist power, make sense of the world, and dream of better futures.

3.1.3 Application and Broader Arguments of Contentious Politics

Contentious politics, as conceptualized by scholars like Tilly and Tarrow, is not an anomaly but a recurring and integral part of political life. It includes different kinds of collective action in which ordinary people challenge powerful systems, often outside institutionalized political channels. Such contests are shaped by political openings, cultural environments, and the agency of the actors involved. In Europe, the 2011-2012 Greek anti-austerity protests are a relevant case, for example. It was in Spain that the movement of the "Indignados" was against the austerity measures imposed by the "Troika." Such uprisings illustrated how political opportunities can be opened at the time of economic crisis for mass mobilization to occur, changing the texture of political events with the emergence of the Syriza party capitalizing on its momentum to take political power[16].

13. McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 2–3, 44.
14. Thoreau, Henry David. *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*. Dover Publications, 1993, pp. 23–28.
15. Rawls, John. *A Theory of Justice*. Revised ed., Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 319–320.
16. Papanikolopoulos, D. (2020). Contentious politics or populism? Protest dynamics and new political boundaries in Greece. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 12(1), 43–67.

Southeast Asia offers a different but equally engaging landscape. The 2010 Red Shirts – Yellow Shirts protests in Thailand can be used as an illustration of how intense political polarization can result in contentious politics. Mainly working- and rural-class, the movement opposed the hegemony of the urban elites and fought for democratic change. The state's bloody repression of those demonstrations highlighted the dangers of disputed politics in authoritarian environments, while that event was also reminding us of the agency and resilience that protesters demonstrate[17]. These cases illustrate that structures shape action; political opportunities influence the form, timing, and scale of protest. Additionally, culture plays a significant role—repertoires and frames find their foundation in place, local histories, and identities. In Greece and Thailand, protesters used symbols and narratives that resonated with local cultures to mobilize support and legitimize their struggles. Contentious politics can, importantly, lead to an institutional change. The anti-austerity surge in Greece rewrote the political landscape[18], bringing change in policy and a realignment of political forces. While immediate reforms in Thailand were few, the protests sparked a renewed focus on debates around democracy and governance that would impact subsequent movements and political reform efforts.

The revolutions in Iran and Egypt in 2011—rallied under the broader "Arab Spring"—further confirm the theoretical argument that contention is normal, particularly in contexts where more mainstream venues of political expression are blocked. The uprising in Egypt that brought down the regime of Hosni Mubarak was not the impulse of a moment but the result of years of rising discontent, labor strikes, and digital activism. Protocols of protest established by movements such as Kefaya and the April 6 Youth Movement were taken up by the large population during the 2011 revolution.[19] A similar case in point is Iran, where the Green Movement of 2009 was a vividly civil society response to electoral fraud, tapping deeply into symbolic Islamic and nationalistic frames to contest state legitimacy. [20]

In both cases, ordinary people reimagined political space by seizing moments of perceived vulnerability in state authority—demonstrating that agency makes a difference, even in the most repressive of settings. Meanwhile, the ascendence of climate activism—from global movements like Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion, and Indigenous land defenders—signals how contentious politics unfolds in liberal democratic settings. [21] The local U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s and its own contemporary challenger, the Movement

17. Taylor, Jim. "Remembrance and Tragedy: Understanding Thailand's 'Red Shirt' Social Movement." *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2012, pp. 131–154. Project MUSE.
18. Papanikolopoulos, D. (2020). Ibid
19. El-Nawawy, Mohammed, and Sahar Khamis. "Political Activism 2.0: Comparing the Role of Social Media in Egypt's 'Facebook Revolution' and Iran's 'Twitter Uprising'." *CyberOrient*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2012, pp. 3–26. PDF link. DOI: 10.1002/j.cyo2.20120601.0002.
20. Al-Naimi, Abdullah M.S. *The Impact of Transnational Forces and Social Force on Political Structures in the Iranian Green Movement of 2009 and the Arab Spring in Egypt during 2011*. 2022, PhD Dissertation, ProQuest, pp. 135–146. Link.
21. Sainz, Gemma Mallon, and Abdalhadi Hanna. "Youth Digital Activism, Social Media and Human Rights Education: The Fridays for Future Movement." *Human Rights Education Review*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–15. PDF. DOI: 10.7577/hrer.4958.

for Black Lives (Black Lives Matter), have similar aspects, exemplify long-term, frame-rich struggles that connect structural inequality with moral outrage, and sustain mobilization over decades. While new repertoires of contention such as digital disruption, school walkouts, and theatrical protest art have moved center stage in climate protests, particularly throughout Europe and North America, illustrating how cultural contexts and communication technologies shape protest methods.[22] Such movements remind us that change is achievable not just through revolution but also through the kind of sustained contestation and cultural evolution that forces institutions to change from within.

3.1.4 Contentious Politics: Core Variables and the Case of Myanmar

Contentious politics is fundamentally about collective political struggle that occurs outside the usual rules of institutionalized politics. While scholars disagree about the details, there is considerable consensus regarding four core variables that explain when, why, and how contentious politics emerges and develops:

- **a)** Mobilization
- **b)** Political Opportunity Structures
- **c)** Repertoires of Contention
- **d)** Framing and Identity Construction

All of these components shape contentious movements[23]. The Myanmar crisis—especially the massive protests and resistance that erupted after a military coup in February 2021—provides an example of those variables in action.[24]

- **a)** Mobilization: The Organization of Collective Action

Mobilization is the process of assembling for action an identified population. This process means establishing networks, enlisting participants, allocating resources, and sequencing actions. Effective mobilization often hinges on leadership, communication strategies, and access to organizational infrastructure. The success of mobilization typically depends on leadership, communication tactics, and means of accessing the organizational infrastructure. When the military overthrew Aung San Suu Kyi's democratically elected government in 2021, civil society groups, students, labor unions, healthcare workers, and even some celebrities rallied to push back against the coup. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) became a dominant driver, calling on public workers to strike, bringing government work to a standstill. The use of social media, most notably Facebook, was fundamental in the mobilization of mass protests, in sharing information on protests,

22. Hall, Nina, Chloe Lawrie, and Silvia Priano. "Progressive Politics? The European Climate Movement and Black Lives Matter." *Handbook on the Politics of the Environment*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, pp. 379–393. ElgarOnline.
23. Tilly, Charles, and Sidney Tarrow. *Contentious Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 7–15.
24. Egreteau, Renaud. "Profile: Blending Old and New Repertoires of Contention in Myanmar's Anti-Coup Protests (2021)." *Social Movement Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2023, pp. 1–15. Taylor & Francis. PDF

and in generating [25]. international support. Such resistance efforts continued in spite of internet shutdowns and crackdowns, as decentralized mobilization allowed for this to occur. Mobilization in Myanmar did reflect widespread discontent among multiple sectors of society, as well as the ability of grassroots actors to mobilize quickly, even amid authoritarian repression.

b) Political Opportunity Structures: Openings and Constraints in the Political Environment

In the context of social movements, political opportunity structures (POS) refer to the external environment that encourages or deters collective action. These are elite divisions, state repression, international attention, legal freedoms, and changing power dynamics. The coup itself was a major political rupture that created both new threats and new opportunities for resistance. While the military regime imposed severe repression, arresting thousands and using lethal force against protesters, the international community's condemnation and the UN's vocal opposition created moral and diplomatic space for resistance movements.

The coup itself was a dramatic political rupture that opened up new threats and new possibilities for resistance. Despite the harsh repression implemented by the military regime, which arrested thousands of people and killed protesters, condemnation by the international community and the united voice of the UN enabled resistance movements to establish a moral, diplomatic, and political space. Furthermore, the creation of the National Unity Government (NUG)—a shadow regime made up of the ousted parliament members and previously elected representatives—presented a symbolic political alternative for citizens to align themselves with a genuine counter-power. However, the absence of international intervention alongside a military monopoly of force also highlighted the limitations of those opportunities, and they contributed to a shift from nonviolent protest to armed resistance in some parts of the country. Myanmar's political opportunity structure was very repressive, though it still bore fissures, such as elite defectors, international sympathy, and a widespread crisis of legitimacy that allowed contentious politics to emerge and escalate.

c) Repertoires of Contention: The Cultural Toolkit of Resistance

A repertoire of contention refers to the catalog of protest techniques for a society at a particular period. And these range from strikes, marches, boycotts, symbolic gestures, and, in more severe situations, armed resistance. These repertoires are forged through history, culture, and struggles in the past.

25. McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 5–6.

Myanmar's demonstrators initially turned to nonviolent tactics, such as silent strikes, banging pots and pans, wearing symbolic colors (red and three-finger salutes), and flash mobbing to evade mass arrests. This inspiration came from both local tradition and international protest models, including those in Hong Kong and Thailand. Protest repertories adapted as repression escalated. Some groups, notably in ethnic minority areas that had experienced armed conflict in the past (for example, Kachin, Karen, and Chin states), escalated tensions and engaged in war, and the established People's Defense Forces (PDFs) resorted to guerrilla tactics to continue resisting the junta by armed struggle. This shift demonstrates a diverse tactical repertoire that moves from nonviolent protest to models of hybrid resistance based on state response and movement strategy. Myanmar's movement demonstrated a flexible and culturally resonant repertoire, meshing symbolic protest with tactics of more direct action as political conditions shifted.

d) Framing and Identity Construction: The Battle for Meaning

Framing explains how movements craft narratives to make sense of grievances, name foes, and spur action. Effective framing leads to a sense of collective identity, where participants feel they share a common struggle. Protesters characterized the coup as an assault on democracy and national dignity. The widespread chant "We Want Democracy" was more than a slogan—it was a rallying cry that built upon a national narrative of hope following the country's brief democratic opening after 2015. Significantly, the resistance also tried to recontextualize Myanmar's fractured ethnic identity and issued appeals across ethnic groups for unity. The NUG, for example, promised to establish a federal democratic union that recognizes the historical grievances of ethnic minorities that have been marginalized by the military and previous governments for decades. This narrative sought to refract the national identity from the Bamar-majoritarian, homogenous one to one that was more inclusive, a federal vision. Internationally, a framing of the conflict as one of human rights and anti-authoritarian resistance assisted in winning support from global civil society and diaspora communities. Framing in Myanmar united the democratic ideals with a broader push for ethnic inclusivity, allowing place for a moral justification that extended beyond immediate political demands.

Conclusion: The Dynamics of Contention in Myanmar

The Myanmar crisis provides a textbook example of how the four critical variables of contentious politics interact. What we witness in Myanmar is not just a struggle confined to one country. It's a global lesson in how people grapple with deep-rooted power systems, and also how their contention takes many shapes, makes use of no one-way baguette, and

takes extraordinary courage. The movement in Myanmar is a reminder that contentious politics can be powerful and transformative even in the face of overwhelming force—especially when it is rooted in the deep cultural, historical, and moral reservoirs of a people willing to be free. Even under conditions of intense repression, people mobilized creatively across difficult chapters of political history, changing the character of their struggles and building persuasive accounts of solidarity and resistance. Their struggle is a reminder that even under the most abject conditions, collective action can foster hope, develop solidarity, and actually contest authoritarianism. In an ever-more-volatile world, making sense of what divides citizens is not merely of academic interest, but vital if we are to understand how to protect democratic values and conceive of new possible futures.

Part 2

3.2 Concepts of democratic transitions and breakdowns

3.2.1 Democratic Backsliding – Patterns, Philosophical Contours, and the Erosion of Norms

Defining Democratic Backsliding: The Philosophical and Historical Framework

Democratic backsliding, or autocratization, constitutes perhaps a profound challenge to modern governance, as those in power undermine or completely dismantle democratic institutions. Unlike the blatant coups d'état or brazen electoral frauds of the Cold War era, contemporary backsliding takes place insidiously, frequently wrapped in the mantle of democratic legitimacy. In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt observe that leaders often initiate today's backsliding at the ballot box, exploiting democratic mechanisms to undermine democracy itself. [26] Their concept outlines a more covert approach to democratic erosion. Military coups and blatant manipulation of electoral outcomes have been replaced by their milder forms — "promissory coups" that promise to restore democracy, concentration of power in the hands of the executive, and gentle interference in elections that destroys their competitive nature while keeping the outward appearance of democracy[27].

Philosophically, this recalls the concerns of Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America* about the dangers built into democracy itself. Tocqueville observed that the mechanisms of democracy, when unchecked, could suppress pluralism and erode liberty.[28] Similarly, Jürgen Habermas warns that procedural democracy devoid of critical public discourse allows for its own subversion, as citizens disengage from communicative action and authoritarian trends take hold.[29]

Indicators of Backsliding: Erosion of Norms and Institutions

The erosion of democratic norms and institutions serves as a crucial indicator of backsliding, as highlighted by Levitsky and Ziblatt in their seminal work. They identify four primary markers that herald the decline of democracy. First there is the rejection of democratic rules. There are leaders who dismiss constitutional norms or propose alternative frameworks to democratic governance, leading towtards eroding institutional guards. This resonates with Carl Schmitt's criticism of the proceduralism of liberal

26. Levitsky, Steven, and Ziblatt, Daniel. *How Democracies Die.* New York: Crown Publishing, 2018, p. 3.
27. Ibid, p. 7.
28. Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America.* Translated by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, pp. 241–243.
29 Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1984, p. 47.

democracy, in which he contended that even and especially institutions responsible for making rules are inherently subject to existential threats, which demonstrates the fragility of constitutional norms. [30]

And there is the denial of opponents' legitimacy. When we treat political opponents as existential threats to the nation, the conditions for democratic dialogue are ruptured. Hannah Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism offers a prophetic analysis of how such narratives break society apart, splitting it into sworn enemies and sworn friends and creating the conditions for a return to authoritarianism. [31] The third indicator is the promotion or acceptance of violence. Political violence fundamentally opposes the Aristotelian ideal of the polis as a space for reasoned deliberation. In *Politics*, Aristotle describes how the displacement of discourse by violence unsettles the norms of social order and undermines the legitimacy of political competition.[32]

The last point is the erosion of civil liberties. The suppression of freedoms like the press, of assembly, and of expression stifles opposition forces, turning democracy into a mere empty façade. John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty*, emphasizes the unique role of free expression as a bulwark against despotism; in its absence, such a system can encourage authoritarian consolidation. [33] These indicators do not exist in isolation; they are intertwined in self-perpetuating loops that deepen authoritarian inclinations. These strategies include tactical changes to electoral laws and are often accompanied by efforts to undermine media freedoms, as exemplified by the Military regimes. Democratic backsliding is not merely a political phenomenon but a philosophical challenge, testing the resilience of democracy's normative foundations. As history shows, democracies rarely collapse in dramatic moments; rather, they erode incrementally, often under the guise of legitimacy, but Myanmar seems to belong to an outlier case with democratic backsliding with an abrupt military coup.

3.2.2 Democratic Transition, Theories in Crisis, and the Case of Myanmar

Myanmar is probably an outlier in this case. It challenges existing theories of democratic transition and democratization. Brief liberalization in Myanmar (2011-2020) notwithstanding, this cycle of military coup, ethnic conflict, and political violence persists in the country. Such patterns of change, as laid out by frameworks such as Huntington's Third Wave democratization theory, and Collier's coups as democratic catalyst thesis, cannot adequately explain the complexities of Myanmar's sociopolitical landscape.

30. Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty.* Translated by George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
31. Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951.
32. Aristotle. *Politics.* Translated by Ernest Barker, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946, Book III.
33. Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty.* London: Penguin Books, 1859.

Theoretical Foundations of Democratic Transition

Theories of democratic transition seek to explain how an authoritarian regime transforms into a democratic regime. Huntington's Third Wave model is still seminal in academic literature that separates three phases of transition: liberalization, the period in which limited reforms are implemented; transition, during which democratic norms are established; and consolidation, when democracy becomes the dominant system. [34]

While these models successfully explain many cases in Europe, Latin America, and Asia, they rely on central assumptions that there is (are) (1) a rational and coherent elite able and willing to compromise, (2) apolitical culture supportive of democratic norms, and (3) strong institutions that are capable of mediating conflict and make peaceful power transitions.

However, the entrenched military-state and ethnic divisions in Myanmar breach these preconditions, thus elucidating the limits of such frameworks.

Collier's Argument: Coups as Catalysts for Democracy

Paul Collier's proposition[35] -that coups can catalyze democracy-challenges the conventional wisdom that democratization requires peaceful evolution. Data suggests that certain coups, particularly against entrenched autocracies, have led to democratization, as seen in Portugal's Carnation Revolution (1974) and Tunisia's transition post-2011.[36] However, this theory depends on critical conditions; such as (1) Military Willingness to Relinquish Power: Coups must aim for democratization, not consolidation of military control, (2) International Pressure: Post-Cold War norms and conditional aid incentivize juntas to hold elections, and (3) Strong Civil Society: A mobilized civil society can push for sustained reforms.

Such factors are glaringly missing in Myanmar, where the Tatmadaw employs its self-proclaimed identity as the "guardian of national unity" in order to quash dissent and entrench its hegemony.

Theoretical Incompatibility: Why Myanmar Defies the Democratic Models

Apart from my argument against Myanmar being not truly democratic state (in chapter 1) and never was, Myanmar still represents a profound anomaly in democratization theory, challenging both the traditional frameworks of Huntington and Collier's more contentious

34. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, pp. 111–113.
35. Collier, Paul. *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places.* New York: HarperCollins, 2009, pp. 132–134.
36. Collier, Paul. 2009. Ibid, pp. 149–172.

arguments about the democratizing potential of coups. The Tatmadaw's influence in Myanmar defies conventional theories of civil-military relations. The military in many democratizing states—such as Spain or Portugal during their transitions—acted as a transitional authority or receded from politics following civilian demands. In contrast, the Tatmadaw institutionalized its prerogative through constitutional means, including seats guaranteed in parliament and power over core ministries.

This resonates with military praetorianism, where the armed forces become the arbiters of political legitimacy. Although this dynamic is not unique—other studies found it in Pakistan[37] and Egypt[38]—Myanmar's Tatmadaw is notable for its ideological commitment to Burmanization that has endured over decades alongside a strategic repression of ethnic minorities. The Tatmadaw justifies its actions through the narrative of national emergency, positioning itself as the sole actor capable of preserving the unity and sovereignty of Myanmar. This precludes the type of civilian-military negotiations Huntington's model assumes as a prerequisite for democratization.

3.2.3 Myanmar's 2021 Revolution: Critical Juncture or Missed Opportunity?

Myanmar's 2021 coup has ushered in an era of profound uncertainty for the country, in which entrenched authoritarianism, popular rebellion, and rising international scrutiny are at stake. These moments are sometimes referred to as "critical junctures"—points in time when historical trajectories diverge, creating new paths of potential—paths to transformation or, alternatively, consolidation of established patterns with the potential to lead the hallways of history in vastly different directions. Capoccia and Kelemen describe critical junctures as "moments of substantial change that create different legacies." [39]

Defining Critical Junctures

Critical junctures are moments of structural destabilization, which create openings for deep political and social transformation. Key elements such as agency, contingency, and path dependence are defined by Mahoney and Thelen's conception of the process.[40] These elements highlight the role of key actors in periods of instability, the unpredictable quality of outcomes, and the enduring consequences of decisions at such junctures. The Tatmadaw's coup, ongoing ethnic conflict, and international isolation has created a highly volatile and contested political environment. But whether all this results in democratization, even graver authoritarianism or continuing conflict will depend on the interplay of actors, institutions and ideas.

37. Jalal, Ayesha. *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*. Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 3–35; 271–298.
38. Sayigh, Yezid. *Above the State: The Officers' Republic in Egypt*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012, pp. 2–21.
39. Capoccia, Giovanni, and Kelemen, R. Daniel. "The Study of Critical Junctures: Theory, Narrative, and Counterfactuals in Historical Institutionalism." *World Politics*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2007, pp. 341–369.
40. Mahoney, James, and Kathleen Thelen. *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 14–16.

The emergence of civil disobedience movements (CDM) in Myanmar and parallel governance structures is an example that have rejected the Tatmadaw as a legitimate authority and promoted alternative authorities.

Myanmar's Crisis as a Critical Juncture: The End of Tatmadaw's Hegemony?

The coup of 2021 reveals how the Tatmadaw's claim to legitimacy as the self-appointed guardian of national unity is in tatters. Its violent suppression of dissent, economic mismanagement, and ethnic chauvinism have alienated broad segments of the population, including the majority Burman community. But the Tatmadaw's dictatorial control of state institutions and the economy continues to weaken the strength of opposition. Though Myanmar's present turbulence undermines existing norms, it does not guarantee a break from authoritarianism. The rise of civil resistance, particularly the CDM, represents a shift from Myanmar's historical cycles of military dominance. *On Revolution* by Arendt highlights the potential for collective action to resist authoritarian regimes, speaking to the importance of shared action from grassroots movements. [41] The CDM's focus on nonviolent resistance, and its broad-based suggestions signal a move toward participatory governance.

The institutionalization of opposition is also evident from the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG), which acts like a shadow government. The vision of the NUG and Ethnic federalists signifies a departure from exclusionary politics, yet its triumph hinges on successfully bridging Myanmar's profound ethnic divisions and maintaining its momentum over time. Myanmar's ethnic diversity is both a challenge and a promise at this important juncture. And historically, the Tatmadaw had capitalized on ethnic divisions to strengthen its grip on power, casting itself as the arbiter of national unity. But the current crisis has forged an unprecedented solidarity between ethnic minorities and the Burman majority.

John Stuart Mill, in Considerations on Representative Government, warns that free institutions depend on mutual respect between disparate groups, conditions largely lacking in Myanmar. [42] The federalist commitments of the resistance are a possible antidote, but still concrete measures to ensure autonomy and representation for minorities are necessary.

41. Arendt, Hannah. *On Revolution.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958, pp. 177–179.
42. Mill, John Stuart. *Considerations on Representative Government.* London: Parker, 1861, pp. 23–25.

Part 3

3.3 Concepts of Federalism

3.3.1 Centripetal Federalism

Centripetal federalism, also known as "coming-together" federalism, is formed by independent political units coming together to create a federation. This model has its normative foundations in liberal social contract theory, with its focus on free association, reciprocal recognition, and consentual rule. As Topperwien notes, this process is structural, premised on building unity through negotiated pluralism and self-rule under a shared identity.[43] Centripetal federalism reflects the pluralist logic of statehood, wherein the federated structure honors the sovereignty of its constituents while constructing a national polity through agreement and institutional synthesis[44]. This bottom-up model of federalism was historically realized in cases such as in The United States, Switzerland, Australia[45]. Such systems demonstrate that centripetal federalism is not merely administrative—it is ideational, privileging shared sovereignty, institutional symmetry, and a federal identity that accommodates heterogeneity[46].

3.3.2 Centrifugal Federalism

Centrifugal federalism, or "holding-together" federalism, reflects a reverse logic. It occurs when a previously centralised state transfers power to subnational units of government in order to accommodate diversity, conflict or political pressure. It is a design inspired by deliberative constitutionalism and practical necessity of maintaining unity that is free from coercion. As Burgess observes, this model presumes a political system committed to subsidiarity and pluralism, while simultaneously mitigating the risk of secession by recognizing group-based rights and institutionalizing regional autonom[47]. Stepan reinforces this, arguing that centrifugal systems often emerge in post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts, where devolution serves as a mechanism for re-legitimation and stability[48]. Centrifugal federalism has been utilized in Spain, Belgium, Germany, and Nigeria[49]. Unlike centripetalism, centrifugal federalism is frequently characterized by

43. Topperwien, Julia. "Federalism and the Accommodation of Ethnic Diversity: Comparative Perspectives." *Forum of Federations Occasional Paper Series*, 2009.
44. Zahrin, Zuriana, and A. M. Mohamed. *Federalism: A Conceptual and Theoretical Perspective*. ResearchGate, 2022. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367043112
45. Tariq, Muhammad. "Comparative Analysis between Federation and Federalism." *ResearchGate*, 2020. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343423591
46. Sofi, Waseem A. "Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Federalism." *Springer*, 2021. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-1019-6_1
47. Burgess, Michael. *In Search of the Federal Spirit: New Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives in Comparative Federalism*. Routledge, 2012.
48. Stepan, Alfred. "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1999, pp. 19–34.
49. Lavelli, Marzia. *Are Federations Centripetal or Centrifugal? The Impact of Federal Arrangements on Secessionism*. Università degli Studi di Pavia, 2015. https://unitesi.unipv.it/handle/20.500.14239/5217

asymmetrical arrangements, protracted negotiations over the division of powers, and the continuing fragility of federal equilibrium. It highlights the idea that federalism can develop out of necessity, not just consent[50].

3.3.3 Asymmetrical and Symmetrical Federalism

Symmetrical Federalism

In this model, the basic assumption is that all member units of a state should have generally have the same powers and authorities in a state and a shared structure of government and representation. For example, in the context of federalism, this would mean granting all subnational units exactly the same rights and responsibilities to maintain formal equality. Centralized federalism stands also on philosophical foundations provided by John Rawls's theory of justice as fairness (1971). For example, Rawls's first principle of justice, namely the principle of equal liberty, and the second, the difference principle, focus on the need for institutions that encourage equality and reduce inequalities. This refers to federalism centered on redistributive policies as regional disparities decrease. [51] Nonetheless, Alfred Stepan has criticized symmetrical federalism for its possible distortions of democracy, arguing that, under these conditions, federal institutions can become "demos-constraining." [52] A more encompassing critique concerns the rigidity of symmetrical federalism. Uniform treatment of regions can shortchange the members of multicultural or multinational states.

Asymmetrical Federalism

Asymmetrical federalism institutionalizes differences across regions. It considers assigning special powers or privileges to those that have particular cultural, linguistic or historical identities. The reasoning for asymmetric federalism rests on Charles Taylor's politics of recognition. Taylor argues that identifying and acknowledging cultural differences is a prerequisite for a politics based on dignity and inclusion.[53] Will Kymlicka adds that the strategy of group-differentiated rights is essential to sustain minority identities. [54] Critics contend that granting special privileges to certain regions may conflict with Rawlsian fairness by creating inequalities.[55] Critics claim that conferring special benefits to certain areas may create perceptions of inequality. For example, in Spain, the autonomy enjoyed by Catalonia and the Basque Country has resulted in demands for similar arrangements in

50. Ogunnoiki, Adeleke O. "Federalism as a Political Ideology and System of Government: The Theoretical Perspectives." *ResearchGate*, 2017. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335126823
51. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 54–57.
52. Alfred Stepan, *Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 33–36.
53. Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 48–50.
54. Kymlicka, Will. *Multicultural Citizenship.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 138–140.
55. Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 65–67

other regions. [56] Philosophers, including Donald Horowitz, caution that asymmetrical federalism can entrench regional identities.[57]

3.3.4 Ethnic Federalism

Ethnic federalism is a system of governance whose purpose is to present ethnicity as a fundamental organizing principle of political power. It creates distinct territorial and political sovereignty depending on ethnic communities. It acknowledges distinctive cultural, linguistic, and historical identities, unlike traditional federalism.[58] Theoretically, ethnic federalism is borne out of justice, autonomy, and cultural pluralism. Advocates argue that conventional federal models often miss the unique political and social needs of ethnically diverse people. Ethnic federalism allows groups to protect and promote their cultural and linguistic practices without interference. This aligns with Isaiah Berlin's idea of value pluralism in *Two Concepts of Liberty*.[59] Berlin argued that in heterogeneous societies, plural conceptions of the good life exist. This concept of self-governance is further explained by Michael Walzer in *Spheres of Justice*.[60] He argued that each cultural group must be allowed to dictate governance of its internal affairs.
The concept also draws on the principle of self-determination, as explained by Allen Buchanan in *Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce*.[61] Buchanan contended that while self-determination is a right only in cases of serious injustice, it is the only way to guarantee cultural and political aspirations. If this dilemma can be resolved, it will provide a practical balance between decentralized self-rule and national unification. Together, these philosophical ideas support ethnic federalism with a strong theoretical basis that highlights the importance of cultural independence, fairness, and living together with diversity.

Ethnic federalism offers a mode of dealing with difference and preventing conflict through autonomy and recognition. Yet focusing on ethnic representation threatens to entrench differences and dilute unity. Ethnic federalism teaches the importance of inclusion and fairness while challenging us to harmonize between justice, recognition, and unity.

3.3.5 Cooperative Federalism

Cooperative federalism (also called the "marble cake" model) refers to the sharing of policymaking and administrative responsibilities across government levels. It encourages interdependence, joint responsibilities, and bargaining to address complex governance problems.

56. Conversi, Daniele. *The Basques, the Catalans, and Spain.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1997, pp. 95–98.
57. Horowitz, Donald L. *Ethnic Groups in Conflict.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985, pp. 253–255.
58. Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: A Global Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 134.
59. Berlin, I. (1958). Two Concepts of Liberty. Clarendon Press, pp. 118-172.
60. Walzer, M. (1983). Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality. Basic Books, pp. 3-31.
61. Buchanan, A. (1991). Secession: The Morality of Political Divorce. Westview Press, pp. 1-45.

Jürgen Habermas believes democratic legitimacy comes from inclusive stakeholder discourse.[62] Cooperative federalism's shared decision-making encourages compromise and deliberation. John Rawls's justice as fairness illuminates cooperative federalism. Institutions should foster equality and fairness. Cooperative federalism enables subnational governments to impact national policymaking.[63] Subsidiarity undergirds cooperative federalism. It's the principle of subsidiarity at work: Government at the lowest effective level, higher levels stepping in only where necessary. Cooperative federalism promotes whole of Government cooperation for agility. But critics point out inefficiencies and unclear accountability. Alfred Stepan notes that negotiations can delay decisions and warns that state resource disparities can worsen inequalities.[64]

3.3.6 Confederal Federalism

Confederal federalism is a governance arrangement wherein independent states cede specific powers to a national government for functions like defense, trade, or foreign relations. Confederations value constituent state sovereignty above centralized authority. They are often temporary, as shown by the United States under the Articles of Confederation and the European Union. [65,66]

Confederal federalism has its roots in classical liberalism and structural theories that stress the voluntary state association and local sovereignty. In *Second Treatise*, John Locke writes that political power derives from the consent of the governed. In confederalism, sovereign states are said to delegate limited authority to a central entity. [67] Stability depends on mutual trust and cooperation. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant proposes a federation of free states to promote peace. Though looser than modern confederations, his ideas of voluntary cooperation and mutual respect support confederal principles. Kant also stresses the need for strong structures to ensure cooperation.[68] Subsidiarity supports localized decision-making. It enhances confederalism by allowing states to maintain policy control while assigning collective responsibilities to the central authority. But Alfred Stepan warns that voluntary cooperation creates structural instability.[69]
Donald Horowitz warns of inequality among member states due to resource disparities and argues that confederations may fail to generate the recognition necessary to mediate between autonomy and unity.[70] Confederal federalism offers lessons in balancing sovereignty and cooperation, especially in settings resistant to deep integration. Its flexible but fragile structure requires mediation and thorough collaboration.

62. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), p. 110.
63. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 54.
64. Alfred Stepan, *Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 85.
65. Ibid. p.50-65.
66. Brendan O'Leary, "Brexit and the Fragility of Confederal Systems," *European Studies Quarterly*, 19(2), 2021, p. 98.
67. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), p. 54.
68. Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 112
69. Alfred Stepan, *Beyond the Nation-State: Reconceptualizing Federal Systems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 87–89.
70. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 203.

3.3.7 Decentralized Federalism

Decentralized federalism emphasizes distributing significant powers to subnational units. It contrasts centralized federalism by supporting local autonomy and regional self-determination alongside national unity. Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government* suggests that local governments better address specific community needs. Decentralization enables "laboratories of democracy" and prevents tyranny, enhancing freedom. It justifies giving subnational governments flexibility to reduce inequalities. He also stresses the need for national redistribution to prevent uneven service delivery. [71] Critics like Stepan and Horowitz warn of deepened regional inequalities and secessionist risks. [72, 73] Overlapping roles may reduce policy efficiency.

3.3.8 Centralized Federalism

Centralized federalism privileges the national government, emphasizing unity or security over subnational self-government. Hobbes discusses the need for a sovereign power to keep order in the natural state in *Leviathan*. [74] This is echoed in centralized federalism which allows national governments to control instability. But Stepan critiques centralized systems of governance for their neglect of diversity. [75] They promote standardization but have a tendency to alienate culturally different areas. Centralized federalism combines a concentration of power in the national government with a retention of federal structures. Russia exemplifies the point: the Constitution guarantees regional autonomy, but the ministries in the center dictate regional policy and personnel, allowing for homogeneity across vast land masses[76]. Critics say this arrangement erodes democratic governance and regional self-determination, mentioning risks such as regional alienation and a reduction of accountability, as Daniel Treisman describes. [77]

3.3.9 Hybrid Federalism

Hybrid federalism is a blend of federal and unitary models by harmonizing the respective spheres of central and subcentral power. It combines both centralised and decentralized approaches in an attempt to accommodate unity in diversity. This approach is context-sensitive and reform driven. Taylor's *Politics of Recognition* argues that governance must recognize group identities. Hybrid federalism decentralizes for autonomy and centralizes

71. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (London: Parker, Son, and Bourn, 1861), p. 104.
72. Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 203.
73. Alfred Stepan, *Beyond the Nation-State: Reconceptualizing Federal Systems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 87–89.
74. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1651), pp. 87–89.
75. Russian Constitution, Article 72.
76. Daniel Treisman, *The Architecture of Government: Rethinking Political Decentralization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 121–124.
77. Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition*, in *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 25–29.

for cohesion.[78] It balances identity recognition with state integrity. This twist is epitomized in hybrid federalism which localizes governance and yet maintains distributive equity. It is designed also to handle regional disparities but still provide access to resources. Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy also serves as the basis for hybrid federalism's insistence on cooperation.[79] Dialogue and participatory governance add democratic legitimacy. In addressing contemporary challenges like climate change and globalization, hybrid federalism offers a flexible, inclusive governance model.

Conclusion

The concepts I have observed in this chapter are intended to emphasise the importance of seeing democratic breakdown of Myanmar as not simply as an institutional failure but as a recursive outcome of historically embedded exclusions. Based on the tradition of contentious politics (Tilly, Tarrow, McAdam), this framework highlights how collective struggle, political opportunity structures, and repertoires of contention structure not only transitions across formal institutions but also in practices of resistance and refusal. Instead of taking democracy for granted by means of procedural liberalism, it enlists Brubaker's relational theory of the constitution of groups and Chatterjee's politics of the governed to maintain that contestations over identity and legitimacy lay at core of political change in divided societies.

In the case of Myanmar, these concepts help to clarify why post-2011 liberalization constituted an unstable structure. The repression of historical ethnic grievances, the military's entrenched hegemony, and the exclusive logic of nation-building stymied the institutionalization of democratic norms. Power-sharing can consolidate democracy in plural settings, as Stepan and Lijphart (2013) have demonstrated in the context of federalism, but Myanmar's centralized, coercive state and selective decentralization proved such hopes wrong. It is in that, coups like that of 2021 should not be read as breakdowns of society, but as the apex of unresolved tensions with unaddressed contradictions between state formation, identity exclusion, and democratic aspirations.

In this regard, by drawing insights from democratization and contentious politics, this chapter sets the stage for an analysis of the redeployment of contention in authoritarian settings. It creates a diagnostic framework for grasping how moral outrage, symbolic resistance, and identity-mobilization reorientate the political terrain, in conditions of formal blockade. As the thesis turns to investigate the lived politics of resistance after the 2021 coup, this theorization lays the scaffold to question how contentious politics develops in a post-coup state bound by coercive restoration and pluralist claims. Many claims federal

78. Taylor, Charles. *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.
79. Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

democratic Myanmar is an answer on the surface level.

On the other hand, I am acutely conscious that no institutional design, however artful, can be a panacea. Federalism is not a panacea. And yet, I believe it is a step we must take — a device that can bind together the country's diversity and inoculate it against democratic erosion. Myanmar's political volatility, which I have observed with both concern and hope, makes the urgency of this work all the clearer.

Chapter 4 onwards this thesis moves away from the conceptual scaffolding towards empirical research; using original fieldwork, in-depth interviews and content analysis to question what was/is actually happening in Myanmar's post-coup political crisis. Building on empirical evidence, these chapters delve deeper into the current Myanmar crisis by examining how key protagonists, such as activists, ethnic associations and displaced communities, are maneuvering, and resisting, an authoritarian resurgence. Through triangulating interviewees stories, media narratives and institutional knowledge, this study aims to fill critical gaps in existing literature and shed light on the everyday lived experiences of resistance, revolution, adaptation and re-imagination. The empirical turn is central to addressing the core question that informs the orientation of this study: how do fragmented identities and contested sovereignties reconceptualize democratic potentialities within an overtly militarized and deeply polarized order in Myanmar?

Chapter 4. From Uprising to Revolution

A Contentious Politics Analysis of Myanmar's Post-Coup Movement

Introduction

This chapter discusses the empirical aspects of Myanmar's swiftly changing political dynamic since the 2021 coup d'état in an ethnographically informed manner. In order to show how this historical juncture has caused deep changes in society, it synthesizes the narratives of ethnic minorities, political activists, members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and regional militias. This chapter and the chapter that follows are also informed by the dynamic models of contentious politics developed by Tilly, Tarrow, and McAdam (2001)[1], which explain the mutual dependence between state repression and popular resistance. Their models demonstrate how nonstate actors adapt their tactics as threats and opportunities change and depict a variety of ways in which they can be peaceful or violent. These concepts help explain Myanmar's opening political opportunities and shifting repertoires of contention under military repression.

This analysis treats the coup not only as a political crisis, but it also construes it as a movement of authoritarian consolidation that gave rise to wide social resistance and recast the notions of nation and governance. The Tatmadaw's swift dismantling of a weak civilian government produced mass protests and, ultimately, the emergence of what would come to be called the "Myanmar Spring Revolution." Though it may carry the same impetus as the 1988 revolt, this revolution has taken a different course, shaped by changing dynamics of resistance and increased state violence. I argued that this moment exposed a rupture between rising popular expectations and authoritarian reversal, resonating with James C. Davies's "J-curve" theory (Davies, 1962)[2]. Davies's concepts, such as "revolution of rising expectations" and "capability decay" also help explain why unmet aspirations became an agent of collective unrest.

I also argued that the demand for an inclusive governance arrangement (by the resistance actors) is heavily influenced by the experience of individuals who have borne the brunt of the conflict. By contrast, this voice, predicated on the stories of local communities and marginalized people, not only contests the performance of state practices but also highlights the significance of social movements in constituting new political norms. Chapter 5 further develops this argument by examining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and exploring how ordinary people are reimagining the state structure from below,

1. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, pp 54-59
2. Davies, J. C. (1962). Toward a Theory of Revolution. American Sociological Review, 27(1), 5–19.

using their own stories as testament.

Through weaving together these theoretical insights with empirical data, this chapter provides a theoretically informed, ethnographically grounded analysis of Myanmar's coup and its aftermath. This chapter has outlined the 2021 revolution as an extreme case study of the relationship of repression, militarization, and social resistance. And it contributes to understanding where grand upheavals come from and how collective action under repression can help produce transformative political horizons.

4.1 Mobilization: Emotional Shock, Grievance Formation, and Collective Uprising

4.1.1 The Emergence of the Social Movement and Revolution

The Spring Revolution sparked in Myanmar right after the coup d'état on February 1, 2021, was not simply a catalyst that pushed directly toward the change but an epitome of a momentary change itself in the political scene: people from every sector of society, regardless of their job, social status, and income, took to the streets of the country to march against dictatorship[3]. Its origins lay in defiance of the military coup, but it quickly outgrew that defensive stage and took on a broader and more inclusive general narrative that transcended Myanmar's long-established ethnic and social divides.

The evolution thus illustrates that collective identity is far more than a reaction to common adversity but rather a strategic device to sustain opposition to authoritarian repression. As one interviewee, an active teacher participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), explained, the coup was a "deep betrayal" and yet one more case demonstrating the psychological trauma of its utter failings for everyday people (Interview #3)[4]. The sudden disruption of political norms led to widespread disillusionment and resistance. The February 1st coup represents a critical political juncture—a profound disruption that reconfigures institutional trajectories and social expectations.

Mirroring Tilly and Tarrow's (2007)[5] concept of a "contentious episode," the Spring Revolution represents the breakdown of routine political activities and the mobilization of previously disengaged actors becoming apparent mutual grievances. This movement possesses the ability to form cross-cutting alliances, maintain protests against repression, and apply the adaptive logic of collective action in high-risk environments.

Such events are rare but transformative, creating opportunities for collective action by

3. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). (2021, July 22). *Myanmar's Spring Revolution*. https://acleddata.com/2021/07/22/myanmars-spring-revolution/

4. Burmese CDM teacher, Yangon Interview #3.

5. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious politics*. Paradigm Publishers, p. 33.

changing perceptions of the costs and benefits of taking part. Just a few months after the 2020 election, the Tatmadaw declared the elections a fraud, complete with false claims and hearsay of widespread voter fraud; this was less of an administrative exercise and more of a direct assault on democracy and on the hopes of a population that had progressively enjoyed increasing freedoms over the preceding decade. As Mahoney and Thelen (2009)[6] argue, critical junctures irreversibly disrupt the status quo, forcing individuals and groups to reevaluate their stance within the political system. The coup significantly delegitimized the Tatmadaw in the eyes of the political opposition, including those who previously never engaged in politics.

4.1.2 Shattered Expectations and Emerging Resistance: A J-Curve Interpretation of Myanmar's Post-Coup Uprising

The detention of popular elected leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, along with the military takeover of governance, produced a collective, aggrieved sense of betrayal among the people. As described by one of the interviewees, the coup shattered their perception of reality:

> *"Everything began to unravel. When the news broke, the world seemed to turn upside down. The whole thing was surreal — none of it added up. Why now? Why in 2021, following such a free and fair election? I was shocked. My wife was silent and cried. Everyone we knew was in shock. It was more than confusion — it was betrayal. We had believed in everything — democracy, peaceful change, humanity — and they were gone overnight. For some time, we thought perhaps the world would act. We waited for action, for someone to stand up to the generals. But as days passed, it became clear no one was coming. That realization changed me. The shock turned into determination. I started reaching out, talking to neighbors, sharing our anger. We all felt it: a line had been crossed. The fear didn't go away, but it became something we could use. With each passing moment, my resolve hardened—so we hit the road and revolution started."* (Interview #1)[7]

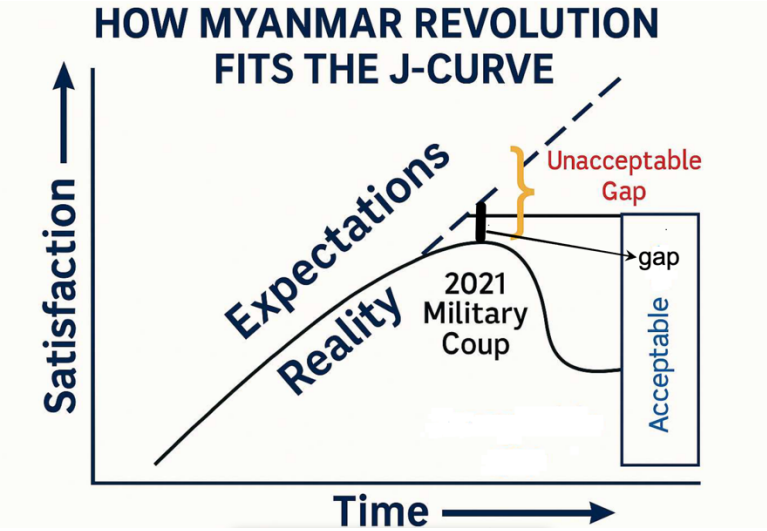
This testimony exemplifies the kind of societal rupture described in This testimony exemplifies the kind of societal rupture described in Davies' (1962) J-Curve theory of revolution: when a period of rising expectations is suddenly interrupted by an abrupt decline in political or material conditions, triggering mass discontent (p. 6)[8]. The post-2010 quasi-democratic opening in Myanmar had elevated hopes of institutional reform, civic inclusion, and stability. The 2021 coup violently reversed this trajectory,

6. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). p.29 – 35.
7. Burmese Activist, Yangon Mandalay #1.
8. Davies, J. C. (1962). *Toward a theory of revolution*. *American Sociological Review, 27*(1), 5–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/2089714

producing the kind of sharp disjunction between perceived progress and authoritarian regression that Davies argues is a key precursor to revolutionary action (pp. 6–7)[9].

In this framework, the interviewee's initial emotional collapse—marked by confusion, tears, and disbelief—represents the first psychological stage of revolution: the realization that prior political trust and expectations were illusory. This loss of faith, however, did not lead to political withdrawal. Rather, consistent with the J-curve model, the sudden reversal of perceived political gains catalyzed a transition from passive outrage to collective agency, as shown in diagram 1. The phrase "a line had been crossed" functions as a cognitive pivot: the symbolic point at which individuals no longer see the existing order as reformable but as fundamentally illegitimate.

Diagram 4.1. Myanmar Revolution and J curve theory



The rapid shift from despair to mobilization—"the fear didn't go away, but it became something we could use"—illustrates how perceived betrayal and unmet expectations can lower thresholds for participation. The internalization of crisis becomes the external expression of resistance. This is consistent with the larger claim found in social movement theory that emotional shock, wedged in previously existing social networks and collective narratives, may be catalysts for organized defiance[10]. At a macro level, the collapse of political continuity in Myanmar was not only institutional but also personal and emotionally charged. The rupture activated dormant networks of mutual trust and solidarity, giving rise to spontaneous micro mobilization. In Davies' terms, this is the reactive formation of collective will at the precise moment when social conditions fall

9. Davies, J. C. (1962). Ibid. pp 33-37.
10. Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M., & Polletta, F. (2001). *Passionate politics: Emotions and social movements*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 13–14.

below the trajectory the public had come to expect[11]. When people feel that not only is progress denied, but regression is violently imposed, political fear gives way to revolutionary resolve.

The military's abrupt power grab thus intensified the distance between citizen expectations and regime behavior, producing what Davies calls a 'revolutionary gap.' The interview's emotional register—"My wife stood silently, crying … my resolve hardened"—is not merely anecdotal but diagnostic: it reflects the moment when normative alignment with the state collapses and a new logic of contention emerges. In Myanmar, this moral and emotional fracture has contributed to the sustained character of resistance, as collective memory and rising expectations converge with lived repression to drive mobilization forward.

4.1.3 Mobilization Through Moral Shock: Grievances in Historical and Institutional Context

The coup was awfully asymmetrical, and its coming after a decade of quasi-democratic reforms made its impact all the more shattering. Myanmar people had just begun to taste the partial freedom of political liberalization over the decade (2011–2020), which brought increased civil liberties and participatory governance. This authoritarian turning back was not just a political defeat but a moral shock, in a sense underlined by the literature on contentious politics that highlights feelings of indignation at being suddenly and unfairly acted against by the state, a feeling that can lead to mass mobilization[11]. One participant in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) articulated this sentiment with visceral clarity:

> *"It was an insult to us that they [the military] said there was voter fraud. My personal experience (…) they [the military] were lying about the election. I myself have done the duty of counting the votes and registered them in my assigned area. We stayed at the polling station late into the night—me and the other volunteers—carefully counting and documenting each ballot. Local observers were there too, watching everything closely. We were tired, sure, but there was this quiet pride among us. We really believed we were part of something bigger—maybe even the start of a new chapter for our country. So when the military came out and just dismissed the results, like they meant nothing—it hit us hard. It wasn't just politics; it felt personal. Like they were wiping away all the effort we had put in, like our work, our honesty, our hope—it didn't matter. Like our voices didn't count. A lot of us believed the 2020 election could change things. Maybe not overnight, but it felt like a step toward*

11. Davies, J. C. (1962). Ibid. pp 106.

something better. And then suddenly, they said it was all fraud. That wasn't just stealing ballots—they were stealing our belief, our sense that the future could be different. That's why I joined the CDM. I couldn't stay quiet while they used a lie to take away everything we had started to build." (Interview #3)[12]

The response is more than just a factual denial; it is a profound indignation at the army's dare to challenge the democratic process through delegitimization. This teacher and participant in the CDM, a vote counter, was not only an administrative worker but also an instantiation of confidence in citizenship and democratic inclusion. The accusation of voter fraud thus functioned as a betrayal of both personal integrity and collective political identity. Their experiences illustrate how perceived injustice becomes an actionable grievance—a central logic of contentious politics. Trust in the legitimacy of the state can crumble quickly if institutional actors are perceived to violate accepted norms or moral standards[13]. In Myanmar's case, the military's assertions of electoral fraud weren't just unconvincing; they were widely regarded as deliberately fabricated, intended to legitimize a power grab by strongmen. These demands provided a focus for community anger, triggering demonstrations and nationwide civil disobedience. The coup itself was also worsened by its legal and institutional context. The 2008 constitution, designed by military generals to entrench their dominance, gives military control over key ministries, a quarter of the seats in parliament, and immunity from prosecution under Article 445 of Chapter 14.[14] Thereby, for many, the coup was not only unwarranted but also the symbol of unchecked authoritarian ambition. As one respondent observed,

As one respondent observed,

"The military already held significant power. We understood General Min Aung Hlaing's ambitions, but we did not anticipate he would undertake such a foolish act. Everyone already knew the military had their hands all over the government. Through the Constitution, they controlled the important ministries—defense, home affairs, you name it. It was frustrating, but still, we thought maybe if we kept voting, change could come slowly. We didn't expect them to throw everything away like that. The coup... it was shocking. Not because we didn't know about General Min Aung Hlaing's ambitions, but because he didn't have to do it—he already had so much power. He just couldn't stand the idea of losing even a little control. It showed how afraid they were of the people's choice. We weren't naïve about the system, you know— authoritarian control—but we were still stunned by how far they were willing to go, how little they cared about what people had started to believe in—about trust, progress, anything." (Interview #6)[15]

Indeed, this quote reflects both pragmatic awareness and emotional disbelief. Variations on

12. Burmese CDM teacher, Yangon Interview #3.
13. Tilly, Charles. *Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 2006. p.188
14. Yash Ghai, "The 2008 Myanmar Constitution: Analysis and Assessment," *Burma Library*, 2008, https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs6/2008_Myanmar_constitution--analysis_and_assessment-Yash_Ghai.pdf.
15. Burmese shadow government officer, Pegu. Interview #6.

these perceptions from the viewpoint of scholarship; contentious politics highlights especially when perceived to shatter informal political contracts or social expectations, ignites massive mobilization. [16]

Likewise, it is possible to interpret Myanmar's novel rebellion as a moral and psychological answer to the disruption of the informal political agreement between the state and its citizens. Subsequently, the ensuing civil disobedience movement was not only intentional but also an emotive act to reinstate the constituents' manner of agency, authority, and integrity in the face of authoritarian regression.

4.2 Political Opportunity Structures: Disruption, Legitimacy Crisis, and Repression

4.2.1 Political Opportunity Structures and Collective Identity

As one participant observed:

> *"The military thought they were untouchable. But this time, even the people who stayed silent before have had enough—"You see, in 1988 or even 2007, people like my father participated in the strike but receded in time before the army shot them all. But now, even he is frustrated. They pushed too far. They made us feel like we had nothing left to lose."" (Interview #20).*[17]

The sense of impunity long associated with the Tatmadaw had been tolerated—if begrudgingly—by some sectors of the public during earlier periods. But the coup of 2021 ruptured this uneasy equilibrium. It can be described in the contentious politics literature as a "reactive mobilization" to perceived political betrayal or repression[18], enabled the conversion of latent discontent into open defiance.

That these once disparate groups are now unified speaks to the strategic nature of framing within social movements. The Spring Revolution managed to unite the diverse sets of grievances from students, workers, ethnic minorities, and civil servants into a shared narrative of defiance against authoritarianism. In so doing, the movement developed a collective action frame in which the struggle was framed as not only a reaction to the coup but also as a broader campaign for justice, dignity, and structural change. The coup dramatically altered Myanmar's **political opportunity structure**—a core concept in contentious politics referring to the external conditions that affect the likelihood of protest success or repression [19]. Although repression intensified almost immediately, it paradoxically functioned as a unifying force. As security crackdowns grew more

16. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious politics* (pp. 14, 133). Paradigm Publishers.
17. Burmese Activist, Taunggyi/ Shan State, Interview #20.
18. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed., p. 163). Cambridge University Press.
19. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). Ibid. pp 49-50.

violent, the boundaries between formerly disconnected or cautious social groups dissolved. The Tatmadaw's overreach shattered durable but contingent alignments between the military and segments of the bureaucracy and urban professionals, as well as even some conservative elites—many of whom provided tacit or explicit support for CDM.

One participant elaborated,

> *"For us, getting back to where we were was not an option anymore; the movement was calling for fundamental change to the political landscape in Myanmar for a more inclusive and pluralistic democratic system. And this is no longer just about Aung San Suu Kyi or the NLD. We've seen how that kind of democracy left too many people out—ethnic groups, poor communities, women. Now we want something deeper, something fairer. For everyone—including other ethnics." (Interview #11).*[20]

This articulation signals a transition from restorative to transformational goals**,** highlighting how the coup catalyzed a more radical democratic imaginary. The Spring Revolution thus framed the struggle as not merely a political contest but a battle for national sovereignty and moral dignity, encapsulated in the Burmese phrase ***"Ar Nar Thein"***[21]—a term cited by every respondent in this study—which expresses a collective lament over the loss of national pride and autonomy.

Such cultural framing of a sort, which is a critical weapon deployed by contentious actors, had the effect of appealing to collectively held existence structuring symbols, meanings, and values that cut across ethnicity, region, and class[22] (Snow, Zurcher, & Ekland-olson, 1986). In particular, the movement's ability to encompass the grievances of ethnic minorities—including calls for a federal union—has been key to both its success and its survival. Unlike uprisings in 1988 and 2007, which marginalized or tokenized ethnic minority voices, the Spring Revolution actively included ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and civil society actors. The result is a clear strategic refocusing of alliance building and a deliberate rejection of the Tatmadaw's traditional strategy of divide and rule.

On the other hand, the effectiveness of the Spring Revolution in attracting mass participation can also be accounted for by the framing of a sense of collective identity—

20. Burmese CDM doctor, Yangon, Interview #11.
21. The notion of "Ar Nar Thein," which has become widely evoked throughout the Spring Revolution, encompasses a powerful feeling of collective grievance linked to the loss of national sovereignty and dignity through change. Meaning "the theft of a nation" or "the theft of national sovereignty," it has been invoked as a rallying cry by participants in Myanmar's resistance movements. The fact that respondents brought it up over and over again shows how important it is as a cultural and emotional touchstone, representing not only political subjugation by the Tatmadaw but also the desire for independence and the restoration of lost national pride.
22. Snow, D. A., Rochford, E. B., Worden, S. K., & Benford, R. D. (1986). Frame alignment processes, micromobilization, and movement participation. *American Sociological Review, 51*(4), 464–481.

what Melucci (1989)[23] calls the ongoing negotiation of shared meanings, belonging, and emotional solidarity. By creating a sense of common purpose and by legitimizing diverse voices within its framework, the movement has sustained participation despite escalating costs. In contentious politics terms, this reflects the formation of a movement culture capable of enduring state repression while fostering emotional investment and social cohesion.

4.2.2 From Outrage to Systemic Transformation of the Mobilization

Spring Revolution participants viewed the 2021 coup as a critical break—not simply a political crisis but an event that deeply interrupted the perceived trajectory of democratization. It prompted not just spur-of-the-moment protests but also a more profound reorientation and change of heart in the way people saw themselves as participants in the struggle. People saw resistance as not only a moralist position but also as a historical requirement—both required and unavoidable. In the context of contentious politics, this is an example of what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) call a 'disruptive episode' when structural changes and political openings coincide to generate collective action on an exceptional scale.[24]

One participant summed up this transition:

> *"It was a lie. There was no voter fraud. We'd had a taste of democracy, and there was no turning back. I recall seeing the morning news and feeling a sinking sensation in my stomach. It wasn't just doubting—it was a betrayal. We had queued by the polling stations, and believed in the process, and for once it had felt like the closest thing to freedom for us. The military's cry of fraud was ludicrous, but more important, it was a slap in the face of everything we had striven for. That fleeting experience of political agency changed us. Once you've had even a brief glimpse of freedom, it's not something you can unsee or forget. The coup didn't just undo an election—it shattered the illusion that reform under military oversight was ever going to be enough." (Interview #7)*[25]

This statement discloses a pattern common in post-authoritarian transitions: once a people have tasted from the fruits of an opening, even if it is an incomplete one, they become less patient with authoritarian backtracks. What had once been endured as inevitable now became intolerable. From a contentious politics perspective, this transformation signals the crossing of what Tarrow (2011) terms a *threshold of contention*, where popular discontent

23. Melucci, A. (1989). *Nomads of the present: Social movements and individual needs in contemporary society* (p. 34). Hutchinson Radius.
24. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2007). *Contentious politics* (p. 49). Paradigm Publishers.
25. Burmese shadow government associate, Karen States, Interview #7

transitions into mobilization due to a shared sense of betrayal and lost legitimacy. [26] In addition, the reflections of one interviewee encapsulate the profound miscalculations and unintended consequences of the military's decision to stage the 2021 coup. By describing the Tatmadaw's actions as akin to "*pulling the tiger's tail*," [27] the interviewee illustrates the precarious position the military has put itself in—one in which it has overreached and, in doing so, sparked a movement of such sheer size and endurance as to be unparalleled. The metaphor implies that when repressors do so, they fail to anticipate the causal properties of that repression: rather than silencing dissent, the coup acted as a trigger for radicalization and broader coalition-building, both hallmarks of contentious episodes escalating toward systemic challenge 28. The recollection of one interviewee starkly evokes the transformational change that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the coup. Reflecting on the days after the Tatmadaw dismissed the electoral results of Myanmar, he described the shift from despair to determination.

> *"Revolution has, at last, come to our doorstep! For us, there was no other way left. Military coup again! Making sense of it is still difficult, just like walking in the dark jungle of deep despair. We had seen history repeat itself, and this time, we couldn't remain silent. At first, I couldn't even speak—I felt numb, paralyzed by the weight of it all. But soon, the mood had shifted. The fear turned into fury. We gathered our courage, made our signs, and joined the swelling crowd in the streets. It didn't feel like a choice—it felt like a call, as if the revolution had arrived not just at our doorstep, but inside each of us. After three days of the coup, initial sadness was replaced by tremendous anger, and we hit the road and started our demonstrations." (Interview #13)*[29]

Here the emotional tempo maps a well-established rhythm of the social movement literature: the progression from affective disorientation to affective clarity. The remark of "dark jungle" and the decision to protest because of existential confusion and the 'crystallization' of collective identity and oppositional framing. This shift corresponds to what McAdam (1982) refers to as cognitive liberation—the realization that change is possible and that individuals can have a role in such change. In a matter of days, what started as anger over a stolen vote turned into a systemic attack on military rule, prompted by a dawning sense that no one could go on living under the status quo. This evolution shows that, far from being purely reactive, politics are incredibly generative: they make new identities, solidarities, and senses of political possibility. This sense of inevitability, of a historical moment that demanded action, reflects the crystallization of long-simmering grievances into a cohesive revolutionary impulse.[30]

26. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed., p. 213). Cambridge University Press.
27. Burmese Activist, Yangon Interview #2.
28. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed., p. 147–149). Oxford University Press
29. Burmese Activist, Monywa, Interview #13
30. McAdam, D. (1982). *Political process and the development of Black insurgency, 1930–1970*. University of Chicago Press. (2nd ed., p. 48–51).

4.2.3 The Paradox of Repression: Violence and Resistance

The military's brutal response to the growing movement was both anticipated and feared. The first silence from the Tatmadaw leaders was the lull before a storm of violence. For peaceful protesters, the death of Mya Thwe Thwe Khine—who was shot in the head while demonstrating—was a defining, devastating moment in the bleak early days of the uprising in 2021[31]. Her death was not only repressive, it was a brutal message. The military meant it as a warning: a savage demonstration of how far it would go to suppress opposition.

However, within the framework of contentious politics, acts of state violence can backfire. They can trigger what Tarrow (2011) calls the **"paradox of repression"**—where coercive efforts aimed at demobilizing protest instead galvanize it[32]. The more brutal the regime's response, the stronger the emotional, moral, and strategic resolve of the movement becomes.

As one interviewee recalled,

> *"After that day, there was no turning back. Her name was on everyone's lips. Her photo was everywhere. It made us cry, yes—but more than that, it made us fight. We marched for her. The military wanted to silence us, but that became our drive to go on against them." (Interview #35)*[33]

This transformation of victims into **martyrs** is a critical phenomenon in social movement theory. It reframes the public narratives from individual grievance to collective injustice and often leads to increased mobilization[34]. Each act of military violence steeled the movement's resolve, affirming that the struggle was not only about electoral justice but also about dignity, survival, and moral legitimacy. What repression did, in this regard, was not to silence but to deepen opposition. Each fallen protester became a symbol, each violent crackdown a confirmation of the movement's claims. Protesters, no longer just resisting a coup, were confronting an existential threat to their future. The military's violence thus deepened the emotional foundations of the uprising, turning fear into defiance. It helped construct a revolutionary narrative centered not only on political objectives but also on sacrifice and moral clarity—an identity that, once formed, is exceedingly difficult to dismantle.

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31. The Guardian. 2021, February 19. *Myanmar protester shot in head during police crackdown dies*. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/19/myanmar-protester-shot-in-head-during-police-crackdown-has-died-says-brother
32. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press, p. 209.
33. A Chinese born in Mandalay and a Myanmar citizen, Mandalay, Interview #35
34. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 147–149.

4.2.4 Legal Repression and the Criminalization of Defiance

The Tatmadaw's strategic use of legal instruments as tools of repression further illustrates its authoritarian grip. The weaponization of laws—prohibiting satellite TV, allowing warrantless arrests, and criminalizing dissent on social media—created a pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and fear.

> *After the coup , so many laws have changed, such as cyber laws, 505 and so on—targeting us—using social media*—draconian controls—*spreading news online—and allowing them (soldiers and police) to jail us anytime without a reason. There is no more law protecting us. We wake up each morning not knowing if a post we liked or a comment we wrote will bring them (military police) to our door. It's not just the activists they target—it's students, teachers, even volunteers. The dread follows us everywhere—at home, online, in the streets.* (Interview #38)[35]

The regime continues to use its intrusive cyber-laws, which allow soldiers and police to have unhindered access to personal information, recognizing the importance of digital platforms to organize the resistance. But even those measures reflect the regime's weakness: Its need for such draconian controls reveals the challenge posed by modern, decentralized forms of resistance. This atmosphere of pervasive menace combines the regime's legalistic authoritarianism—the instrumentalization of law to criminalize dissent and make repression seem routine—around the entire country and normalize repression[36]. In the context of contentious politics, this also illustrates what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) call the "repressive apparatus of the state," where legal codes serve to delegitimize activism and isolate potential challengers from their support networks[62].

The imposition of invasive cyber-laws by the regime, offering unlimited access to personal data, shows clearly how the regime understands the potential of digital platforms as tools to gather and organize resistance. But these measures also reveal the regime's vulnerabilities; the need to rely on such repressive measures further highlights the extent to which the regime is struggling to confront contemporary, decentralized forms of resistance. The state's desire to dominate the digital terrain underscores what Jasper (1997) terms the *"moral panic"* authoritarian regimes often experience when they cannot predict or manage emerging sources of power.[37] The interviewee's account of a "dread" that characterized the atmosphere of everyday life mirrors the psychological impact of such measures. However, rather than suppressing dissent entirely, these tactics have fueled

35. Burmese Activist Lawyer. Bagan, Interview #38.
36. Cheesman, N. (2015). *Opposing the rule of law: How Myanmar's courts make law and order*. Cambridge University Press, p. 140–160.
37. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press. (pp. 135–138).

a deepening resentment and a determination to resist. For the regime to monopolize the legal field[38], it has instead exposed its authoritarian nature, further alienating a population already disillusioned by the coup. This procedure is a militarist policy of total repression and signifies that the military is committed to wiping out not only organizations of dissent but also the symbols of dissent. But the extremity of these measures also risks further delegitimizing the regime, as the population sees them as an assault on their basic freedoms and cultural symbols.

On the other hand, the criminalization of charity and empathy, as described by one interviewee,

> *"Even giving food or water to protesters—just helping—was enough to get arrested. That's when we realized this isn't just about politics. They are criminalizing charity, empathy being human." (Interview #1)[39]*

highlights the desperate measures the regime has taken to crush resistance, reinforcing and not challenging its reputation as a totalitarian entity—rather than a legitimate government. In terms of contentious politics, this is a classic case of overreach—the repressive escalation that isolates broad sectors of the population and inadvertently expands the base of the opposition[40]. By criminalizing empathy, the regime broke the illusion of a rule-by-law, and the nature of its rule-by-fear became clear.

4.2.5 Tatmadaw's Strategic Miscalculations: A Protracted Conflict

Most probably, the Tatmadaw has miscalculated the impact of its brutalization, as was evident with its escalation of the coup into a protracted conflict against the civilian population. The regime's actions, described by one interviewee as an "act of war" (Interview #19)[41] against its own citizens, signify a departure from the typical logic of coups, which aim to seize control of state power with minimal disruption. The interviewee elaborated:

> *"They didn't just want control—they wanted obedience. They bombed villages, arrested teenagers, burned homes. This operation is no longer a political takeover. This is a war, their act of war—but one where the people didn't declare it. They did."*

But rather than consolidating power swiftly, the Tatmadaw has followed a course of mass suppression, treating the population itself as the primary obstacle to its dominance. In the

38. Jasper, James M. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements*. University of Chicago Press, 1997, p.127
64. Human Rights Watch. *"They Can Arrest You at Any Time": The Criminalization of Peaceful Expression in Burma*. 2021, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/burma0616web.pdf.
39. Burmese Activist, Mandalay, Interview #1.
40. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 166–167.
41. Burmese Activist. Taunggyi/Shan State, Interview #19.

realm of contentious politics, this is a transition from authoritarian accommodation to brute coercion—a response that can usher in a backlash, rather than its extinction[68]. This framing of the military's actions as an internal invasion indicates the complete rupture between the regime and the people it claims to govern. By positioning itself in direct opposition to the population, the Tatmadaw has abandoned any pretense of serving as a stabilizing national force, instead becoming a symbol of oppression and violence.

4.3 Repertoires of Contention: Strategic Innovation, Resistance Tactics, and Escalation

4.3.1 Symbolism and Adaptation: Sustaining the Movement

Symbolic actions were also key in building and renewing the movement's collective identity. The three-finger salute, popularized by the Hunger Games TV series, was adopted as a symbol of resistance and solidarity. As the same participant said,

> *"The three-finger salute was not just a gesture, it was a sign of our determination. It reminded us we are not alone in the darkest moments.* Whenever we saw someone raise it—on the street, online, or even in photos—we felt that connection. It was like a silent promise: we stand together. It helped keep our spirits alive when everything around us was falling apart. It told us: we are seen, we are many, and we are not giving up*." (Interview # 22)*[42]

Symbols like this, as well as chant songs and other cultural referents, gave a shared language to the movement, allowing men and women from all walks of life to voice and share their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. It rapidly adopted unifying symbols—the red peacock flag, for example—to try to stitch together separate communities across Myanmar. This was also paired with the strategic framing of the coup as an existential threat, a story that reverberated strongly with a population of not just divergent socio-economic backgrounds but different regions of the country as well.[43] By framing the struggle as not only against a particular act of repression but against a wider system of tyranny, the movement drew participation from urban centers like Yangon and Mandalay as well as rural villages. The same interviewee noted,

> *"It knitted 50 million people together as brothers and sisters, standing side by side, under the flag of revolt, the peacock banner, red! I had never seen people from so many different walks of life—Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, students, and farmers—all marching behind one single flag. For once, we were defined not by our differences, but by what we had in common. The banner also provided a focal point,*

42. Burmese Activist, Mon, Interview #22
43. Beissinger, Mark R. *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion*. Princeton University Press, 2022, pp 55 – 60.

something we can stand behind and feel that was emotionally bigger than any of us individually." (Interview #22)[44]

This strategic framing aligns with Tarrow's (2011)[45] concept of '*frame alignment,'* in which protest participants effectively link local grievances to broader narratives of systemic injustice. This imagery of collective harmony and common goals exemplifies the power of the movement to forge a common identity that crossed lines of class and creed—an essential trait of successful social movements[35].

In contentious politics, such identity-making is not the result of spontaneous processes but is actively produced by performance, symbolism, and shared meaning. In addition, symbolic acts helped to convey the movement's values and objectives and the movement to a global audience, boosting the visibility and "external legitimacy" of the events. These tactical instances to act in a symbolic way and the longer-standing injustices coupled with digital technologies made for a potent crosshatching of mobilization tools. The symbolic gestures were taken up on social media and spread widely, subsequently gaining momentum both domestically and internationally. The military's denial of 80% of democratic votes was an assault on the people's belief that they had any say in their country's direction; they no longer trusted the state apparatus. Such delegitimation of authority was an environment that allowed the relatively rapid rise of resistance, much as Gurr (1970) argues for relative deprivation, that is, when expectations about political involvement escalate but are suddenly denied[46].

In the case of Myanmar, the retreat of hard-won democratic space only sharpened the movement's moral urgency and extended its reach. In the end, the mix of cultural symbolism, emotional solidarity, and strategic framing turned a political reply into a national movement. This is how the Spring Revolution showed that its legacy is based not just on the hatred in politics but on cultural and symbolic work to keep possibility and meaning alive in dark times. On the other hand, by slogan and symbol, solidarity was crucial in shaping identity. The evocative use of slogans and chants, such as

"Ah Ye Taw Pong" and "Aung Ya Mye"

("The cause must be - won by the people"), (Interview #4)[47]

embodies the collective ethos of the Spring Revolution, encapsulating its core demands and aspirations.

44. Burmese Activist, Mon, Interview #22
45. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press, pp. 189–190.35. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 112.
46. Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton University Press, pp. 56.
47. Shan/Da Nu Ethnic, Taunggyi/Shan State, Interview #4

The cries of

"Phan Se htarte Kaungsaung Mya"
"Pyan Loot Pae – Pyan Loot Pae"

("Our leaders – release, release") (Interview #4)[48]

reflect an immediate and visceral demand for the restoration of democratic governance and the release of figures like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Similarly, the chant

"Tatmadaw Asoe Ya"
"A Lo Ma Shi, A Lo Ma Shi"

("Military dictatorship – abolish, abolish") (Interview #4)[49]

represents a broader rejection of military rule, uniting diverse factions of Myanmar's society under the common goal of dismantling the oppressive structures perpetuated by the Tatmadaw.

These slogans, roared in unison until voices seemed to 'hit the sky'(Interview #4)[50] carry a profound symbolic weight. They serve as a means to convey messages to get through the complexities of systemic injustice and decades of military oppression into concise and powerful calls to action that resonate deeply with the population. Its cadence and repetition provide an emotional beat that ties participants together, cultivating a sense of horizontal solidarity and collective action in the midst of disrupting the world as we know it. These slogans function as a rallying cry as well as a narrative framework, constructing the identity and magnifying the message of the movement for both national and international audiences. The political awareness of Myanmar's citizens, as represented in the interviews, is widening and deepening, laying critical ground for the sustenance of the Spring Revolution. Shared collective identity is necessary to the resilience and efficacy of any social movement.

4.3.2 Intergenerational Alliances: Historical Memory and *Technological Integration*

The generational aspect of the revolution is, too, a crucial determinant of the transition to large-scale resistance. Middle-aged people, weighing up decades of frustration with military rule, found common cause with younger generations, those who couldn't imagine a

48. Ibid
49. Ibid
50. Ibid

future without democracy but whose hopes had been dashed. One of the interviewees remarked,

> *"Middle-aged persons, like me, decided to settle the combining scores of old and new dictatorial wounds, and young people decided to uproot the entire system of the military-dominant political system, converged. This time, we weren't alone. We saw our children rise—not with fear, but with fire. It felt like the past and the future had finally joined forces. The movenment was no longer just about protests. It was about ending a cycle that had haunted generations." (Interview #1)* [51]

This cross-generational alliance represents the interplay of memory and aspiration, a collective bound by common cause based on the common knowledge that under military tyranny, there was no tomorrow. A digital generation, skilled in moving through online and social media spaces, emerged as the conduit for expressing revolutionary fervor and turning rage into concerted moves. The reference to

> "*Facebook gurus, without them, we wouldn't have known where to meet, what to wear, or how to stay safe. While the older generation taught us protest tactics and gave us slogans, the younger generation equipped with technology kept us updated. They weren't official leaders, but they were leaders in every sense." (Interview #25)*[52]

underscores the importance of modern digital technology in movements; that the ability to spread information quickly means that a large number of people, spread across the geography of a country, can be mobilized. The generational shift in leadership and participation is another defining feature of the revolution. The younger generation, especially "Gen Z," was instrumental in defining the movement's objectives and organizing its actions.

Their exposure to quasi-democracy, along with fluency in the digital age, made it possible for them to organize swiftly and effectively. Without depicting the revolution as the continuous pursuit of future-oriented structural transformations, this generation has charged the movement with dynamism and vision, ensuring its relevance and adaptability. As another interviewee put it, the Spring Revolution's novelty lies in its appeal to historical grievances, matched up with modern tools. One of the participant's observations was that the revolution

> *"Not a flame of popular discontent, arising in a day and dying down in a day. The difference now is that we're organized, connected, and determined. The military underestimated how deep our roots had grown." (Interview #17)*[53]

51.. Burmese Activist, Mandalay, Interview #1
52. Burmese Activist, Ayerwaddy, Interview #25
53. Burmese Activist, Yangon, Interview #17

This observation highlights the movement's capacity for sustained mobilization—what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) refer to as *contentious performance* that adapts over time through repertoires, framing, and learning. [54]

Unlike its predecessors, the Spring Revolution meshed historical grievances to sophisticated use of the tools of the new era and allowing its structure to unfold. At its core, the longevity and durability of the revolution is rooted in this hybrid character — generational memory combined with technology-driven innovation and traditional grievances expressed within contemporary repertoires of contention. That interplay has not only helped the movement endure, but also redefined what collective resistance can be in the 21st century.

4.3.3 Economic Disruptions as Strategic Resistance

Economic disruptions, as described by another interviewee, underscore the comprehensive impact of the revolution on Myanmar's society. A small business owner from Yangon recalled,

> *"Businesses closed, mine too, schools shut down, and railway transport stalled. Roads and streets filled with demonstrators—hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic faces. It wasn't an easy decision to shut my shop—I depend on it to feed my family. But we all knew that if we kept living as usual, the generals would win. Our refusal to do business was also our refusal to be ruled by them. When I saw the streets full, I knew we weren't alone. We were making the city ungovernable." (Interview #36)*[55]

This narrative gives a sense of the magnitude and ferocity of the revolt, which abruptly paralyzed daily life in the cities. The economic malaise—with banks closed, public transportation halted, and commerce interrupted—was not just the byproduct of protest activity. It was a deliberate tactic of non-cooperation, aligning with the strategic repertoire of what Tilly and Tarrow (2015) describe as 'disruptive contention': actions that impose material costs on regimes and challenge their capacity to rule[56].

In this context, everyday acts of withdrawal—from commerce, state institutions, or routine labor—functioned as a coordinated challenge to state authority. The refusal to conduct "business as usual" became a powerful mode of resistance. As Gurr (1970) notes, when political grievances escalate into action, participants often adopt methods that strike directly at the regime's capacity to govern, especially in the absence of conventional political channels[57].

54. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, pp. 153–156.
55. A business man, Yangon, Interview #36
56. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, pp. 121–124.
57. Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why men rebel*. Princeton University Press, p. 58.

Such variety of participation, from mom-and-pop-store owners to striking civil servants, reflects what McAdam et al. (2001)[58] call the '*mobilizing structures'* of protest: the networks and informal infrastructures that allow for sustained engagement and broad participation. By prioritizing resistance over regularity, participants showed a common commitment to accepting economic risk in the pursuit of political goals, reinforcing the movement's authority and durability. This degree of economic rupture also represented symbolic power. It was a message to the military junta and its domestic and international observers that the military junta could not rely on a functioning society to legitimize its rule. The image of full streets and shuttered storefronts—described by the interviewee as filled with "enthusiastic faces"—illustrates how public space was transformed into a visible theater of resistance.

4.3.4 The Power of Collective Disruption: The Role of the CDM

The transformation of Myanmar's Spring Revolution from peaceful demonstrations to a robust and multifaceted resistance movement reveals the depth of collective determination and the dynamic processes underpinning revolutionary change. At the heart of peaceful demonstrations, there lies CDM. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), as described by one participant,

> *"the revolution's capacity to disrupt the state apparatus by government workers refusing to work for them (military generals) and the withdrawal of labor and showing the moral commitment of ordinary citizens." (Interview #11)[59]*

The same CDM participant's account of how daily life shifted to a different rhythm under the revolution underscores the profound psychological and logistical impact of the movement. He has also mentioned that

> *"Our CDM movement is far and wide; it draws every sector, including healthcare workers, educators, lawyers, engineers, transport workers, and beyond, rendering the administrative machinery of the state largely nonfunctional, and we were okay with the collapse of the medical system, as we have to close down hospitals. I mean, we did not face a huge impact then." (Interview #11)[60]*

This participant's account of the "collapse of the medical system" and halting of Covid-19 vaccinations serves as a vivid illustration of the sacrifices it entails. Although healthcare

58. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 126.
59. CDM doctor, Yangon, Interview #11
60. Ibid

workers are abandoning their posts even during a global pandemic; this action signifies a collective determination to prioritize political liberation over the most pressing health conditions. This ruling was framed as a moral calculus. This suspension of normalcy underscores the transformative power of the revolution, where the exigencies of political struggle temporarily overshadow even the most urgent needs of society. This is a deep and transformative kind of disruptive power, by which critical services are withheld, and thus the legitimacy and operational capacity of the state are corroded. [61]

4.3.5 Transformation from reformist to revolutionary goals

Another interviewee's vivid description of mass demonstrations highlights the emotional and symbolic power of collective action.

> *"A sea of faces - tens of thousands of enthusiastic faces glistening under the warm rays of February and the collective singing of revolution songs capture the true spirit of resistance. When we sang, it was like our voices were telling the military: We are not afraid anymore. That crowd, that moment—it was Myanmar's heartbeat."* (Interview #21)[62]

This type of mass mobilization can be classified as the contentious gatherings (Tilly and Tarrow 2015)—public displays of collective defiance that signal strength and legitimacy in the streets[63]. The magnitude and visibility of the demonstrations reflected not just opposition to the coup but a broader demand for systemic change, as articulated by the same respondent:

> *"Not for the NLD party, nor the battle for an idol, but a broader fight to uproot the military-dominated system. The entire goal has changed. Now, it's to burn the entire snare." (*Interview #21)[64]

It represents an important shift in the movement's aims. This transition, from reformist to revolutionary objectives, ushered in a new chapter in the history of the movement. It's a defining change in the movement's aims: from the defense of a specific party (such as NLD) or from protecting a particular party or figure to rejecting the entire structure of military-backed governance. It reflects a moment of *goal transformation*, a common dynamic in protracted contentious struggles where participants, confronted by repression and betrayal, escalate their demands from reform to full regime change[65]. The metaphor of the snare—not merely the military but the system that allowed for

61. Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan. *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*. Columbia University Press, 2011, p.128
62. Burmese Activist, Sagaing, Interview #21
63. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 113–116.
64. Burmese ctivist, Sagaing, Interview #21
65. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 136–138.

military dominance—epitomizes the movement's lurch into more radical territory. This radicalization marks the transition from defensive opposition to revolutionary assertion. It is that ad hoc reforms or negotiated agreements are inadequate because there is something deeply wrong with underlying institutional infrastructure through which military rule is pursued. In terms of contentious politics, this process serves as a classic case of what Tarrow (2011) refers to as 'radical flank' effects, whereby more radical parts of a movement set the terms of the struggle and expand the boundaries of the politically feasible[66]. It is also about reconstructing a sense of identity in which they are no longer voters or petitioners but are revolutionaries who are intent on overthrowing—rather than simply reforming—the state. This kind of metamorphosis, rooted in collective sentiment and strategic clarity, is a defining feature of resilient revolutionary movements that seek not simply to survive repression but to reinvent the political order.

4.3.6 The Turning Point to Armed Resistance

Accordingly, the 2021 Spring Revolution of Myanmar reached a turning point when military violence escalated, and lives were lost and when the people's fight for freedom shifted from peaceful uprising to armed resistance. Describing the brutality experienced by protesters, one interviewee vividly remembered his horrific experience during the period:

> *" Since about early May 2021, when the country was in turmoil, there was so tiny a hope that the death toll wouldn't rise further and that the Tatmadaw would have the heart to relent. This hope was a self-deceit, expecting a miracle. The army shed its princely pretense and waged open war on peaceful protesters. Many died daily from the army's gunfire. We, our group, found ourselves running time and again to escape the relentless gunfire, dispersing in different directions, hearts pounding with the rhythm of survival. Shots echoed around us, bullets whizzing past, striking from behind. Miraculously, we managed to escape each time, the narrow margins of fortune separating us from the fate that claimed so many others – we had no other choice.* That was when we understood. This wasn't just suppression. It was extermination. What kind of future could we imagine if we kept turning our backs and running? So, we decided to take up arms." *(Interview #17)*[67].

This story exposes the cruel calculus of repression, not untypical of contentious politics in autocracies. With the Tatmadaw ramping up its use of deadly force, the room for nonviolent resistance was only shrinking. The "self-deceit" described by the interviewee captures a moment of psychological and strategic reckoning.

66. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press, p. 202.
67. Burmese Activist. Yangon, Interview #17.

Myanmar's revolution began with symbolic methods: banging pots and pans, viral Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) messaging, and mass protest. These tactics also served to delegitimize the regime and indicate increasing public opposition. But as violence escalated, nonviolent resistance became too costly. What had started as an act of civil disobedience now felt like a desperate fight for survival. The movement was forced to adopt a different strategy as the regime refused to compromise. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) note, when institutional channels close and repression becomes overwhelming, movements often turn to more confrontational or violent methods, especially when peaceful efforts are met with lethal force.[68] The movement's calculus shifted. Activists saw that the symbolic power of peaceful resistance—however morally resonant—was no match for a regime that met protest with death.

4.3.7 From Protest to Armed Resistance: A Broader Revolution

The escalation in violence—followed by the acquisition of weapons—is a radical change in the movement that arose in 2021, unlike any other. The intensifying repression during the Spring Revolution pushed the movement into a phase of no return, with the state's actions leaving profound scars on civil society. One interviewee captured the devastating impact of the Tatmadaw's violence:

> *"Countrywide crackdowns saw indiscriminate shooting, attacks on hospitals and clinics, invasions and destruction of schools and homes, and thefts. In Mindat, a small beautiful hilltop town in Chin State, heavy artillery destroyed homes, leaving villagers starving in the jungle as the military cut off food supplies. For young people, despite efforts to conceal their anger, the news of comrades being killed, journalists and reporters arrested and tortured, and U Kyaw Thu's renowned free funeral service destroyed and its voluntarily donated fund stolen by soldiers, drove the revolution further into the road of no return." (Interview#11)*[69]

This narrative reflects the Tatmadaw's total assault on society.

Random killings have only deepened grievances. The attack on U Kyaw Thu's funeral services—which had been widely regarded as an emblem of community solidarity—demonstrates the regime's apparent desire to destroy not just the opposition, but the social fabric that holds civil society together. The uprising has developed from peaceful mobilization to armed struggle, demonstrating the ways movements adapt when faced with extreme repression. As Davies (1962) argues, when political avenues close and conditions worsen, citizens often resort to political violence.[70] This is not just a tactical change; it is a structural shift in the revolution's character. Armed resistance

68. McAdam, Doug, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. *Dynamics of Contention*. Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 132.
69. CDM doctor, Yangon, Interview #11
70.. Davies, J. C. (1962). Toward a Theory of Revolution. American Sociological Review, 27(1), 5–19.

became a last resort against exterminatory state violence. The collapse of faith in peaceful resolution ushered in a new phase: one defined by confrontation rather than protest.

4.3.8 Victims of Repression to Active Agents of Revolutionary Change

What the interviewee describes here as the increasingly narrow margins between their escapes and how state violence has taken a psychological toll on the movement's collective mindset exposes the transformational role repression has played in the movement, he said:

> *"Each time we ran, each time we heard the bullets whiz by,* we understood even more deeply that the military wasn't just trying to silence us—they wanted to eliminate us*. We stopped thinking we could appeal to their humanity or reason; they had neither. What became clear to all of us was that survival wasn't enough anymore. If we lived, it had to mean something—it had to be for something. We decided to fight back with whatever we could grab." (Interview #17)*[71]

This testimonial illustrates a key dynamic in contentious politics: the moral transformation of fear into agency. Self-preservation gives way to a collective imperative to act. Repression can catalyze reactive mobilization, where trauma strengthens rather than demobilizes resolve. The sense that "survival isn't enough" reflects what Jasper (1997) describes as the activation of moral emotions—when personal pain becomes political responsibility[72]. Exposure to repeated violence leads individuals to see resistance as an existential necessity. This transition—from fear to defiance—marks a shift in the movement's identity.

It is a reconceptualization of self: from oppressed victims to revolutionaries. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) maintain, these shifts are frequently accompanied by the forging of a general collective identity, wherein individuals come to perceive themselves participating in a wider struggle. [73] It is this heightened commitment that allows ongoing resistance, fueled through shared suffering, moral necessity, and a vision of justice beyond individual survival. The site of repression, in this sense, becomes not only a site of suffering, but also a forge of political awakening. Their decision to take up arms was not taken lightly. Young activists, who transitioned from peaceful protesters to determined revolutionaries, have positioned the Spring Revolution at a critical turning point. One interviewee reflected on this profound shift:

> *"As the revolution entered its sixth month, the military's response grew ever more violent. Since the coup, nearly 1,500 lives had been lost, and over 10,000 souls arrested. Now, young people, moving in secret, began to connect with ethnic armed organizations like the KNU, KIA, primarily along the border with Thailand. They took shelter there, underwent thorough military training, and got ready for the tough*

71. Burmese Activist. Yangon, Interview #17.
72. Jasper, J. M. (1997). *The art of moral protest: Culture, biography, and creativity in social movements*. University of Chicago Press, p.106.
73. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 142–145.

fight ahead. Just a few months ago, these kids were following wild dreams, with innocent days spent playing video games. Steadfast and resolute, one by one they sacrifice their normal lives in order to hide in the deep jungle and receive military training. Their singular intent is to destroy the existing Tatmadaw. If the law of the land permits, they will fight for this end peacefully, at the ballot box and through digital battles. If the law does not permit it, and if force is meted out to them, they will respond in kind. Violence meets violence" (Interview #32).[74]

This account captures the rapid radicalization of the youth movement in response to escalating violence. Such trajectories are common in contexts where state brutality leaves no room for peaceful resolution. It illustrates a critical dynamic in contentious politics: the moral transformation of fear into agency**.** The initial instinct for self-preservation gradually gives way to a collective imperative to act. As Tilly and Tarrow (2015) explain, state repression can catalyze what they term '*reactive mobilization'*—where trauma does not demobilize but instead radicalizes and strengthens collective resolve.[75]

This transformation epitomizes more than just tactical escalation; it embodies a reconstitution of self. Activists emerge from their victim mentality to enter this role as leaders of revolutionary movements. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) assert, such developments frequently demand the creation of shared identity, by which individuals come to understand themselves as actors in a wider conflict. [76] To me, this process is the path toward sustained resistance, one based on common sacrifice, ethical imperatives, and a collective vision of justice. Repression, in this respect, is not simply a technology of control but also the shove into a crucible of political awakening.

4.4 Framing and Identity Construction

4.4.1 When asked, 'How do you see the end of the crisis? - Burmese Perspectives on Federalism

Among Burmese participants of my interviewees, the response to the question "How do you see the end of this crisis?" was nearly unanimous. Every participant, 100% of them—men, women, young, and old of any profession—ultimately arrived at the conclusion that federal democracy is the only viable solution. As we sat down for an informal meeting with a few participants,

A 45-year-old a small business owner from Yangon reflected,

"Before all of this, I had a business, a daily routine, a peaceful life. Now, everything is uncertain. I just want my normal life back." (Interview #36)[77]

74. Former PDF solider, Sagaing. Interview #32.
75. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 152–153.
76. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 142–145.
77. A Businessman in Yangon (a small trading firm owner), Yangon. Interview #36.

But as discussions progressed, participants came to realize that stability alone wouldn't do. Many expressed an awareness of the long history of oppression of ethnic minorities in the region and emphasized the importance of building an inclusive political arrangement as a key to national peace and stability. Some argued that foreign intervention could help pave the way to democracy, while others considered internal cooperation paramount to consolidating a stable future. A university student from Bagan added,

> *"We can't just go back to before; we need a system where no one is left behind. We now realize how bad our ethnic people suffered over many, many years." (Interview #38)*[78]

for which the business owner agreed and said 'Yes, of course, that is true.' This realization marks a profound evolution in the movement's framing. As Tilly and Tarrow (2015) argue, effective movements often rely on inclusive, resonant frames that unite diverse groups under a shared vision.[79] In this case, federal democracy has become such a unifying frame—one capable of transcending the narrow demand to reverse the coup and instead offering a positive, future-oriented political blueprint.

A Burmese NGO worker at the Borderline, Maesot, Thailand, elaborated on the growing sentiment of disillusionment with centralized governance:

> *"At first, we thought the problem was just the coup. But now we see that our system itself is, really really, broken. Federal democracy seems like the only way to ensure we don't end up in the same situation again." (Interview #43)*[80]

This growing convergence is an example of the strategic redefinition of ends that, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue, is the point at which a movement shifts from reactive protest to proactive state-building ambitions[81]. Increasingly, rather than just waving a simple banner of regime change, many now say they want a new politics that is equal, decentralized, and protects the rights of various minorities. As an ex-parliamentarian from the NLD in Yangon stated:

> *"We all want to get Federal Democracy, based on equal rights for everyone including small the forgotten minorities." (Interview#26).*[82]

Described by one interviewee as the dream of *"all the forgotten ethnics and minorities,"* this strategic reframing has expanded the revolution's appeal and deepened its coalition base. It also highlights the importance of movement framing in contentious politics: through enunciating an inclusive vision, the movement opens up a space for a common identity—

78. Burmese Activist, a university student, Bagan, Interview #38.
79. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 147–150.
80. NGO worker at the Borderline, Maesot, Thailand, from Yangon, Interview #43.
81. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 142–145.
82. Burmese NLD ex-parliamentarian, Yangon. Interview #26.

crucial for long-term mobilization. In short, the same shared belief underlies the optimism toward federal democracy among the Burmese interviewees: it is not just institutional reform but rather a new social contract. This new social contract consists of elements to protect ethnic rights, devolve power, and articulate political diversity. Without such structural change, many here fear that Myanmar will remain trapped in a cycle of military dominance, marginalization, and cyclical crisis.

4.4.2 Decolonizing the State: the Struggle Against Bamar Hegemony

For ethnic and resistance political forces, this meant more than political reform, but it also meant the dismantling of deep-rooted Bamar domination. Their demands were about more than inclusion—they were demands for decolonization: removing imposed hierarchical power and cultural erasure at the hands of a central, ethnically majoritarian state[83]. In Myanmar, the meaning is to overcome decades of internal colonialism, where minority areas became subordinate peripheries: militarized, exploited, and left behind in terms of economic and social development.

A young Karen activist shared:

> *"I grew up being told that the government was for all of us, but our people have always been treated as second-class citizens. We want to be equal, not ruled by people who do not understand our struggles. When we talked about democracy before, it was always Bamar leaders talking to each other. Now, finally, people are listening to us. Our language, our land, our rights—they matter just as much. Federal democracy is not a favor to us. It's our right."* (Interview #13)[84]

This statement reflects the concept of identity-based grievances, as described by Tilly and Tarrow (2015), which are central drivers of contention in situations of long-term political and cultural exclusion. [85] For ethnics in Myanmar, federal democracy is not merely decentralization but *reparative autonomy*—a return of agency denied by internal colonization.

Bamar-centric governance under successive regimes systematically excluded non-Bamar communities. Among interviewees, federal democracy emerged as a mechanism not only for equality but also for self-rule—power over land, language, and livelihood. A Mon farmer in a conflict zone spoke:

> *"The economy in Yangon thrives while my village barely has a school. If federal democracy means we get our fair share, then that is what we want. We don't want to*

83.Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). *Decolonization is not a metaphor*. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society, 1*(1), 1–40. https://clas.osu.edu/sites/clas.osu.edu/files/Tuck%20and%20Yang%202012%20Decolonization%20is%20not%20a%20metaphor.pdf
84. Karen Activist, Mawlamyaine, Interview #13.
85. Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2015). *Contentious politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press, p. 143–145.

beg for roads or clinics anymore. We should be able to decide how our resources are used and where our taxes go—it's our home, not a colony of Naypyidaw." (Interview #12)[86]

This highlights Myanmar's territorial inequality**.** When neglect is geographically and ethnically patterned, it becomes fertile ground for autonomy movements. For the Mon farmer, federalism is not abstract—it is materially time-sensitive. Economic inequality was also prevalent in the region. The respondents explained that their regions were systematically disadvantaged with no infrastructure, schools, or opportunities. People saw federalism as a means to rebalance decision-making and resource control.

A commander from a local militia explained:

"We fight because we have no choice. We have been promised autonomy before, but it never happened. This time, we want real guarantees—control over our own land, our own economy, our own destiny. Our ancestors signed peace deals that were ignored. We've seen what happens when we trust without legal protections. That's why this time; we want it written into the constitution—no more handshake promises." (Interview #37)[87]

This statement underscores the credibility crisis ethnic groups face**.** Decolonization now includes institutional safeguards, so rights aren't subject to elite bargains or electoral shifts. It signals a move toward strategic institutionalism—where autonomy is embedded in law.[88] Ethnic respondents view the current crisis as a rare chance for structural transformation**.** The same Mon leader reflected:

"For the first time, even the Bamar people understand what we have felt for decades. This is our chance to build a Myanmar where everyone belongs. The shared suffering has opened many eyes. It is painful, but it's also powerful—because now, we can finally talk about building a future together, instead of being told to wait until after the next peace agreement." (Interview #37)[89]

While skeptical of past reforms, many acknowledged a unique opportunity. This aligns with McAdam et al. (2001)'s "window of political opportunity," where repression backfires and builds new alliances.[90] A cross-cleavage coalition between Bamar urban activists and ethnic minorities is forming—more inclusive than in past transitions. Respondents now insist on

86. Mon Activist, a former farmer, Thaton, Interview #12.
87. Mon Ethnic Leader, Mon State, Interview #37.
88. Tarrow, S. (2011). *Power in movement: Social movements and contentious politics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press, p. 195-198.
89. Mon Ethnic Leader, Mon State, Interview #37.

constitutional guarantees for self-governance, resource control, and cultural rights. They warn that new political systems could reproduce old exclusions without structural reform. In short, ethnic communities and militias see this moment not just as an uprising against dictatorship but as a decolonial rupture—an opportunity to reconstruct Myanmar on the basis of equality, autonomy, and dignity. They would not seek to reintegrate with a ruinous system, but a justice-based plural state.

4.4.3 'Burmanization' as Political Authoritarianism: An Ethnographic Critique from Mae Sot

Despite its frequent invocation in both academic and activist discourse, *Burmanization* often suffers from conceptual inflation—it is used as an all-encompassing term to explain Myanmar's ethnic discontent while eliding its structural specificity. We, me and three others, had gathered casually, almost by accident, in the corner of a small tea shop near the Moei River. They are a young Karen woman (Interview #8)[91]; a middle-ranking Karen soldier (Interview #9)[92], and a Burmese political activist (Interview #2)[93]. He had fled Yangon after the coup, having spent time underground. Drawing on their conversation between a Karen woman, a Karen soldier, and a Burmese activist in Mae Sot, this paper argues that Burmanization does not operate uniformly across Myanmar's societal spectrum. Rather, it functions as a *political exclusion*, selectively enforced in elite power structures while allowing cultural plurality in everyday life.

As the Karen woman remarked during the conversation,

> *"Definitely, there is 'Bamar lumyōgyi warda'. (meaning Burmanization)… A lot of Our Karen villages still don't have electricity. But in Yangon, people complain about Wi-Fi speed, which holiday to choose next… It's not just poverty—it's neglect, design."*

Her observation reflects the perception that state neglect is not merely developmental lag but strategically patterned through an ethnicized geography of state investment. This was reinforced by her critique of Burmanized education since 1962:

> *"They come with Bamar teachers Bamar textbooks; we have to learn Burmese since birth but not our language properly… It's like we're guests in our own land."*

Yet the Burmese activist complicated this narrative, warning against essentialist framings.

> *"There's a narrative that the Bamar people as a whole benefit… but it's not accurate.*

90. McAdam, D., Tarrow, S., & Tilly, C. (2001). *Dynamics of contention*. Cambridge University Press, p. 142–145.
91. Karen Ethnic, Karen State, Interview #8.
92. Karen Ethnic Fighter, Karen State, Interview #9.
93. Burmese ActivistYangon, Interview #2.

We don't. Burmans are suffering too. Rural Burma is suffering too; look at the central dry zone—some are even poorer than most villages in Karen state".

His intervention points to the need to disaggregate ethnic identity from political authority. Burmanization, in this framing, is not an ethnic project of the Bamar people writ large, but a *state-driven modality* of authoritarian consolidation, most acutely realized through the Tatmadaw and centralized ministries.

Indeed, the most compelling insight of this dialogue lies in the recognition of Myanmar's social and cultural heterogeneity. As the activist observed:

"Sule Pagoda stands right beside a mosque and a church… In some ways, Yangon and many of – say – Burman cities show openness to any ethnicity – I believe – it's not exactly hard to feel like a truly multi-ethnic, multi-religious society." He continued his thesis, "Look at the entertainment industry – full of famous ethnic people in films, cinema, music, and literature routinely showcasing Karen, Kachin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan voices. And look at the richest cronies in Myanmar 5 out of 10 are not Burmese at all – they belong to ethnic minorities."

Ethnic identity is *not* systematically erased from the social sphere; on the contrary, it often thrives. This porous cultural coexistence reveals the paradox of the state's project: the presence of ethnic symbols is tolerated, even commodified, until they threaten the apparatus of power.

The line is drawn at institutional authority.

"Sure, you can become famous as a Karen singer," the Karen woman noted, "but try becoming a regional chief minister or commander in chief in the army." The soldier added, "They gave ethnic parties some seats… but not real power."

In this structure, Burmanization is not simply cultural imposition—it is the bureaucratic, military, and ideological architecture that narrows leadership to one ethnic-linguistic formation.

This conversation illustrates the layered nature of Burmanization:

1. **Socially**, it is diffuse and inconsistent—urban centers like Yangon and almost all areas throughout the country reflect multiethnic coexistence and representation in arts and commerce.
2. **Culturally & Educationally**, it allows visibility but imposes linguistic and curricular hierarchies. Burmese as the national language for the entire country.

3. **Politically**, it becomes exclusionary, permitting participation but denying authority.
4. **Militarily**, it is hegemonic—command is inseparable from ethnic identity.

As the activist conceded,

> *"I didn't realize the weight of my own language (hegemony) until I saw guys like you…. That is true that we can never see ourselves… That's sad".*

And the soldier quietly added:

> *"You don't have to shoot people to erase them. Just teach them to hate their own tongue."*

Thus, Burmanization is not a cultural monolith—it is a stratified political regime. Its most pernicious form lies not in social life, but in who is chosen to govern, command, and define the future of the state. The ethnic groups are allowed to take part almost always, but sharing real power is obstructed systematically. Even under nominally democratic forces, like the National League for Democracy, key ministries and security portfolios were almost exclusively held by Bamar officials. Electoral politics has provided symbolic access—ethnic parties forming according to the central's guidelines—but never unfettered structural power. Political Burmanization should therefore be seen as not only a symptom of ethnic misbalance but also as a means of strengthening a vertical structure of state legitimacy based on mono-ethnic dominance.

This exclusivity becomes absolute within the military apparatus. In the armed forces, Burmanization manifests not as policy but as ontology: to command is to be Bamar or to have sufficiently effaced one's difference. The refusal to recognize ethnic languages, traditions, or leadership in the army, combined with informal but invincible cultural taboos against invoking ethnic identity, puts the military as the terminal frontier of Burmanization—where power is not only exercised, but also stripped to purity. In the end, the issue in the Mae Sot conversation is not about replication or whether Burmanization exists, but rather where we locate it and what it leads to.

The participants reach no full consensus, but together they expose its uneven terrain. While society remains plural, politics demands sameness; while culture is porous, command is tightly bounded. The state tolerates diversity in appearance, on paper, but consolidates authority through enforced homogeneity. Burmanization, then, is not merely the extension of Bamar identity but the projection of a political order in which plurality is permitted only at the margins and denied where it matters most.

4.4.4 The Federal Dream and the Path Forward

As observed from the emerging theme of this empirical analysis, Myanmar's crisis has paradoxically united its people under a common political aspiration: federal democracy. Even with differing experiences and motivations, all groups reached the same conclusion: federal democracy is the only viable solution. Federalism, once feared as a separatist agenda, now serves as a unifying framework to reconcile long-standing ethnic divisions.

In all my interviews, conducted on both sides of ethnic and political divides, the conclusion was the same: Myanmar needed to be a federal union. Regardless of whether the issue was autonomy, cultural identity, or inequality, the participants concurred—democracy needs to be inclusive, rights-respecting, and resource-sharing. Dialogue and coalition-building must now focus on expectation alignment and a clear roadmap**.** Inclusive, participatory governance is vital if the goal of federal democracy is to address ethnic rights, economic justice, and political autonomy.

Nevertheless, the means to achieve this vision remain uncertain due to deep-rooted trust issues, which I address in the following chapters. While federalism marks a major ideological shift in national politics, the critical gaps lie between expectation, strategy, and trust—obstacles to turning shared aspirations into political reality.

Findings and Discussion

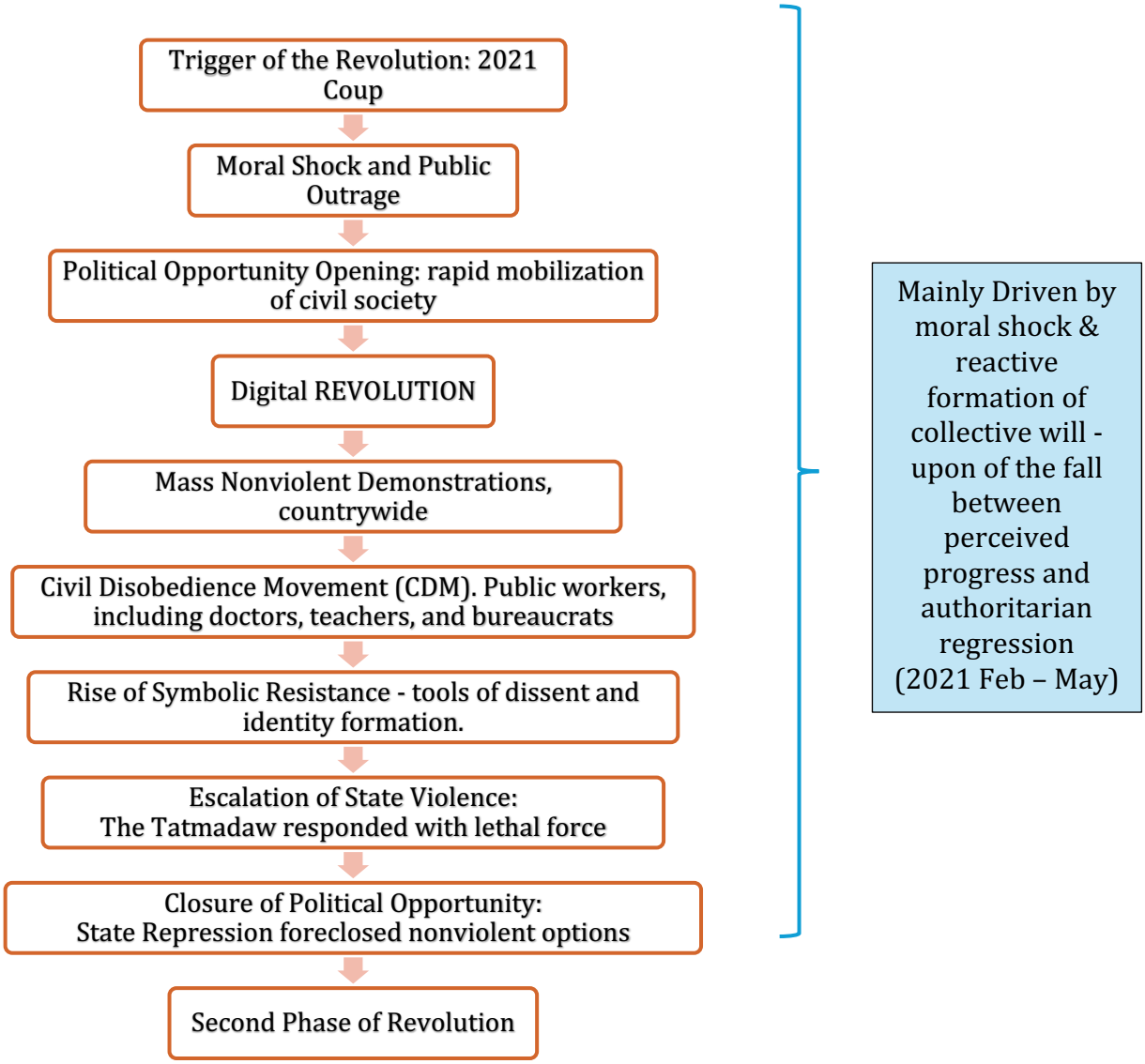
The 2021 Spring Revolution, which began with a military coup, has evolved into a full-blown confrontation with Myanmar's long-established political order. Symbolic defiance quickly turned into a civil war—an example of how movements mutate under repression. With nonviolent pathways blocked, the movement drew on collective self-defense and psychological resilience. This shift reveals the revolution's potential to fundamentally alter the state structure. Its progression offers key insights into civil resistance, defiance, and armed struggle under authoritarianism. The fall of Myanmar's quasi-democracy reawakened long-standing struggles. To many, the coup represented more than just political theft but a reversal of hard-fought economic and social progress. A shared sense of pervasive betrayal stirred an anger that cut across both ethnicity and class. The military-imposed 2008 Constitution further codified structural oppression, and the coup exacerbated it: this only deepened grievances and legitimized resistance.

Transformation of Public Sentiment: The public's shift in perception and evolution of the revolution illustrated in the phase 1 diagram 2 of Myanmar's 2021 revolution above marked a turning point**.** Initial shock turned into determination and moral urgency. As repression escalated, fear transformed into a sense that resistance was not optional but

essential. The military's brutality solidified its image as an existential threat. The revolution articulated mass grievances through slogans and symbols, dissolving demographic and ethnic divides. This collective identity reinforced resistance, giving the movement a unifying moral clarity.

Diagram 4. 2. Evolution of Myanmar's 2021 Revolution

Phase 1. Initial Response



From Nonviolent Protest to Armed Revolution**:** This phase illustrates how repression can escalate resistance**.** The revolution's shift from peaceful protest to armed struggle was driven by "political opportunity closure"—when lethal violence against unarmed civilians forecloses nonviolent options. Beginning with the Civil Disobedience Movement and symbolic acts, the uprising radicalized as youth and others recognized that meaningful

change required confronting the military directly. Repression not only galvanized defiance and turned it into armed resistance but also forced strategic shifts in movement tactics, strategy, and ideology, as shown in diagram 3 of Phase 2 below.

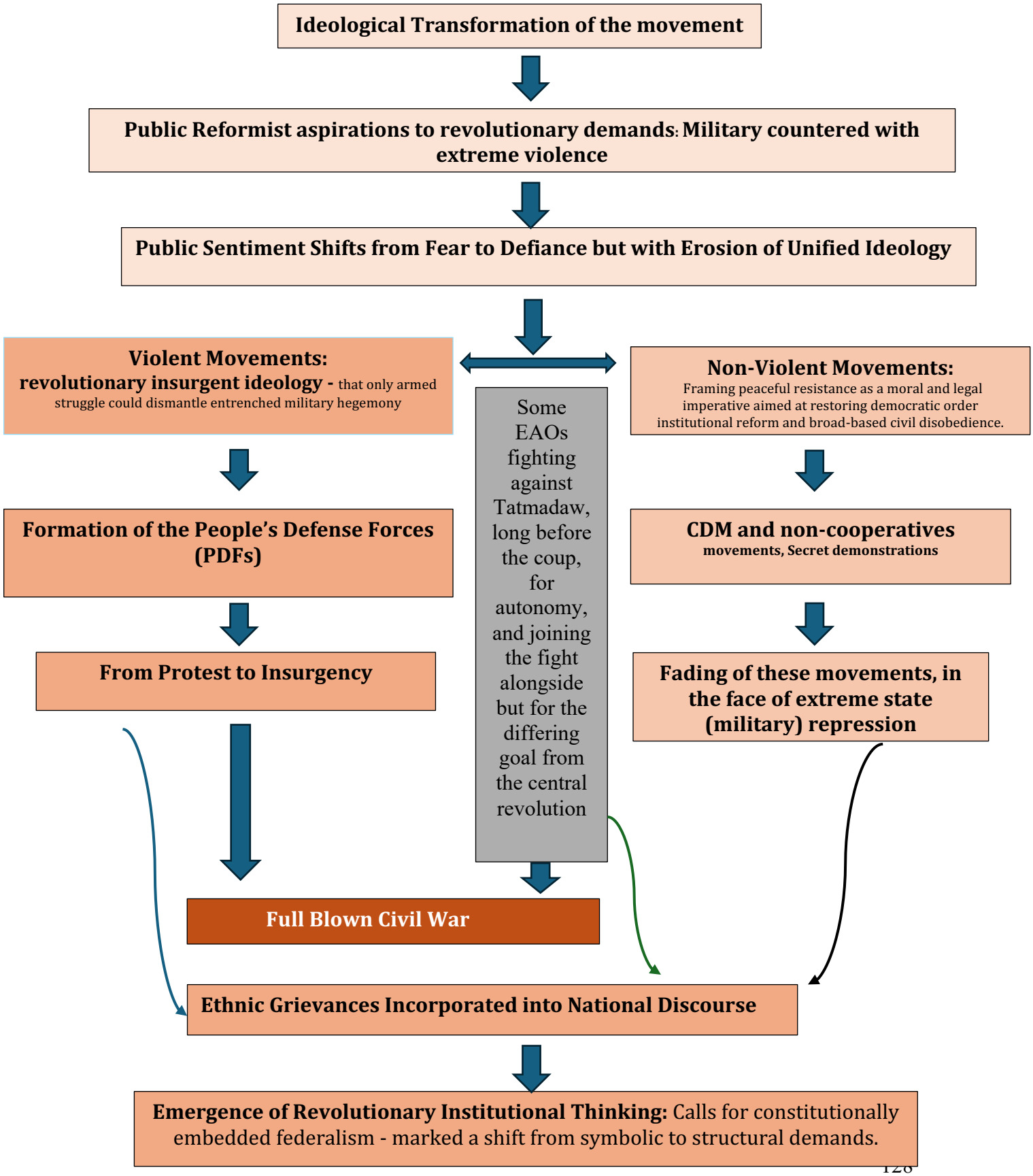
Broader Political Goals: Over time, the goals expanded—from reversing the coup to dismantling military control altogether. The movement began to demand a structural change with the vision of establishing a federal democratic system to address the historical injustice of marginalized communities. This shift marks a departure from previous movements that attempted to reverse the coup and return to the pre-coup status quo. Now, the priority is to create a new order that favors inclusion and power-sharing.

Toward an Inclusive Federal Future: Federalism and inclusivity are now central to the movement's identity. The revolution grew in strength and credibility by absorbing the demands of communities that had been historically marginalized. The movement has shifted from a reactive protest to a proactive insistence on justice, refashioning resistance in Myanmar. This expansion of goals is typical of maturing movements**.** As alliances broaden, so do aspirations. The revolution now serves as a platform for systemic change, far beyond mere ethnic redress. Yet, sustaining this vision will require cohesion across its diverse factions and overcoming major material constraints.

Key Barriers to the Federal Dream: Key obstacles to making the federal dream a reality are the absence of a common strategic vision, different expectations, and an ongoing trust deficit. While there is broad consensus on the need for federalism, there is no unified strategy on how to achieve it. A number of actors express a pro-international orientation for intervention, while others push for the necessity of building from within and from below. There are also widely varying expectations: many among the Bamar majority see federalism as a route to national integrity and economic development, while many minorities see it as a necessity to unravel entrenched centralized authority. This misinterpretational gap adds to and, in itself, contributes to a wider issue of trust. After decades of disappointment with false peace deals, ethnic groups have become deeply suspicious of all power-sharing formulas, which raises questions about the sincerity and viability of federal arrangements under the current political order.

A Historic Opportunity: Myanmar's 2021 revolution represents a historic rupture. By unifying diverse voices, confronting systemic violence, and demanding inclusivity, it redefines national resistance. It is a statement on how resistance, repression, and radicalization interplay in authoritarian states. As of 2024, it has evolved into civil war, with implications for social movement theory and conflict studies. The outcome will shape Myanmar's with implications for social movement theory and conflict studies.

Diagram 4.3. Phase 2. Revolution turned into armed struggle



The outcome will shape Myanmar's future—and global discussions on civil resistance. Adaptability, endurance, and unity will determine the revolution's fate. Although uncertain, the movement continues—an emblem of hope and a reminder of the cost of defiance under repression. As Myanmar's largest uprising, its legacy will resonate globally as a testament to the pursuit of justice and dignity.

Violence, Escalation, and the Logic of Retaliation: A major drawback often overlooked is the spiral of retaliatory violence. Assassinations and executions have created a brutal feedback loop. Targeting military affiliates marks a strategic shift into zero-sum logic—common in protracted conflicts. Contentious politics theory highlights how such cycles harden divisions, complicating resolution while deepening resolve.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the emergence and evolution of Myanmar's post-coup resistance, mainly based on the literature on contentious politics, with evidence from interviews, ethnographic field notes, and participant observations. Findings reveal that the 2021 uprising was also not an ad hoc or temporary wave of uprising but a collectively embedded, long-term reaction to a rupture in political expectations and legitimacy. Mobilization was triggered by more than just material grievances but by moral outrage and visceral shock—particularly among the young and a politicized segment of the urban population. These betrayals, especially in the wake of the military coup after the 2020 election results, instantiated identity and historical trauma that reignited both reformist and revolutionary currents of resistance.

Empirically, the chapter demonstrates how different types of actors strategically adapted to varied political opportunity structures—from nonviolent civil disobedience to decentralized armed struggle—and, at the same time, expanded the repertoire of contention. These results contribute to and broaden the literature by providing evidence that repressive environments, rather than universally suppressing dissent, could ignite reactions to repression in unanticipated and contradictory ways. Applying Tilly and Tarrow's framework, the case of Myanmar is an example of how moral outrage, disrupted legitimacy, and tactical innovation can combine to give rise to transforming, not merely oppositional, movements. One of the main findings of this chapter might be the emergence of, in particular, the articulation of a future-oriented, pluralistic federal vision from every actor, that defines the significant move away from elite-driven transitional politics to a ground-up, postcolonial state reimagining.

The chapter's contribution lies in bringing theoretical insights on contentious politics with the lived and narrated experience of a people in revolt. By foregrounding the micro-

dynamics of mobilization and weaving them through analytical frameworks, the chapter contributes to situating the mechanisms of mobilization from below, how it emerges how it turned into armed revolution under such authoritarian repression. Moreover, it challenges most structural analyzes of the Myanmar crisis, which tend to oversimplify recent upsurge as an armed revolt or as a "failed" democratic transition, and, instead, it invites scholars to recognize the epistemic and political labor unfolding within the resistance itself. Thus, this chapter speaks to wider discussions around revolutionary subjectivities, the elasticity of repertoires under duress, and the role of framing in maintaining hope in violent circumstances.

To fully grasp the revolution's trajectory, different dimensional perspectives are essential**.** First, from within the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM): How do resisters rationalize continued defiance amid fragmentation and violence? Chapter 5 addresses these internal strategies, dilemmas, and resilience practices of Myanmar's forgotten Civil Disobedience Movement—revealing the revolution's adaptive core. Second, from Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs): These actors are not just combatants—they shape federalism's future. Chapter 6 contrasts their public rhetoric to extract their visions of self-government, alliance, and institution. Combined, they fill a much-needed gap in Myanmar studies, linking the bottom-up resistance and the top-down negotiation. This dual lens illuminates how the revolution combines grassroots energy with insurgent statecraft.

Chapter 5

Understanding the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar

Introduction

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) arose as a crucial part of Myanmar's social movement against the military coup in 2021. Yet participation in this movement comes at an extraordinary cost. This narrative analysis follows a teacher and a medical doctor, who are Bamar ethnic people who have actively participated in the CDM despite the danger and adversaries that followed them. It explores their lives, naked struggles, smoldering anger, and abiding fears. To merely describe their suffering would be insufficient; they are two out of millions caught in Myanmar's turmoil, yet these are experiences uniquely their own.

The CDM teacher, who is now a fugitive from the military government, lost her husband—a middle-level resistance forces leader—in the movement. Currently, she works in a low-paid job at a restaurant in Mae Sot, a town in Thailand, and lives in a refugee camp across the border. The CDM doctor, meanwhile, operates a small clinic in the forested areas of Karen State. As his clinic grew and became a vital resource for resistance fighters and local communities, it was targeted and bombed twice by fighter jets. After enduring the destruction of his clinic a third time, he has once again managed to rebuild it, continuing to serve those in desperate need. This account attempts to faithfully honor their voices, using the narrative interview method, to bring their experiences to life. Their stories, which were originally in Burmese, have been translated into English and put into first-person narrative form to create a stronger connection to the experiences described. Through their eyes and perceptions, we deepen our understanding of Myanmar's CDM—its sacrifices, resilience, and humanity.

By employing the ethnographic narrative interview method, researchers are normally able to build on common sense within scientific inquiry to identify broader social phenomena through the life stories of individuals. Each narrative reflects the complexity of social realities, and through narrative analysis, one can explore the interplay between individual experiences and broader social contexts. Fischer-Rosenthal emphasizes that this method illuminates the structures of social life through the depth of individual narratives, offering a unique perspective on societal interactions.[1] This method is rooted in the Chicago School's

1.. Fischer-Rosenthal, W. (1999). *Narrative biographical interviews: Methodological reflections.* In A. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, & T. Wengraf (Eds.), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (pp. 98–109). London: Routledge.

tradition of symbolic interactionism, as first articulated by Mead, where meaning emerges through communication and social interaction.[2] The process of narration, whether through life stories or interviews, support both self-understanding and the comprehension of broader social frameworks. The principles guiding the narratives are universally applicable, serving as a structured means to interpret and as a confined direction of relating their or others' singular or collective experience.

The subfield of symbolic interactionism emphasizes that humans interact based upon symbols—i.e., words, gestures, objects, and other forms of communication that have certain meanings attached to them. Such as the term "teacher" in the Burmese language, which takes on layered meanings through a social process. The term *Sayar* (meaning "teacher") conveys profound respect, rooted in cultural and societal norms. Through interactions, individuals negotiate, reinforce, and reshape these meanings, allowing symbols to reflect evolving social contexts and personal experiences.

In the story of the CDM teacher and CDM doctor, symbols are pivotal in how they make sense of their experiences and convey that sense-making to others. Words such as "resistance," "freedom," and "sacrifice" are not just some abstract concepts, borrowed words, emptied of life, but endowed with personal meanings and shared meanings that are shaped by their own participation and lived life experiences in the Civil Disobedience Movement and their interactions with others who share similar experiences. Narrating their story is a way in which to interpret these symbols in terms of the broader social movement of which they are at the core. In their narrative, the CDM teacher narrates in self-reflective thinking about how her actions, decisions, and the events she has lived through contributed to her identity; the CDM doctor also reflected on his life stories. This reflective process is a form of "role-taking." This is important because such symbolic interactionism focuses on the way we understand others through common symbols and meanings.

My first observation is that such interaction is no simple transmission of information; it is the negotiation of meanings and perspectives. Through the symbolic and meaningful language that the CDM teacher employs, also reflecting others in the CDM, related academia, or wider implications in different movement concepts, one can grasp the CDM teacher's experience. This process of mutual interpretation is essential in social movements, where people need to collectively identify common goals, obstacles, and methods to take social action. By highlighting her experiences, the teacher's narrative helps to shape the collective identity of the CDM movement. She is further alluding to her own story, which serves to create a sense of solidarity by emphasizing the collective struggles and promoting mutual values. The story elicits empathy from the listener or

2. Mead, G. H. (1934/1968). *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 22.

reader, encourages them to put themselves in the position of the teacher, and helps them understand the human and mental aspects of her experiences. As I listen to her articulate despair, which creates a vast, fertile ground of understanding for her personal narrative as well as for that of many others who became embroiled in the movement.

5.1 Moral Identity, and Resistance under Repression: a CDM Teacher's Story

The narrative provided by the CDM teacher[3] offers profound insights and provides unique reflections on social movement dynamics in periods of extreme repression. The particular CDM teacher's story is essential to understanding the complexities of individual and collective experiences against the background of social and political change. It is a story not just of individual suffering but of the broader struggle for liberty against an oppressive regime. Following her story, I have learned insights into the philosophical underpinnings of a lived experience as a method of both individual self-expression and collective identity formation. These details serve as a gentle reminder to individuals like me that this is merely one personal account; however, it is an important one because it embodies both the individual and collective dimensions of resistance. This narrative is analyzed with an empirical perspective on contentious politics to unpack the different but interrelated political, social, and psychological obstacles faced by actors in the CDM struggle.

Like the other CDM actors, her designation became a "fugitive," a hunted one, a criminal in the eyes of the authoritarian state rather than a teacher because she simply refused to work under their rule. After fleeing to the border town of Mae Sot, Thailand, grabbing her own son's hand, the teacher was met with a stark reality: survival as refugees was an almost insurmountable challenge. Deprived of legal status, employment prospects, and security, she encountered constant hurdles. By maintaining herself as a teacher and mother, she asserted her right to exist against the forces conspiring to erase her. Her story, though, also testifies to the lasting strength of those whose hopes have been uprooted, whose people have suffered the sting of persecution—and still stand for justice and community. It also underscores the complicated relationship between individual identity and collective intervention as her identity as a teacher, mother, and CDM participant becomes intertwined with her acts of resistance. And in her tale, we perceive not only the devastation of war but also the unbreakable spirit maintained by those who will not let their lives and their futures be written by violence alone. She mentioned that

> *"It's been a constant struggle. We made it to Mae Sot, but just barely... Sometimes I go without food so that my son can have something to eat."*

3. Burmese CDM teacher, Yangon. Interview #3.

It also reflects the emphasis on individual sense-making, mirroring the understanding that movements are also cultural phenomena rather than strictly political ones. These acts gain significance that transcends practical value—they become part of her involvement in the social movement that reaffirms her agency and humanity in a situation that strips her of normalcy and control. When she looked for a job, she found that

> *"It was a humbling experience... I had no documents—nothing legal to stay here in Thailand. My broker had suggested I lie... but I couldn't do that. I've always taught my students to value the truth."*

The job interview becomes a site of negotiation for the teacher's identity.

Her refusal to lie about her illegal status without documents is due to her belief in the value she associates with her role as a teacher and a participant in the CDM movement. This activity cements her identity, even in such a place where her continuation is based on negating it. It is the structural constraints faced by most CDM participants in exile. Her illegal status as a result of the larger political climate hinders her ability to gain resources. However, her fidelity to truth is consistent with the symbolic dimensions of social movements: maintaining ethical ideals intersects with ethical codes like truth-telling as part of the resistance.

She recounted her past,

> *"I was a teacher at a well-known public school in Yangon. Teaching wasn't just a job for me; it was my passion... My husband and I met at a teachers' union meeting. We built a life together, modest but full of hope."*

The reverie about her pre-coup life indicates the extreme contrast between her former existence and her current situation. Her identity as a teacher and union member is as a powerful, participating force in her community. The roles were not only professional but also symbolic of her engagement and identity in a struggle for social change, based on ideas of education and solidarity. This identity continues to shape her interpretation of her current struggles, reinforcing her commitment to the principles of the CDM movement even in exile.

She reflected on her own experiences that

> *"It was a nightmare. The military thought they could silence us, but they underestimated our determination. The CDM movement spread quickly. My husband became a leader in the daily marches, and we both fully committed to the CDM. But then the military started shooting at us, and things got really bad. My husband went into the forest to train with ethnic militias... He became a unit commander, and I was*

so proud of him. But then I got the news one day that he had been killed while saving his comrades. He died a hero, but all I wanted was to have him back."

This paragraph highlights the teacher's process of assigning meaning to her husband's role and sacrifice within the CDM movement. Symbols like "daily marches" and "unit commander" are elements of larger acts of defiance against oppression, given meaning through the collective story of resistance. The CDM organization was one of the earliest examples of mass mobilization in contentious theory[4] and rapidly became popular among civil servants and citizens who believed that collective action offered a mechanism to overthrow the military junta. The movement's shift from public protest to armed resistance that her husband represents parallels the development of the movement from nonviolent dissent to armed struggle. This transition highlights the limitations of nonviolent strategies when faced with a regime that responds with unrestrained brutality in an oppressive political context that shapes the strategies of social movements. In retrospect, she analyzed the movement from her own perspective (which is very different from the overwhelming analysis and writings in the news about CMD in Myanmar).

"In the beginning, the CDM movement almost brought the military to its knees. I mean, it's not comparable – the background of CDM (the context). But unlike Gandhi's non-violent resistance in India, we faced a military that was brutal and unyielding... CDM participants had to flee their homes and families, seeking safety in IDP camps. We are labeled as fugitives. We were all trying to survive in any way we could, financially and physically but how long or how far can we go on given the circumstances – I don't know – I really don't know."

The teacher compares Myanmar's CDM movement to Gandhi's nonviolent resistance, putting into perspective the unique symbolic and material challenges facing participants in Myanmar. Moving herself to IDP camps represents a kind of physical displacement. The camps represent survival and fragility, while the repression underscores the military's intent to destroy both the movement's momentum and its participants' spirits.The movement's success was there in the beginning, but as time dragged on**,** the movement's trajectory could be analyzed, highlighting the depletion of both material and human resources as CDM participants were forced to flee or hide. The movement's initial success underscores the importance of collective solidarity, while its later plight reflects the overwhelming imbalance of power in the face of the relentlessness of the Tatmadaw's military apparatus. Increasing repression led to fragmentation and a transition from collective resistance to individual survival strategies. When describing the impact of movement on their own personal life, she said,

4. Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. pp. 69–102.

"What was once a strong movement is now struggling just to survive... This isn't a story of victory. Our world has fallen apart, families are broken, and fear is always with us. Reality is that we have no back up, no supporters. And we are forgotten. We try to hold onto hope, even though it feels fragile."

Symbols like "daily marches" and "unit commander" are elements of larger acts of defiance against oppression, given meaning through the collective story of resistance. The CDM organization was one of the earliest examples of mass mobilization in contentious theory4 and rapidly became popular among civil servants and citizens who believed that collective action offered a mechanism to overthrow the military junta. The movement's shift from public protest to armed resistance that her husband represents parallels the development of the movement from nonviolent dissent to armed struggle.

This reflection demonstrates how participants reconstruct the concept of resistance in the moments of deep loss and suffering. As the movement started out with an empowering, hopeful energy, the current landscape of survival and fragmentation has recast resistance as simply staying alive. The continued trembling and brokenness indicate the psychological price for repression but also the fragility of hope, reminding us of the durability of symbolic meanings associated with the movement's values. By one measure, the fight of this CDM reflects how social movements can be about more than just achieving political victories but can involve the preservation of cultural and moral norms. Even in its weakened condition, the contentious movement represents a struggle for justice and dignity that hangs on through the sacrifices and endurance of its participants. This is consistent with the notion that social movements endure not only through resources but also through shared meanings and moral commitments, and it's a hard one when it becomes protracted.

She remembered how she had to flee normal life.

"My troubles didn't end with my husband's death. One day, the military's TV channel, Myawaddy, broadcasted my name, labeling me a CDM teacher and a fugitive. That's when the hunt for me started. I quickly packed our things, grabbed my son's hand, and we slipped away in the middle of the night... Every moment felt like we were on the edge of danger."

Reporting her name and labelling her a "fugitive" changes her status from a teacher to a criminal in the eyes of the state. The flight towards safety is one laden with fear and determination where she constantly renegotiates her survival and resistance to protect her son and her principles. This fleeing under compulsion symbolizes the suppression and resistance in a movement, in which the power controls employ fear and force to break down resistance. Her flight is an act of rebellion against this repression, safeguarding the CDM's emblematic spirit of defiance even as its protagonists are dispersed. This journey

also reflects the fragmentation of the movement, as participants are forced to prioritize individual survival over collective action, a common consequence of intense state repression

The makeshift refugee camp captures the reality of stability and dignity lost, a representation of the broken lives of Myanmar's hundreds of thousands of members of the CDM. But the absence of long-term solutions – such as asylum in another country – demonstrates the limited capacity of international backing to tackle systemic problems. Her quest for a better future for her son exemplifies a reordering of priorities away from direct resistance toward survival and recovery in ways that illustrate how individual and collective aspirations can diverge under long-term repression.

When she was asked about the future,

> *"As I go about my daily tasks, I always dream of a future where Myanmar is at peace, where all the different ethnic groups can live together and thrive. As I see a lot of Karen and other minority refugees here in Thailand, I understand, how inhumane this kind of life it is for them, for decades suppressed by Myanmar military and… My heart aches for the opportunities my son's missing, for the childhood that's slipping away because of our hardships, just like it's happening to so many other children in Myanmar."*

The teacher's vision of a peaceful Myanmar represents a collective dream among CDM participants and refugees. Her hope for a "federal democracy" and coexistence of ethnic groups represents a symbolic rejection of the military's divisive and authoritarian rule. For her, this envisioned future is not simply a political objective but also a personal hope, wrapped up in her son's well-being. Imagining her son in a school without the burdens of war is about wanting a return to normalcy and stability for the coming generation. Her "aching heart" carries personal loss but evokes the collective grief of a displaced community, linking private heartbreak with the shared pain of others. Her high hopes emphasize the utility of cultural and moral values—like justice, equality, and peace—as central to social movements. The federal democracy she imagines is not just political change in the immediate sense but something more like a long-term cultural shift that reconstitutes Myanmar's structure of community. The teacher's acknowledgement of lost opportunities for her son and other children in the period of revolution testifies to the intergenerational burden of conflict. This resonates with how prolonged instability creates social and emotional fractures that ripple through families and communities.

She also expressed that

"So many people from Myanmar, now living in foreign lands that don't welcome us, just want to go home... Right now, the war continues, and there's no clear end in sight. Returning to our beloved homeland remains just a distant dream."

The yearning for the home embodies a complex symbolic tie to a feeling of identity and belonging. Home for the teacher is not just a physical space but a repository of memories, relationships, and cultural connections that make her who she is. The juxtaposition of home with displacement captures the loss of home experienced by refugees, where home becomes a dream yet a source of trauma. The teacher's reflection captures the existential uncertainty of her predicament: the possibility of going home feels simultaneously tantalizingly close and infinitely far away. Her reflection also illustrates the continued instability in Myanmar, and the lack of resolution to the conflict exacerbates the challenges of sustaining resistance and hope. The teacher's acknowledgment of home as a "distant dream" underscores the psychological toll of prolonged displacement and repression, a reality that impacts the cohesion and morale of the movement.

5.2 A Story of CDM Medical Professionals in Myanmar's Contentious Struggle

This account is drawn from an interview with a remarkable and busy CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement) doctor[5] who continues to operate a free of charge medical clinic at the Thailand-Myanmar border, deep within the forest. His clinic provides care not only to locals but also to resistance fighters fighting the junta. This doctor survived, rebuilt, and held his ground—even after the Myanmar military bombed two of his makeshift clinics in separate bombings and then leveled another, all in the past two years—to keep his care for those who would otherwise have no access to it. He even trained some nurses along the way. He sees almost 40 patients a day, free of charge.

These patients come from all walks of life—local villagers displaced by violence, injured resistance fighters needing urgent medical attention, and others with little hope of accessing healthcare in the war-torn regions of Myanmar. His clinic is sustained entirely by the generosity of local people, who contribute what little they can to support his work. The junta's bombings of his clinic are a clear reminder of the risks faced by those who defy an oppressive military regime. He has been one of the few to keep on going in the face of such hostility, and his continued operation reflects not only personal resilience but also the spirit of collective defiance that sustains the resistance movement.

This doctor's story is one of remarkable courage, sacrifice, and dedication. His work embodies

5.. Burmese CDM doctor, Yangon. Interview #11.

the spirit of the CDM: that even amid relentless violence and oppression, individuals can stand up and do something meaningful. When asked how he became involved with the CDM he said,

> *"I am a medical doctor, graduated from Mandalay Medical University, with a master's degree in clinical practice from the UK. Like many others in Myanmar, I joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) to stand against the oppressive military. We were determined to paralyze their administration, so we organized demonstrations and, as medical professionals, made the difficult decision to shut down all medical care units. This action had a profound impact—the country was almost paralyzed—but we believed it was necessary to resist the junta."*

The speaker begins by presenting himself as a doctor—a status that he's worked hard for and which speaks of a relationship of trust between the profession and society. Using his own professional identity, similar to thousands of other workers, he also redefines himself from healer to disruptor as he questions the legitimacy of General Min Aung Hlaing and his administration.

The phrase, *"We decided to close all the medical care units,"* underscores the deliberate nature of this act. Closing hospitals and clinics disrupts not just the immediate provision of healthcare but also the broader societal order, symbolizing the collapse of normalcy under the junta's regime. In the beginning of this movement, almost 90% of medical care services ceased to exist, according to him.

The medical profession—traditionally seen as apolitical—translates into a vital asset in the struggle against the military junta. Within the CDM movement, the choice to cripple healthcare is an example of the strategic use of professional expertise to pressurize the regime; it showcases how expert knowledge, and social trust can be weaponized for collective action. The near paralysis of the country is a strong reminder of the power civil servants wield when they move in unison. He uttered his disappointment for the military and its brutality.

> *"But the military was not caring about people—for sure—because they continued anyway— even when - the widespread disruption caused by our protests and the closure of essential services, they pressed on with their brutal agenda. Eventually, they declared all medical doctors participating in the CDM as fugitives. Being a well-known doctor in northern Mandalay, I became a target. I was forced to flee for my life. It's a weird thing to say, but at times like this I was thankful that my wife had died a couple of years before this nonsense coup had taken control of our lives—at least she hadn't seen the world go bonkers all around her."*

This expression of the military's disdain for the populace reflects a wider disenchantment among professionals who had constituted a stable element in society. Describing them as "fugitives" changes their status from respected individuals in the community to targets of state repression. The term "fugitive" carries a powerful symbolic weight, stripping him of his professional legitimacy in the eyes of the state while reinforcing his moral commitment to resistance. His reflection on their late wife— "she did not have to see all the crumbling world around us"—underscores the profound sense of loss and collapse, both personal and societal, that fuels his actions. These unbearable contradictions of living under military rule force individuals like him into exile and resistance. The reclassification of CDM doctors as fugitives also exemplifies political process theory, where the state's coercive measures create new contexts for resistance. Rather than suppressing dissent, this act pushes the speaker further into the movement, aligning them with resistance fighters and strengthening their resolve to contribute[6] to the CDM. When he arrived at the borderline of Thailand after fleeing from the Junta when he became a fugitive, he described,

> *"So I connected first with KNU and NUG from this region—I started my small clinics for the fighters and for emergency. Through them, I connected with resistance fighters and began using my skills to serve the cause in a different way. At first to provide care for injured fighters and to address medical emergencies and of course for the local people in the region. It's free of charge. And I see around 30 to 40 patients a day. It was my way of continuing to contribute to the CDM and resistance against the military coup, even as everything around me seemed to crumble".*

The speaker's connection with the Karen National Union (KNU) and the National Unity Government (NUG) was a shift from individual survival to collective action. Building clinics for resistance, villagers, and emergencies shifts the speaker's professional medical knowledge as a form of resistance. These clinics are not simply healthcare facilities but symbols of resistance and defiance to the junta—sites that blur the line between survival and the structure of resistance. At a time when fighters and the region itself were starved of critical healthcare, his health clinic was an asset to the movement, showing how professional knowledge can be repurposed to bend and support the wider aims of the CDM. The doctor is still the doctor, a role intrinsic to the man, yet redefined in the case of the movement, marking yet again how cultural and professional capital is turned around to challenge authoritarian structures.

His clinic was bombed three times, he remembers,

> *"I was so shocked when my clinic was bombed for the first time. I lost several patients*

6.. McAdam, Doug. Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970. University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp 45-67.

in that attack, I could not sleep for many nights because of that and much of the medical equipment I relied on was destroye. They were incredibly difficult and expensive to replace. That day was one of the darkest of my life."

This incident is the overt act of state violence that aims to extinguish the scaffolding of dissent. The bombing of the clinic is an attack on the symbolic and material basis of the entire resistance, not factoring in the humanity. Clinics, the sort of places people go for healing and protection, become places of violence and vulnerability, a reflection of the junta's ruthless indifference to humanitarian norms. The dead and the destroyed equipment add to his grief and frustration, reminding him of their work's fragility and precariousness. His astonishment at the bombing also speaks to a changing view of their role in the movement. Although his original intent was to provide care, the continued assaults on their clinic leave them with little choice but to face the dual reality of being a healer and a target. It's this duality that highlights the moral and emotional cost of their resistance. At the same time, the loss of his medical equipment underscores the movement's difficulty of replenishing crucial supplies in a context of scarcity. Nevertheless, his continued persistence shows the tenacity of social movements in which multiple blows fail to sap the will of the combatants.

He continued saying that,

" But I kept going, even after my clinic was bombed not just once, but three times. But somehow, I have managed to survive every attack, and my clinic is now a very well-known one in the area. I am thankful that I am able to remain on as a presence among the people here, particularly for those who otherwise have no possibility of receiving medical care."

His continuing existence and the thriving reputation of their clinic are a testament to the resilience and adaptability of local resistance. The clinic serves as a beacon of hope and defiance in the region, offering critical services to a population abandoned by the state. The proud statement of service as symbiotic collaboration encapsulates a reclamation of agency and purpose wherein the speaker's professional identity is redefined in terms of resistance and solidarity. The phrase "Honestly, I am very happy that I can do something for the people of the region" shows the speaker's identification with the populace of the region. This connection strengthens the symbolic weapon of the clinic as a space of care, resistance, and collective identity despite having very little available resources instrumentalized in order to support the movement.

When asked about his goal, this busy doctor said,

"My goal? – um – it's clear. It is to witness a federal union in Myanmar—a system in which all ethnic groups can coexist in peace and equality, with no military dictatorship repression. This makes me alive, and I will contribute as much as I can, wherever I am, this work might look tiny in the big picture, but it matters, and I do care about sharing it—it's a form of a fight for a better, freer Myanmar."

His statement, like those of the CDM teachers and other activists who I interviewed, reflects their unwavering commitment to the broader goals of the CDM movement. The aspiration for a federal union symbolizes a rejection of the junta's centralized and authoritarian rule, replacing it with a vision of inclusivity and self-determination. By emphasizing his willingness to contribute "from whichever corner," the speaker reaffirms the importance of individual actions within the collective struggle, reinforcing the interconnectedness of personal agency and collective goals. By framing his work within the larger goal of a federal union, the speaker situates his personal sacrifices within the collective aspirations of the CDM, emphasizing the interconnected nature of individual and collective resistance.

Findings and Discussion

The narratives of the displaced CDM teacher and daring CDM doctor provide a microcosmic glimpse of the greater dynamics of the CDM and contentious politics in Myanmar. The categories such as displacement and oppression, resilience and survival, and longing and hope capture the multilayered aspects of resistance within extreme circumstances. As shown in diagram 1, these messages emphasize how a repertoire of contention and nonviolent civil disobedience movement is formed and how collective political struggle and individual survival efforts are intertwined with each other in the broader collective resistance against authoritarianism.

The teacher's narrative also points to the importance of elevating the voices that are frequently made invisible within discussions of social movements. While the literature tends to accord more attention to studies of leaders and organized groups, the movement's structural dynamic and the daily lives of average people, especially those subjected to repression or forced expulsion, are critical for understanding the lived realities of resistance. CDM is creating an identity of a collective across ethnic lines, wiping out the military's ethnic divide narrative. That inclusiveness not only increases the moral authority of the movement but also plants the seeds for a pluralistic Myanmar. The CDM's broad-based participation counters the regime's portrayal of it as fragmented or ethnically motivated. Instead, it reveals a shared struggle for dignity across ethnic and religious lines.

Beyond identity, the CDM's transformation also reflects a political learning curve borne out of harsh reality. Nonviolent resistance was still initially effective—civil servants, teachers, and physicians paralyzed many segments of the junta's administration. However, brutal

Diagram 5.1. Evolution of Myanmar's 2021 Civil Disobedient Movement (CDM)

military reprisals exposed the limits of peaceful protest. The teacher's husband's shift from peaceful activism to armed resistance exemplifies how sustained violence pushes movements into more radical phases of contentious politics.

At this juncture**,** the human toll becomes stark. The teacher's narrative conveys the deep emotional and psychological cost of resistance: loved ones lost, fear of arrest, and the loneliness of exile. The fact that she'll accept no compromises on her principles, that she'll tell the truth in a moment of desperate need highlights the moral injuries many suffer when survival comes at the cost of violating one's deeply held convictions. A former well-loved teacher, the woman is now destitute, struggling to support her son in a precarious environment. Her descent into material and social ruin is a metaphor for the sacrifices of many million others that had the courage to oppose the regime. This collapse of livelihood underscores the cost of resistance—not just moral, but material. The economic strain leads to another transition: from political sacrifice to survival fatigue**.** As shown by the teacher's contemplation of returning to Myanmar despite the risk of arrest, prolonged hardship risks hollowing out resistance.

Even the most dedicated activist may eventually have to walk away from a struggle if they can't make ends meet. This underscores the need for the international community to deliver concrete tangible aid, not just rhetorical support. Psychological strain compounds economic hardship. The teacher's loss of identity—as an educator, as a provider—manifests as mental anguish, guilt, and despair. Her experience illustrates how structural violence penetrates deeply into the emotional lives of resisters, eroding not just bodies but spirits. Although there was a dilemma between violent and nonviolent—whether to preserve the symbolic morality and keep fighting with nonviolent means or to jump in onto the survivalist pragmatic and join the armed struggle—most CDM participants do not become soldiers. The above analysis has shown the layered experiences of CDM participants who reveal the critical limits of non-violent resistance under a brutal regime.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the stories of two CDM participants—a teacher and a doctor—whose life experiences have shed light on how moral resistance, symbolic identities, and state violence intersect under the shadow of Myanmar's post-coup crisis. Using narrative as a method, informed by the theory of symbolic interactionism, we have seen in the chapter how intimate positions of becoming "teacher," "mother," and "doctor," were loaded with political significance and how they became sites of resistance. Associated with stable home and job status, such identities were reconfigured through fleeing, displacement, and selective persecution as they showed how the everyday becomes contentious under authoritarianism. Their stories reveal the psychological and moral fatigue of resistance, as

well as the symbolic persistence in the currency of shared values of truth, care, and solidarity.

Through the chapter, I demonstrate empirically that the CDM worked not just as a strategic interruption of state-business-as-usual but as a moral and affective repertoire shaped by professional ethics and personal sacrifice. The teacher's refusal to lie was the one I had not expected as a form of "everyday heroism," but taking into account the doctor's very own commitment to offer healthcare despite the bombings makes this act a peculiar, primal example of commitment to civil disobedience, which defies the idea that contentious politics is always collective, or strategical, or even overt. It is in this sense that the above argument is an extension and illustration of Doug McAdam's political process theory and Tilly's repertoires of contention, demonstrating how, under repression, movement actors may alter not only their tactics but also their identities themselves. This chapter also shows the fragility of nonviolent resistance when divorced from international solidarity, support, and material backing—a tension still underrepresented in the classic academic literature.

This chapter contributes to the literature on contentious politics by focusing on non-elite voices amidst long-term authoritarian conflict. It reconceptualizes resistance as an emotional and ethical process of identity reformation as opposed to a reaction to opportunity structures. In the process, it upends binary divisions between political and personal spheres, demonstrating that survival, dignity, and hope are radical practices in sites of abandonment. By juxtaposing moral agency to symbolic disruption, by showing the ways in which professional identities can be weaponized against authoritarianism, this chapter adds richness to our understanding of how contentious movements endure—not only (and perhaps not primarily) through victory, but ethically, through the practice of perseverance even in the face of annihilation.

Ultimately, these narratives capture the cost of resistance and where personal sacrifice meets collective resistance. They show that the CDM is more than a resistance movement against military rule; it is a revolutionary effort to construct a just, inclusive Myanmar. Their stories remind us also that resistance is not only political but also economic, moral, and psychological—and it must be encouraged. And, in the end, the experiences of the teacher and of the doctor challenge us to think about what sustains a movement. Against totalitarian violence, moral clarity, collective identity, and personal resilience are insufficient. Only by a process of inclusive nation-building and strategic solidarity—both domestic and international—will Myanmar's predicament shift from mere survival to transformative potential. Their voices–a product of the lived realities and the depths of suffering—are indispensable in terms of understanding dynamics of resistance and strategies required to enforce justice, democracy, and lasting peace.

Chapter 6

Part 1

6.1 Insights from Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) Leaders and Ethnic Societies

Introduction

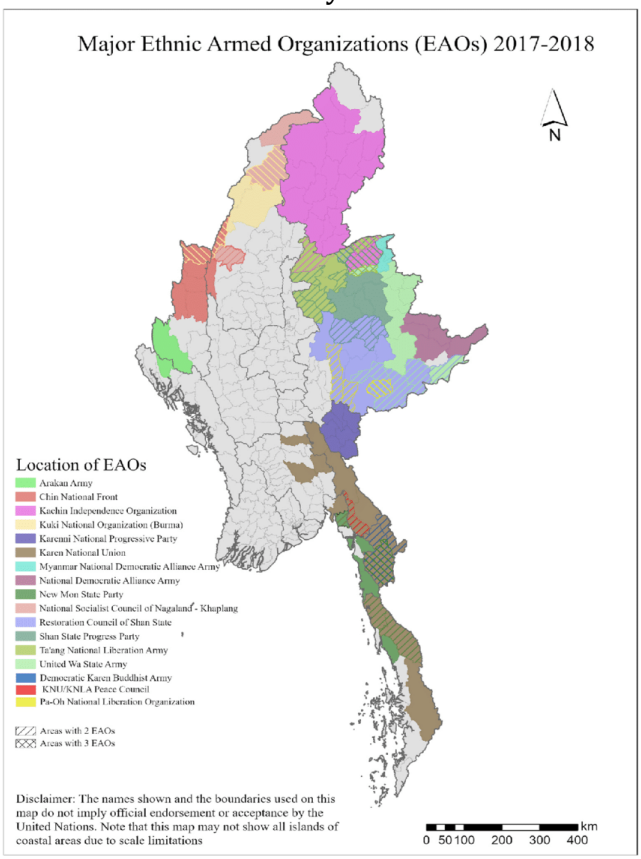
By interrogating the perspectives of the leaders of the ethnic armed organizations and the ethnic civil societies, this component of the research aims to provide a rigorous and systematic examination of what is, perhaps, the most significant research gap in the field of Myanmar conflict studies. In the early days of my research journey, I had plans to do something quite different; I wanted to conduct direct ethnographic interviews with leaders of Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to capture perspectives on federalism and autonomy across Myanmar's diverse ethnic groups. Yet, as civil conflict escalated and access diminished, I supplemented direct interviews with publicly available raw data, including interviews with EAO leaders and ethnic party spokespersons conducted by different news outlets.

In conducting my research, I did not get chance to speak with Myanmar's senior decision-makers but with those whose voices often go unheard—those directly involved in the struggle for autonomy, embodying Myanmar's diverse aspirations. In total, I interviewed 46 people: Bamar, Shan, Karen, Danu, and Chin, activists, as well as mid-level representatives of ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and members of the shadow government. This analysis thus integrates both original interviews and secondary raw data, offering a comprehensive view of Myanmar's federalist aspirations through the method of ethnographic content analysis.

As described in the previous chapter, my interviews were conducted online and offline at the Thailand-Myanmar border; these interviews revealed a remarkable consensus on the fundamental solutions for Myanmar's political crisis. As a final question, I used to ask each respondent to describe their vision of resolution for this crisis in Myanmar. Across the board—100% of those interviewed—the responses swelled with common sentiment: "They called for the military to be placed fully under civilian authority and not involved in day-to-day politics, for Myanmar to be reconstituted as a real democratic federal union with all the ethnic communities, however small they may be, enjoying equal rights, opportunities, resources, and respect for their language and their religion." This common vision is a powerful look at a shared dream for peace and federalism. These voices, despite their diversity and variety, reflect a deep-rooted popular aspiration for a Myanmar that

respects its cultural and linguistic mosaic through autonomy and genuine equality. This is not completely a novel aspiration, of course; it originates in the ideals of the 1947 Panglong Agreement, which promised an inclusive, federal Myanmar prior to independence but was then rejected by the central militarization efforts as seen in chapter [1]. There were more than 20 EAOs before the 2021 military coup, as shown in Map 1. Today's EAO leaders and ethnic societies see federalism as the most viable means of addressing the historical grievances that have fueled conflict for decades. Leaders from groups such as the Arakan Army (AA), Karen National Union (KNU), and Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and others underscored federalism as essential to achieving local governance, safeguarding ethnic identities, and countering the Tatmadaw's oppressive centralization.

Employing Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), this study integrates principles of qualitative data collection with content analysis to examine both numeric and narrative



Map 6.1. Location of major ethnic armed organizations in 2017-2018 (data source: BNI, 2020; MIMU, 2020). Source: Stokke, K., Kham, K. K. M., Nge, N. K. L., & Kvanvik, S. H. (2022)[2].

1.McGarry, J., & O'Leary, B. (2009). *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation: Case Studies of Protracted Ethnic Conflicts.* Routledge. McGarry and O'Leary's work on ethnic federalism provides theoretical foundations for understanding how federalist structures can be used to manage ethnic diversity, especially in conflict-prone multi-ethnic states.

2.Stokke, K., Kham, K. K. M., Nge, N. K. L., & Kvanvik, S. H. (2022). Illiberal peacebuilding in a hybrid regime: Authoritarian strategies for conflict containment in Myanmar. *Political Geography*, 93, 102551

data from televised news interviews. Unlike traditional quantitative content analysis, ECA emphasizes iterative comparison to uncover emergent patterns, themes, and focal points, particularly from the perspectives of EAO leaders regarding federalism and their aspirations for autonomy and self-governance. Conceptualizing document analysis as fieldwork, this ethnographic approach allows for tracing nuanced human actions and interpretive patterns within media presentations (Altheide 1987)[3]. One striking interview was with Tun Myat Naing, the leader of the Arakan Army (AA), who described a "Federal Union of Ethnic and Bamar Peoples" as the Arakan Army's ultimate aim, asserting that federalism is both a political strategy and a profound commitment to ethnic equality. He noted that the AA's initial focus was Rakhine Ethnic's self-interest, but that cooperation with other ethnic and revolutionary forces has underscored the necessity for unified resistance to Myanmar military dominance (Irrawaddy, 2024)[4].

This move toward the common federalist agenda indicates what were initially disconnected ethnic struggles are becoming a unified agenda for peace between various ethnic determinations and national unity. Throughout these interviews, EAO leaders consistently framed federalism as a route to national peace, combining regional autonomy with a cohesive structure of governance. This analysis adopts an ethnographic approach, interpreting these personal insights through the lenses of conflict theory and ethnic federalism models. It discusses how they envision federalism as a reconciliation paradigm that could reconnect and replace Myanmar's centralized and militarized politics with a decentralized and cooperative governance. Integrated with their own perspectives, this work highlights federalism as envisioned by those who have suffered and resisted oppression—a unifying system that recognizes Myanmar's diversity as a strength rather than an issue of discord. In their federalist aspirations, these leaders see not only a potential solution for ethnic tension, but also a reimagined Myanmar built on mutual respect, shared power, and a collective future (McGarry, 2009[5]; Irrawaddy, 2024[6]).

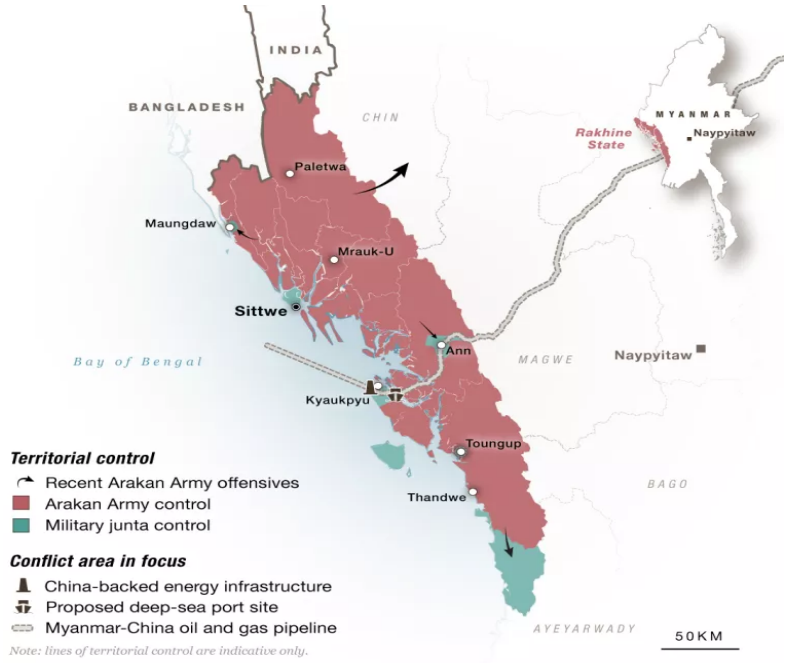
3.Altheide, D. L. (1987). *Ethnographic content analysis*. Qualitative Sociology, 10(1), 65-77. Retrieved from https://qualquant.org/wp-content/uploads/text/altheide%20ethnographic%20content%20analysis.pdf

4&6.Irrawaddy. (2024). "AA Chief: Arakan Army's Vision for Myanmar is Federal Union of Ethnic and Bamar Peoples." *The Irrawaddy.* Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/aa-chief-arakan-armys-vision-for-myanmar-is-federal-union-of-ethnic-and-bamar-peoples.html. This interview with Arakan Army chief Tun Myat Naing provides insight into the AA's federalist vision and their strategic perspective on ethnic unity and autonomy.

6.1.1 Federalism, Ethnic Aspiration: Arakan Army (AA) Leader and Arakan Society

Name: The Arakan Army (AA)	Region: Rakhine State (also known as Arakan State) in Myanmar
AA's Chief: Tun Myat Naing	Ideology: Confederation Federal Model for Myanmar
Founded on: April 10, 2009	estimated strength as of 2024: 30,000 - 40,000 fighters
Active in: primarily active in Rakhine State, the AA also operates in Chin State, Kachin State, and Shan State	Significant operation: Operation 1027
Organization: The AA is a multi-ethnic organization; though most peopel are Arakanese, it includes some members from the Rohingya minority.	Issues: Arakan region economic crisis because of war and Many Rohingya, however, remain unaffiliated with any warring parties and consider themselves victims of the conflict.
Territorial Aspiration: Entire Arakan region, and in 2024, the AA controlled substantial parts of Rakhine State.	Political Wing: The AA's political wing is the United League of Arakan.

Table 6.1. Arakan Army Facts
Source: Arakan Army[7] & International Crisis Group. (2024)[8]



Map 6.2. Arakan Region and Its territory
Source: International Crisis Group. (2024)[8]

5. McCarthy, G. (2018). *Building Citizenship in Myanmar: National Identity and Ethnic Rights.* Amsterdam University Press. This book examines the evolution of Myanmar's national identity and the historical context of ethnic federalist aspirations, including discussions on the Panglong Agreement and its implications for contemporary federalist movements.
7. Arakan Army. (n.d.). *About Us*. Retrieved from https://www.arakanarmy.net/about-us
8. International Crisis Group. (2024). *Breaking Away: The Battle for Myanmar's Rakhine State*. Retrieved from https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/339-breaking-away-battle-myanmars-rakhine-state

In a recent interview *in* September 2024, Arakan Army (AA) leader Tun Myat Naing articulates a revolutionary vision for Myanmar—he argues for a federal union that would include both ethnic minorities and the majority—Bamar. Tun Myat Naing was interviewed by The Irrawaddy news channel *on* September 12, 2024[9] and the following analysis and excerpts are taken from that interview for the analysis. I chose this interview because it provides essential insights into the political aspirations, alliances, and obstacles ethnic armed groups in Myanmar encounter, making it a useful primary source in tracking how the Federalist Project continues to unfold in Myanmar. His straightforwardness has allowed us to comprehend his idea, which seemingly represents the Arakan people's desire for federalism. It also allows us to examine the feasibility of the AA's agenda and the challenges toward confederation or a decentralized form of federalism for Myanmar. His vision of a federal union that can include both ethnic minorities and the larger Bamar population represents a significant reorientation away from a narrow ethnonationalist agenda. He focuses on forming alliances between people of different ethnicities, and putting in place localized government is an example of both the ideas and practices behind a confederative model of federalism. If we observe through the lens of social movement and conflict theory, the armed resistance movement to create political opportunity, especially to gain autonomy in their regions, based on the political reality of marginalization and ethnic suppression of central authority—many ethnic groups have sustained their struggles, now surpassing 70 years—requires a new paradigm of collective resistance rather than isolated ethnic agendas. The last chapters of this thesis will critically examine federal models and provide suggestions for improvement.

Social Movement Dynamics and Collective Identity Formation

Social movement theory asserts that collective identity and resource mobilization are crucial for movements aiming for systemic change and also require inclusive solidarity that bridges disparate groups through shared grievances [10]. Tun Myat Naing's (Arakan Army Chief) account of the AA's evolving alliances underscores the shift from isolated ethnic agendas toward a shared struggle, a key aspect of successful social movements. He states,

"focusing solely on one ethnic goal will not lead to a comprehensive victory,"

recognizing that the collective strength of various ethnic and revolutionary groups is

9. This interview with the commander in Chief of AA (Arakan Army) - Tun Myat Naing, is an essential source for understanding a possible path to a federal union in Myanmar by revealing the perspectives and strategic plans of a critical ethnic armed group. During his talk, Myat Naing lays out the idea that autonomy at a local level can exist side by side with national ties, leading to a federal option that preserves the different forms of identity that members of his country hold. His focus on ethnic cooperation and governance reform suggests an emerging orientation toward a federal system that is not simply a mechanism to simply satisfy traditional ethnonationalist aspirations, and which reaches out to include both ethnic minorities and also the majority Bamar population in that arrangement. For full details, see: Tun Myat Naing, *AA Chief: Arakan Army's Vision for Myanmar is Federal Union of Ethnic and Bamar Peoples*, The Irrawaddy, September 12, 2024. Available at https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/aa-chief-arakan-armys-vision-for-myanmar-is-federal-union-of-ethnic-and-bamar-peoples.html.

10. Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley. Pp.56-99.

essential to dismantling Myanmar's entrenched military rule. This strategic transitioning of perception from localized ethnonationalism to a federated resistance is indicative of a move away from narrow ethnonationalism towards a resistance movement that represents larger national cohesion. In casting the fight against the junta as a "common enemy" that requires the unity of the people, he appeals to ideas of common grievances and objectives that are necessary to build a cohesive social movement of a disparate range of groups. The emphasis on alliances—

> *"Not only with ethnic minorities but also with the majority ethnic Burmese"*

—underscores the importance of forging cross-cutting solidarities that move beyond ethnic boundaries.

The Dynamics of Ethnic, State Power, and Revolution

AA highlights the systemic violence that Rakhine and other ethnic minorities face, and why ethnic groups mobilize in response to systematic repression and denied self-determination, underscoring the failures of Myanmar's military-centered "Union" to serve as a unifying force:

> *"In practice, what we have today is merely a nominal union… driven by extremism and nationalism rather than a genuine commitment to a federal union."*

By rebranding the junta as a neocolonial power perpetuating outdated feudal hierarchies, the AA leader emphasizes that entrenched, power-laden fundamentals only serve to compound Myanmar's conflict, claiming that "modern Myanmar is a colonial legacy," where the military has long repressed the ethnic minorities. His statement is similar to Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonial form retained within post-colonial states[11], which operates to reproduce hierarchy and centrism rather than enabling diverse regions to self-govern. This critical stance helps elucidate the AA's desired emphasis on dismantling these historical hegemonic power structures through federalism and decentralization, replacing the "feudalistic way of thinking" with a very real union of powerful states. Despite the AA's alliance with other ethnic armed groups and the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) on the ground, it has adopted a cautious and strategic federal ideology to form an official coalition with the Bamar majority's shadow government (NUG). Tun Myat Naing considers the common hatred towards the Tatmadaw, the "oppressive junta military council," that he says is a "common enemy," an "opportunity for unity" of ethnic and revolutionary forces. This acceptance of a common enemy hints at the AA's pragmatic attitude toward cooperation, understanding that there is a certain value to be had in temporary allegiances, though there is not a singular revolutionary agenda among resistance actors.

11. Fanon, F. (1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, pp.176.

AA's Federalism: A Confederation Model for Myanmar

AA leader's vision of federalism embodies an asymmetrical, confederative model that accommodates ethnic differences within a unified state. Unlike symmetrical federalism, which offers identical autonomy to all states, the AA's proposed confederation acknowledges varying degrees of autonomy to reflect each region's unique cultural and historical contexts. He explicitly supports this model, stating,

> *"We are serious about this…What we are doing* is consistent with *our political beliefs."*

His proposal for confederation therefore corresponds to Alfred Stepan's asymmetrical federalism which states ethnically diverse state federations should be asymmetrical, catering to the specific needs and historical circumstances of each group, in order to ensure peace and stability[12]. In this decentralized structure, the AA aims to extend to the wider revolutionary movement that includes Bamar people. Tun Myat Naing underscores this, noting:

> *"The Bamar majority is a fundamental force for change."*

He emphasizes the need for a

> *"Federal Union of Ethnic and Bamar Peoples,"* a model that not only addresses Rakhine's national interest but also aims to unify various ethnic and Bamar groups under a shared governance structure.
>
> *"Initially, our efforts were centered on Rakhine's national interest,"* he explains, *"but working with various allies across Myanmar* has exposed us to a broader view of the *situation. We have come to realize that we are not alone in our struggles."*

This reflects a pragmatic position in which the AA has recognized that there is a strategic imperative to work with other ethnic and anti-Tatmadaw forces that reach beyond strictly ethnic agendas to address a national crisis at large. Engaging the Bamar and other actors, the AA seeks to move beyond an exclusively ethno-federal model by reaching out to the Bamar and other groups to find a federal framework that would accommodate the interests of all groups in the common struggle of the people against the military. The AA's approach resonates with the concept of self-rule within federalism, where ethnic groups exercise autonomy over regional matters, as theorized by Will Kymlicka, who argues that such autonomy allows ethnic groups to govern themselves in their own territories[13].

12. Stepan, A. (1999). Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), 68-72.
13. Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford University Press, p 28.

However, Tun Myat Naing also recognizes that focusing solely on Rakhine's interests may not suffice:

> *"After 70 years of civil conflict, it has become clear that focusing solely on one ethnic goal will not lead to a comprehensive victory."*

This indicates an awareness that the ethnic-based logic of federalism cannot fully solve the problem since other dynamics on a national level need to be addressed; hence, the need for cooperation that is not ethnically grounded. Tun Myat Naing's appeal to a "holistic view" and the need for "balance" between local and national levels of governance sounds like an idea—echoing Arend Lijphart's conception of consociational federalism. This model of federalism is characterized by power-sharing arrangements that involve ethnic groups in the central government, leading to both autonomy and inclusion. Highlighting the importance of alliances with the Bamar majority—*"a fundamental force for change"—Tun* Myat Naing underscores the necessity of incorporating the majority's interests to create a cohesive federal system, reflecting Lijphart's principle that inclusivity stabilizes divided societies[14].

Practical and Ideological Challenges to Federal Aspirations

AA leader acknowledges the practical challenges inherent in his federal aspirations, from infrastructural challenges in healthcare and education to constant military threats from the junta's air strikes.

However, AA leaders also confront a key concern in political theory: the threat of fragmentation resulting from the potential collapse of the central state. Addressing fears of Myanmar's "balkanization," he asserts that such concerns overlook the present, tangible harm caused by the military's rule. Rather than speculating on post-junta fragmentation, he advocates for immediate action to restore effective governance, arguing that

> *"the potential fragmentation of the country after the junta's fall"*

is less concerning than the

> *"Dire situation we face today."* He argues that "*the term "Union of Myanmar' often seems more of a formality than a reflection of reality."*

He was noting that the current structure of the union is a vestige of the spirit of feudalism and nationalism rather than a full federal system. He argues that an authentic federal

14. Lijphart, A. (2004). *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies*. Journal of Democracy, 15(2), 96-109.

union, one based on local governance and shared authority, could avert the risk of unraveling by addressing historical grievances. As Lijphart cautions, consociationalism demands trust-building and a commitment to power-sharing among all parties[15] The AA's approach to cultivating Bamar (the majority group) buy-in suggests a move toward this model, but challenges remain, given historical mistrust. The military position of entrenchment further impedes the formation of a consociational system, as the junta may resist the transfer of authority to a federative power structure. Moreover, there is also a potential problem of maintaining cohesion across diverse ethnic and regional interests in such forms of decentralized federalism. Decentralization without integrative mechanisms may lead to fragmentation, something that is certainly one of the greatest issues in the ethnically fractured context of Myanmar.[16] The AA's attempts to reconcile Rakhine autonomy and country-wide revolutionary objectives might prevent such a fate, but it requires robust political frameworks to maintain unity and shared goals.

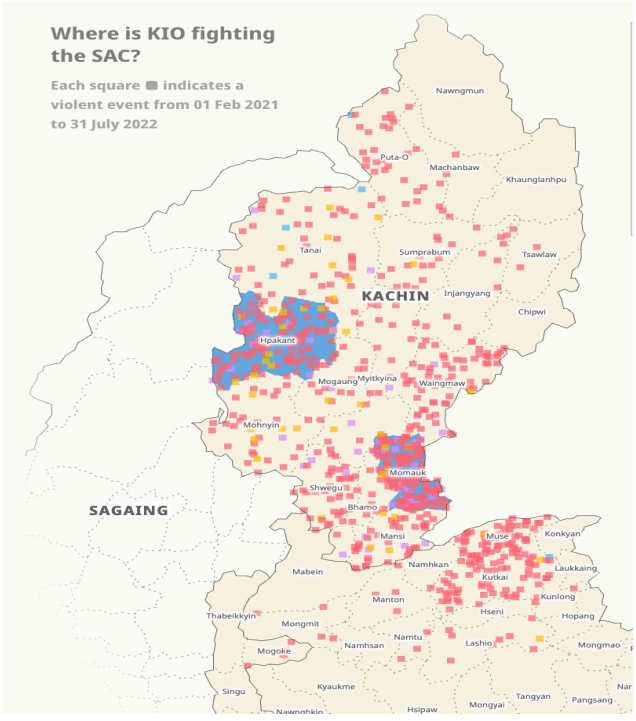
In sum, the AA leader's interview reflects a blend of realism and revolutionary idealism; however, it may seem unrealistic, not accounting for fragmentation, and advocating a political model that balances ethnic autonomy with national solidarity. The AA looks to transform Myanmar from a nominal union where the central government reigns supreme into a full-fledged federation by way of inclusivity of ethnic nationalities, self-governance, and asymmetrical federalism, one that will be institutionalized diversity and autonomy. This vision represents a critical juncture in Myanmar's political development, since it challenges both the legitimacy of and the structure of Myanmar's millennia-old military state.

15. Lijphart, A. (2004). Ibid
16. Brancati, D. (2006). Decentralization: Fueling the fire or dampening the flames of ethnic conflict and secessionism? *International Organization*, 60(3), 651-685.

6.1.2 Federalism, Ethnic Aspiration: Kachin Independence Organization and Kachin Society

Name: The Kachin Independence Army (KIA); Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)	Region: Kachin State, Northern Myanmar in Myanmar
Leaders: Gen. N'Ban La, Lt. Gen. Gam Shawng	Ideology: Asymmetrical Federalism
Founded on: February 5, 1961	estimated strength as of 2024: 40,000 - 50,000 fighters
Active in: Kachin State, Mandalay Region, Sagaing Region, Shan State, Northeast India, China-Myanmar border, India-Myanmar border	Significant operation: Border line of China Operation started in 2023/2024
Organization: The KIA/KIO is a multi-ethnic organization; though most are Kachin, it includes some members from the Burmese, and Shan.	Issues: Reliant heavily on China's resource supply and trade with China
Territorial Aspiration: Entire Kachin region, and In 2024, the KIO controlled substantial parts of Kachin State.	Political Wing: KIO

Table 6.2. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA); Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)
Source: Myanmar Peace Monitor (2024)[17]



Map 6.3. Kachin Regional Map and Its map of conflict (all red spots) after 2021
Source: IISS. (2024)[18]

17. "Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) | Myanmar Peace Monitor." *Myanmar Peace Monitor*, mmpeacemonitor.org. Archived 12 Mar. 2018. Accessed 12 Mar. 2024.
18. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), editor. *The Armed Conflict Survey 2024.* The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024, https://myanmar.iiss.org/updates.

Lieutenant General Gwan Maw's interview with the *BBC*[19] provides an incisive window into the aspirations and strategies of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). In this interview, he lays out a vision for the future of Myanmar, characterizing the 2021 conflict as a "structured interim period" towards creating federal democracy, calling for an end to the authoritarian military regime but also reiterating the need for "strategic pragmatism" for the revolution to succeed. His reflections provide evidence of a keen awareness of Myanmar's fundamental ethnic and political fragmentation, and his approach inherits the theoretic foundations of asymmetrical federalism, a term that denotes differentiated autonomy among states, and social movement theory, or dynamism, that emphasizes the need to form coalitions and mobilize for systemic change within the system.

Coalition Building and Collective Identity

These reflections from Maw also ring close to social movement theory, including the role of collective identity and building coalitions to affect systemic transformation. Effective social movements are based on the construction of a collective identity that unites divergent actors4. Maw's frequent invocations of "revolutionary groups" and "the Spring Revolution" are highlighting a conscious effort to identity-build around a goal of federal democracy that Myanmar's diverse political and ethnic landscape can unite under, rather than a series of atomized ethnic interests. When Maw says, "We should avoid the word 'attacking one group," (meaning entire Bamar ethnic) he is emphasizing the importance of a careful, unified approach to revolution that unites rather than divides. Thus, the movement would avoid internal antagonism, which is more likely to sustain broad support and achieve lasting reforms. Maw's emphasis on "the attitude of cessation" rather than complete destruction of the military council reflects a strategy designed to avoid alienating potential allies within the Bamar-majority regions. By framing the conflict in terms of "cessation" and coalition rather than elimination, he seeks to broaden support for the federal vision across ethnic and political divides, thus reinforcing a shared objective within the revolutionary movement[20].

Managing Intra-State Tensions and Political Transition

Maw's reflections on Myanmar's future show an acute awareness of the risks of escalated

19. This interview with Lieutenant Gwan Maw, translated (originally conducted in Burmese) by the BBC, offers critical perspective on the strategic aims and conditions laid down by the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) for the country of Myanmar. Maw's time frame and conditional commitment to participate in the creation of a federal union suggests that the KIO is willing to engage in the federal democratic process, given that concrete steps are made by 2025. His focus on coalition-making and the necessity for a federal structure underscores the larger movement toward asymmetrical federalism, providing for Myanmar's ethnic diversification without jeopardizing national unity. Maw's interview is therefore an important primary source for understanding the changing strategies of ethnic armed organizations within Myanmar's complex political landscape.. Maw's interview is thus a key primary source for analyzing the evolving strategies of ethnic armed organizations within Myanmar's complex political landscape. For the original interview, see: *BBC Burmese*. (2024). "Lieutenant Gwan Maw: **"စစ်ကျွံလာတဲ့အခါ တိုက်ရင်းနဲ့ပဲ တိုက်ပွဲတွေဖော်လိုက်တာဖြစ်ပါတယ်" – KIO ဒုဗိုလ်ချုပ်ကြီးဂွမ်မော်**." Retrieved November 16, 2024. https://www.bbc.com/burmese/articles/c0dje287vzpo.
20. Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley. Pp.56-99.

intra-state violence. Conflict theory argues that persistent internal oppression can fuel intense civil unrest, yet Maw proposes a pragmatic approach to prevent full-scale destruction[21]. Rather than viewing the Myanmar military purely as an enemy, Maw suggests an "attitude of cessation," advocating a non-totalizing victory that avoids annihilating the military council. He explains,

> *"If the Myanmar Tatmadaw loses, where will [they] flee? They are Myanmar citizens."*

This approach illustrates a desire to mitigate what Johan Galtung (1969)[22] termed "structural violence," aiming to transform rather than eliminate adversarial structures, ultimately allowing the nation to avoid cycles of violence and retain capacity for reconciliation.

Asymmetrical Federalism: An Adaptive Approach to Diversity and Conflict

Lieutenant Maw's call for a "federal democratic union" is a step in the direction of asymmetrical federalism as a way to deal with Myanmar's ethnic tensions. The principles of asymmetric federalism grant some states honors different from others based on particular historical, cultural, and political commonalities. Maw's reference to the title "Union of Myanmar" is an expression of a nuanced perspective that affirms the need for unity while also recognizing the need for autonomy for each ethnic group. By emphasizing the formation of "a strong government in the Union," he suggests that while Kachin and other ethnic states must retain self-determination, they should be integral parts of a broader federal system.

Asymmetrical federalism is often essential for ethnically diverse states, where granting equal autonomy to each region may fail to address unique cultural and historical distinctions[23]. Maw's goal of establishing a federal system that respects "the Union" without enforcing an unyielding centralized structure echoes Stepan's ideas. As Maw asserts, the timeline for such a transformation "should not exceed 5 years," reflecting both urgency and the recognition that a lasting political resolution requires decisive restructuring at both the regional and national levels.

Moreover, by acknowledging the differing levels of involvement and integration within the Union, Maw implicitly critiques the historical military approach, which treated Myanmar as

21. Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton University Press. 114-119
22. Galtung, J. (1969). *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*. Journal of Peace Research, 6(3), 167–191.
23. Stepan, A. (1999). Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), 68–72.

a singular, centralized entity with little regard for regional diversity. This understanding is further emphasized when he notes, “We have to find a solution,” highlighting that each ethnic group has distinct stakes in this conflict and, correspondingly, in the future federal structure. Maw’s statement

"We must avoid unforgivable mistakes by adhering to our extreme nationalism."

unveils a strategy to guarantee balanced federal governance in accordance with the consociational model of power-sharing, characterized by a design that avoids strong domination by any particular constituency, and thus fosters stability within plural societies24. Under such an asymmetrical federation model, a place like Kachin State might receive a significant degree of self-governance—enough to address local needs and historical grievances without jeopardizing the nation-state's integrity.

Pragmatism and Strategic Patience in Revolutionary Action

Maw’s reductionists note here also exhibits the pragmatic “war of position” support for revolutionary movements. Instead of aiming for an all-time decisive victory over military strength, Maw cautions that strategic patience and gradual gains are vital.

“This revolution must succeed... it does not mean that everything must be crushed.”

This suggests a preference for a measured transition and a moderated approach to change that focuses on long-term stability instead of scoring a quick victory, rejecting the zero-sum game mentality. This approach is particularly significant given Myanmar’s volatile history of ethnic conflict; by avoiding the pitfalls of an absolute victory, Maw advocates for a sustainable transition that retains structures necessary for post-conflict governance. Furthermore, Maw’s question

“How will [the military council] do the reunification?”

implies a recognition that unity, reconciliation, and national cohesion will need to be the product of intent and not just the blowback of military success. He meant that revolutionary actors should be open-minded and realistic: build power in stages and save national ability to rebuild after the fighting ends. This is a strategic calculation to escape the kind of full collapse that could bring about fragmentation. Maw’s revolutionary-mindedness has, therefore, to calculate both immediate and future benefits and society’s structure, highlighting the necessity of the establishment not just of the revolutionary movement, but of a lasting polity or political structure that can accommodate varying interests[25].

24. Lijphart, A. (1977). *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration*. Yale University Press. 109-120
25. Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers. 88-98

Lieutenant Gwan Maw's statements reflect both a sense of urgency and a willingness to work within a defined timeframe toward Myanmar's transformation into a federal union. His remark,

"We have to find a solution… we should find a solution by 2025,"

is as much a warning as an invitation that the KIO and its partners are still open to cooperation—only on their own terms. His timeline seems to confirm this: calling for a five-year "interim period," he suggests Kachin and the other ethnic groups are prepared to engage in the process if a resolution can be achieved within this window. This is a tactical use of time pressure—to send a signal that the KIO's patience is not endless. It illustrates a mode of what could be called "opportunity framing" in social movement theory, wherein a movement uses periods of transition to bring about systemic change[26]. Setting 2025 as the deadline, Maw is clear that KIO will join the federal project if there is real development within a time frame. If this goal is not achieved as such, Maw suggests that "after 2025, this concept will change," that is to say, that the willingness of the KIO to be negotiated with is dependent upon the military and—more so—political leaders—General Min Aung Hlaing and others—to ensure the establishment of a federal democratic union.

In asserting that

"We will participate in the establishment of a federal democratic union,"

Maw offers a pathway for integration but conditions this on the broader political environment. It is an attitude that is informed by a prudent strategy in asymmetrical federalism, according to which autonomy and participation are the price to be paid for ethnic diversity as long as a central state has an interest in recognizing ethnic differences. Ultimately, the KIO's time-bound and conditional foray sets up a stalemate: the KIO and its allies are ready to negotiate with Myanmar, but unless genuine reforms are made between 2020 and 2025, their tactics and position may change. Similarly, in an interview with Dr. Manam Tu Ja,[27] he stated that for the Kachin people, federalism is not merely a political framework but a right to exist, a framework for peace that all the ethnic groups need, and a guarantee for Kachin people's political rights within a federal system. Dr. Manam Tu Ja, chairman of the Kachin State People's Party (KSPP) and a former deputy chair of the

26. Tilly, C. (1978). *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Addison-Wesley. Pp.56-99.

27. Dr. Manam Tu Ja's interview is a critical resource for understanding Myanmar's potential trajectory toward a federal union, as it provides valuable insights into the perspectives and strategic intentions of key ethnic political actors in the Kachin region. Dr. Tu Ja is the Chairman of the Kachin State People's Party (KSPP) and elected Member of Parliament. He explained that federalism is a prerequisite for the peace and autonomy of the nation and critical for the unity and development of all ethnic states in Myanmar. His conclusion emphasizes the political goals that ethnic organizations believe are necessary to achieve stability and cooperation in a unified Myanmar.. For the full interview, see: *Kachin News Group*. (2020). "KSPP Chair and MP-Elect: Federalism Must Come First." Retrieved November 16, 2024 from https://kachinnews.com/2020/11/30/kspp-chair-and-mp-elect-federalism-must-come-first/.

KIO, has stressed the importance of "federal democracy," noting that

> *"When we talk about federalism, democracy automatically follows. When we talk about democracy, federalism doesn't automatically follow."*

This prioritization underscores a foundational belief within Kachin society that democratic reforms alone are insufficient to safeguard autonomy and rights without a federal system. For Seng Nu Pan, a Kachin activist[28], also asserts,

> *"To build a nation, we should have a constitution based on the Panglong Agreement… we must have the right to govern our state."*

The repeated failure of central governments to honor these commitments has only solidified Kachin's conviction that a federal structure is essential for peace and stability.

Perspectives on the Spring Revolution and Armed Forces

Lieutenant General Guan Mao acknowledges the strides made in military resistance but underscores the fragmentation within the revolutionary movement.

> *"As for the battle, everything is encouraging. However, there is still no hope in terms of connection and political pre-discussion when developing battles."*

He emphasizes that while tactical progress is visible, the absence of unified political coordination hampers long-term goals. The lack of clarity on the revolution's overarching objectives is another significant concern. While some groups aim to end military dictatorship, Guan Mao critiques this as insufficient:

> *"I think that is not enough. I guess I would say, as much as I think the fights are encouraging, it is really bad to be in the fight so scattered, forces ununited."*

His remarks help highlight the lack of unity between actors and the short-term military goal and the larger necessity of a politically coherent vision. This illuminates a huge problem for the Spring Revolution, which has dispersed groups and fighting in their own regions, more of a lone ranger style than in unity for the same goal, and it will need a complete U-turn with its scattered military activities into a coherent political force if all the actors really mean to take down the entire Tatmadaw.

28. The interview with Seng Nu Pan is a vital source on the possible path of Myanmar towards a federal union. It reflects a personal narrative as well as the views and strategic intentions of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), one of Myanmar's key ethnic armed organizations. The interview sheds light on the KIA's increasing support for a federal army, as well as its preparations for an intensified conflict and its ambitions for autonomy within a federal Myanmar. This perspective is invaluable for comprehending the dynamics of ethnic resistance within Myanmar and the KIA's alignment with the federal vision. For the original interview, see: Frontier Myanmar. (2024). "The Last Fight: With Growing Support for Federal Army, Kachin Prepares for War." Retrieved from https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-last-fight-with-growing-support-for-federal-army-kachin-prepares-for-war/.

The absence of a unified policy platform among revolutionary forces complicates the pathway toward federalism.

Dialogue and Inclusivity in Peace Processes

When asked about the prospects of inclusive dialogue, Lieutenant General Guan Mao expressed cautious optimism, asserting that

> *"An inclusive dialogue will inevitably return."*

But he is critical of previous frameworks, including the NCA talks held under the U Thein Sein government in 2013, and argues that future discussions must be more substantive and politically committed:

> *"A debate where everyone involved needs a dialogue table discussing politics. This is an inevitable need to reach."*

This attitude has led several ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to express a desire for genuine engagement over superficial agreements that do not offer tangible results while addressing some of the core issues of Myanmar's conflicts. But the general emphasizes the preconditions for such discussions:

> *"We must be able to reconcile political aspirations. Third and finally, we must not commit unpardonable mistakes against each other."*

Challenges to Reconciliation and Federalism

In the interview, Lieutenant General Guan Mao states three important aspects of reconciliation and building a federal system:

(1) If the political will to reconcile is not there, he cautions, the results will not last. (2). Converging Political Goals: Conflict-management requires the stakeholders of the ethnic groups to come up with a shared vision of the future of federalism. (3). Steering clear of unforgivable mistakes: He cautions those that would exacerbate mistrust and limit future cooperation. These factors underscore the fragility of Myanmar's path toward federalism. Achieving these conditions is very difficult in the context of long-term mistrust between the EAOs, the central government, as well as the military, and rising territorial claims.

Federalism and the Vision for a Unified Myanmar

Lieutenant General Guan Mao and other lead figures of Kachin society's references to the Panglong Agreement and the federal principles put forward by ethnic revolutionary forces

point to the historical foundations of the federalism debate in Myanmar. It underscores that these principles remain central to the aspirations of ethnic groups.

However, the general's critique of the Spring Revolution's fragmented goals reveals the political complexity of implementing such principles. The federal aspiration, therefore, has a twin purpose: it has to satisfy the federal desires of the ethnic minorities but at the same time reconcile differences within the revolutionary alliance itself.

Pathways and Impediments to Federalism

The interviews with Lieutenant General Guan Mao offer a powerful window on the multifaceted challenges of federalism in Myanmar. Although the military resistance has achieved tactical successes, the lack of political unity is a major impediment. The general underscores the importance of inclusive political discourse, but the difficulties of realizing such goals are evident in the challenges of mistrust, competing visions, and political will fragility. As Guan Mao poignantly reminds us, progress now rests on two interrelated tasks of avoiding "unforgivable mistakes" and making political sacrifices—all of which will demand unprecedented levels of cooperation and compromise from Myanmar's many stakeholders.

As time presses on, the urgency for meaningful political dialogue becomes ever more critical. Maw and Kachin ethnic societies acknowledge the plight of Myanmar's ethnic states within a broader Union framework while also understanding their unique needs, echoing theories of asymmetrical federalism, which posit the need for flexible governance structures to meet the needs of ethnic diversity. His attempts to forge strategic coalitions are a nuanced reflection of the principles of social movement theory and emphasize the link between revolutionary success and the need for a unified national identity, pragmatism, and unity. Maw's model provides an insightful sketch of a way forward for Myanmar's federal union, emphasizing both regional autonomy and the critical importance of national solidarity in creating sustainable peace.

6.1.3 Federalism, Ethnic Aspiration: Chin Resistance Forces and Chin Ethnic Society

This analysis of Chin ethnic aspirations (of the region as shown in Map 2) for federalism draws on an exclusive interview conducted by *The Irrawaddy* with Chin leader Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong[29], alongside the 2023 Chinland Constitution[30]—the first charter drafted by the Chin people. Ratified on December 6 by 235 representatives from the Chin National Front (CNF), township and area-based administrative bodies, elected parliamentarians, and other key Chin stakeholders, this constitution marks a pivotal moment in Chin self-governance.

The interview with Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong also provides a deeply critical perspective on Myanmar's ongoing conflict and highlights the ideological rift between ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and the military junta over the concept of federalism. As vice-chairman of the Chin National Front (CNF) and federal union affairs minister in Myanmar's shadow National Unity Government (NUG), his rejection of peace talks with the junta is rooted in a long-standing belief that the military has systematically undermined attempts to create a genuine federal democracy since the 1962 coup. His statements encapsulate a key text for understanding the resistance to centralized military control in Myanmar.

Collective Identity and the Military of Myanmar as Perennial Oppressor

Dr. Sakhong's dismissal of Min Aung Hlaing's offer of peace talks (in 2024 with all EAOs) as illegitimate is significant from a social movement perspective. Dr. Sakhong's interview underscores the structural antagonism between the military and ethnic minorities, reinforcing the notion that the military functions as an oppressive force seeking to monopolize power. He argues that the military has consistently obstructed federalism, noting that

"the military has prevented [the federal union] since 1962,"

29. Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong's interview is an important source of information on the Chin ethnic group's possible journey to a federal union in Myanmar. Dr. Sakhong is a leader of the Chin National Front , a group of EAO and a prominent advocate of Chin self-determination. He provides a valuable insight into the strategic goals and challenges for Chin armed organizations in this iunterview. His views offer important context for the Chin community's federalist dreams within Myanmar's complicated political framework.. Read more at - The Irrawaddy. (2022). "'This Is Not The Time For Peace Talks': Chin Leader Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong." Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com.

30. The establishment of the Chinland Council offers a key source of information regarding the Chin ethnic group's path towards a federal union in Myanmar. As the political entity that represents Chin interests at the local level, the insight offered by the Chin National Council brings to bear the perspectives of a significant ethnic organization that is having — and will continue to have in the near future — an impact on local governance and the work of autonomy. Its formation, constitution and political agenda reflects the Chin people's demand for self-determination and federalism, significant development in the broader ethnic federalist movement in Myanmar. Read more at - Chinland Council established in Myanmar. Stimson Center. (2024). Retrieved from https://www.stimson.org/2024/chinland-council-established-in-myanmar/

Name: **Chin National Defence Force** (**CNDF**), The **Chin National Army** (**CNA**), The **Chinland Defense Force** (CDF), **Chinland Council (CNF)**	Region: Chin State in Myanmar
CNF Chair Pu Zing Cung and others	Ideology: **Asymmetrical Federal State**
Founded on: Varies	estimated strength as of 2024: 15,000 - 20,000 fighters
Active in: primarily active in Chin State and Borderline of India	Significant operation: Chinland Resistance against Myanmar military in each Chin cities and towns
Organization: Mainly composed of Chin ethnic people	Issues: conflicting claims over territory, disagreements over governmental representation, and allegations of collaboration with perceived enemies. Underlying the rivalry are long-standing tensions between the various Chin tribes.
Territorial Aspiration: Chin State	Political Wing: Numerous groups
Represented population in total est 2024: almost half a million	Represented population in percentage of entire Myanmar (est 2024): 2.5%

Table 6.3. Chin State and resistance forces Facts
Source: Myanmar Peace Monitor 2024[31]

Map 6.4. Chin State Map and Its territory
Source: Chin Land Association (2024)[32]

31. Myanmar Peace Monitor, https://mmpeacemonitor.org/1540/cnf/ (2024)
32. Chin Land Association. https://chinmd.org/history/

It was an expression of his disappointment in decades of simmering resentment among ethnic groups. Internal conflicts also sprout from systemic oppressions and lack of agency. Narrating previous conversations stymied by the military—for example, in 2019 at a Union Peace Conference, where the "military opposed the agreements"—he frames the military as historically resistant to genuine reforms, suggesting that its current call for peace is merely a strategic move to retain power rather than a sincere attempt to resolve conflict.

The Federal Union as a Pathway to Peace

Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong's remarks highlight the Chin perspective on federalism as a longstanding struggle obstructed by military dominance. He recalls the historical aspiration for

> *"a genuine federal democratic union with complete self-determination in line with the 1947 Panglong Agreement,"*

framing federalism as not merely a political arrangement but as an ethical imperative to rectify Myanmar's historical injustices against ethnic groups.

Federalism must be seen not only as a political system but also from an ethical perspective in that [it is] a response to historical injustices committed by the Myanmar military against ethnic peoples. Federalism, for the Chin people, as Dr. Sakhong commented, is not just a political option: it serves as a vital basis of their self-determination and equality with other national groups in Myanmar. This vision is based on the concept of asymmetrical federalism, recognizing that diverse ethnic states need different degrees of autonomy to accommodate their unique identities and preserve their local customary governance structures. Asymmetrical federalism is increasingly viewed as a flexible solution for ethnically diverse countries such as Myanmar, where one-size-fits-all governance structures fail to meet the needs and ambitions of individual ethnic groups. In such a context, the persistence of Chins to self-determination and equal representation translates as an appeal for federal autonomy, which respects the distinct identity without enforcing homogeneity.

He maintains that the concentration of power in the hands of the military, historically justified as a means of "saving the union," has been fundamentally flawed with the aspirations of Myanmar's diverse ethnic communities. His account of the history of peace talks reveals a deep-seated skepticism toward the military, grounded in decades of failed attempts to achieve federalism. He describes how ethnic organizations and the Chin society in particular have consistently demanded constitutional amendments to establish a true federal democratic union since the Taunggyi Conference of 1961. Yet, each of these efforts was systematically blocked by the military, beginning with General Ne Win's

assertion that federalism would destabilize the union. This longstanding military resistance to federalism has left the Chin and other ethnic communities viewing the military as an entity inherently opposed to ethnic rights and self-determination. His remark that "the military opposed the agreements" even when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi presented federalist principles at the Union Peace Conference in 2019 illustrates the military's consistent resistance to any form of federalism that would decentralize power.

By blocking these agreements, the military enforced a unitary approach that for decades has sidelined ethnic minorities and fueled mistrust among groups like the Chin. Such a federal model would allow the Chin and other ethnic groups to take charge of their own affairs autonomously when it comes to education, local governance, and cultural preservation, while still contributing to a larger federalist framework that recognizes the union's unity. This is far from the military's vision, which prioritizes centralized control and treats asymmetrical governance as a threat. He said that the military's call for dialogue (in 2023 with all EAOs) was simply designed to deceive and pacify ethnic groups and did not address their legitimate demands. His analogy—

> *"They are saying a tiger can eat grass"*

—suggests a fundamental distrust, framing the military's overtures as inherently deceitful and self-serving. He argues that these talks are not designed to "serve the interests of the people" but to sustain Min Aung Hlaing's "grip on power." In mentioning the unfulfilled pledges made during past dialogues, he calls into question the motives behind the military's actions and makes a case that to enter into talks would lend legitimacy to the military's rule. Such a view mirrors a Chin ethnic belief that real federalism cannot be arranged and dominated by a centralized, authoritarian military, which has historically used peace talks as a tool to maintain its dominance rather than as a platform for meaningful reform. It needs steps towards forming a genuine asymmetrical federalism, as proposed by federal theorists like Alfred Stepan, which would offer a constitutional framework allowing each ethnic state to exercise varying degrees of autonomy based on its unique needs and historical context, creating a balanced union rather than a centralized authority.

Chinland Constitution: Pioneering Self-Governance and Federal Aspirations

Long excluded from meaningful political representation, the Chin, who occupy both a geographically remote and economically underdeveloped part of the country, have been left out of the political process. The Myanmar military's repeated offensives in ethnic minority areas have made these communities feel even more alienated.

Given this reality, the Chin constitution isn't simply a set of laws but an expression of their desire for self-determination and identity. The Chinland Constitution[33], the first-ever charter written by Chin ethnic people of Burma/Myanmar, solidifies the role and functions of the Chinland Council as a central power that controls the land's executive, legislative, and judiciary powers in 2023. Adopted on December 6 by a group of elected representatives, including the Chin National Front (CNF), township and area-based administrations, sitting Members of Parliament at all levels and other prominent Chin leaders. The Constitution is a historic step towards local self-governance and collective political agency for the Chin people.

From a federalist perspective, this Constitution represents a major step towards autonomy for the Chin people by establishing the Chinland Council, which provides governance itself through executive, legislative, and judicial branches. This was ratified by a diverse group of Chin representatives from the Chin National Front (CNF) and other local administrative organizations and represents a grassroots approach to federal governance—moving away from the ad hoc, externally imposed Chin Hills Regulation Act (1896-1947) and earlier drafts. Through a framework of local representation integrated into a structure of distinct government bodies, the Constitution unambiguously defines a model of governance characterized by localized sovereignty within the national infrastructure of Myanmar.

Central to the Chin constitution is the concept of ethnic federalism. Ethnic federalism seeks to balance unity and diversity by granting substantial autonomy to ethnically defined regions while preserving the integrity of the larger state. This strategy would be in accordance with the demands of many ethnic groups in Myanmar, who claim that central rule has only furthered inequality and caused conflict. This Chin constitution requires a high degree of local control over natural resources, education, and the protection of culture. For example, one of those most integral to maintaining cultural identity is the right to teach and promote the Chin language, which the constitution has protected. It also creates mechanisms for equitable distribution of resources, recognizing economic justice as a key tenet of sustainable governance. This is a commitment to self-government and the dramatic reversal of Myanmar's top-down 2008 constitution in favor of a bottom-up vision grounded more on global ideas about local governance and participatory democracy. The provision of the Chin constitution is in line with universal principles that can be found, for example, in the United Nations Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). UNDRIP Article 3 acknowledges the "right of indigenous peoples to self-determination," and it defines the autonomy to govern their own affairs. In drafting their constitution, the Chin people exercise this right in a concrete and proactive way.

However, the Chin constitution's specific terms and rights with respect to governance

33. **"5th Draft Constitution of the Chinland."** *Burma Library*, https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs09/5th_draft_Cc.pdf. Accessed on 13th November 2024.

structures seem to be impractical in some ways and difficult to become an implementable framework. The Constitution's omission of provisions for shared governance with the union government, alongside its endorsement of a state flag and the Chin National Army as the only military force, suggests a claim for self-rule that many see as a step toward separatism. Yet, the preamble makes it clear that a "federal democracy union" is still the goal. This suggests a federalist project based on the "coming together" model, similar to Myanmar before Panglong, which was made up of many different decentralized states. The Constitution embodies a federalist vision founded not only on territorial autonomy but also on respect for cultural diversity by recognizing the Chinland people as the rightful owners of their land and resources.

In addition, the international community's inconsistent approach to self-determination complicates the Chin's aspirations. Although Western democracies—especially of the left—may profess support for the oppressed in principle, geopolitical considerations frequently dictate selective engagement. Support for federalism in Myanmar is tempered by strategic interests in Southeast Asia, including economic ties with China and concerns over regional stability. The most significant obstacle in Chin State itself is that the Council faces the struggle to gain control and engender inclusiveness over the different Chin language societies, and it appears as divided within. While the Council enjoys a positive majority of local administrative bodies' support, some townships and groups from within the Interim Chin National Consultative Council (ICNCC) rejected it. However, to realize its federalist design, the Chinland Council needs to overcome previous divisions between its own tribes, coordinate overlapping jurisdictions, and manage tensions with township regions that do not (yet) participate. The Council's final success hinges on its capacity to unite disparate local interests under its framework, reflecting a model that could potentially serve as a cornerstone for a future federal Myanmar.

In sum, the Chin perspective on federalism articulated by Dr. Sakhong and the Chinland Constitution ratified on December 6, 2022, by 235 representatives, is an emblem of the painstaking struggle for a projection of self-determined autonomy that is thwarted by a country's central military apparatus that views decentralization as a threat. For the Chin, federalism means a path to self-determination and equality, something that has been denied under military rule since 1962. Past failures in negotiations for peace have only reinforced Chin belief that the current military leadership could not be trusted to deliver federal democracy and strengthened their commitment to a vision of a federalized system free from military presence. It points to the need for a system that acknowledges the diversity of Myanmar's ethnic groups, allowing each of them the autonomy to govern itself according to its own needs while coexisting in a broader federal structure.

6.1.4 Federalism, Ethnic Aspiration: Karen resistance forces and Karen Ethnic Society

Name: Karen National Union (KNU) , Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)	Region: Karen State, Thai-Myanmar Border
Chairman Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win (KNU), and others	Ideology: Asymmetrical Federal State
Founded: 1949	estimated strength of all Karen Forces, opposing Tatmadaw, combined as of 2024: 40000 fighters (est)
Active in: primarily active in Thia -Myanmar border	Significant operation: Numerous operation within 70 years of fighting
Organization: Mainly composed of Karen ethnic people	Issues: so many army factions among the Karen groups and sometime – they would engage each other
Territorial Aspiration: Karen State	Political Wing: Numerous groups
Represented population in total est 2024: approximately 0.4 percent	Represented population in percentage of entire Myanmar (est 2024): approximately 2 million

Table 6.4. 2014 census and estimates, Karen resistance forces Facts
Source: Myanmar Peace Monitor, Shona Loong & Thai source[34,35,36,37]

Map 6.5. Karen State and Its territory
Source: South, Ashley. (2011)[38]

34. *"Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) | Myanmar Peace Monitor". mmpeacemonitor.org. Myanmar Peace Monitor. Retrieved 12 March 2024.*
35. *"ชาติพันธุ์กระเหรี่ยง ต่อสู้เพื่อความฝัน "รัฐกะเหรี่ยง"". pptvhd36.com (in Thai). 30 March 2021. Retrieved 3 April 2024.*
36. *"Karen Peace Council (KPC) | Myanmar Peace Monitor". www.mmpeacemonitor.org. Myanmar Peace Monitor. Archived from the original on 25 September 2015. Retrieved 15 October 2024.*
37. **"The Karen National Union in Post-Coup Myanmar."** *Stimson Center*, 2022, https://www.stimson.org/2022/the-karen-national-union-in-post-coup-myanmar/. Accessed 22 November 2024
38. South, Ashley. *Burma's Longest War: Anatomy of the Karen Conflict.* Transnational Institute, https://www.ashleysouth.co.uk/files/TNI-BurmasLongestWar.pdf. Accessed 22 November 2024

Recent interviews with leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) and its military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), reflect a vision for a unified, cohesive, and determined push toward a federal democratic Myanmar. They express an unequivocal commitment to federalism as the mode of governance to deal with Myanmar's ethnic diversity and decades of military oppression, as seen here: Spokesperson Pado Saw Taw Ni (KNU)39, Chairman Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win (KNU)40, General Secretary Padoh Saw Tar Doh Moo (KNU)41 and General Baw Kyaw Heh42, KNLA's deputy commander-in-chief. Although these interviews were conducted separately and in different locations, the leaders' calls for federalism reveal a strikingly consistent perspective within Karen leadership.

The KNU and KNLA have led the resistance in Myanmar as leaders of its largest and most influential ethnic armed group right after the military coup in 2021. Based almost entirely on the Myanmar-Thailand border, these organizations not only opposed the Myanmar regime but also made themselves invaluable supporters of the Burmese resistance groups. Many of these groups fled the country's interior and found refuge under KNU or KNLA protection, receiving essential military training and resources to continue the fight for democratic reform. Through these interviews, the Karen leaders also emphasize that federalism defined by principles of self-determination and accountability is not just a goal for the Karen people but an aspiration for every future in the whole country. By linking the cause of the Karen to that of Myanmar's broader democratic fight, these leaders have made a strong argument for federalism as the basis for a fair and inclusive state. Their views reflect the Karen ethnic perception of federalism as a necessary platform for self-determination and justice while addressing decades-long centralized military suppression. The above leaders demonstrate a consistent strategy that sees federalism as both the solution and protection to Karens' autonomy and rights.

Mobilizing Identity and Shared Grievances

Karen leaders stressed mobilization of ethnic identity to combat centralized military governance by the Tatmadaw. One finds this in Pado Saw Taw Ni's presentation of the Tatmadaw as "an enemy for both federalism and democracy," positioning the Karen struggle as part of a broader movement for democracy and autonomy within Myanmar.

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39. For the original interview, see: *Burma News International*. (2022). "KNU Says Military Council is the Enemy of Federalism and Democracy." Retrieved from https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/knu-says-military-council-enemy-federalism-and-democracy
40. The Japan News and The Yomiuri Shimbun. (2024). "Karen National Union Calls for Japanese Support." Retrieved from https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/world/asia-pacific/20240515-186238/.
41. Burma News International. (2022). "KNU Federal Army Necessary, Military to be Excluded." Retrieved from https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/knu-federal-army-necessary-military-be-excluded.
42. Transborder News. (2024). "Interview with Gen. Baw Kyaw Heh: Karen National Liberation Army Perspective on Myanmar Conflict." Retrieved from https://transbordernews.in.th/home/?p=37639.

By portraying the military as an enemy of both ethnic rights and democratic values, the Karen leaders are trying to develop a stronger collective identity among their community and connect their cause to a broader anti-military struggle in Myanmar. Gen Baw Kyaw Heh's comments underscore the significance of collective identity and consolidation of the ethnic armed groups in their struggle for autonomy. For the Karen, that common enemy is Myanmar's military regime; its ongoing tyranny not only provides impetus to disparate ethnic groups within Burma but also helps unite them around a cause.

General Baw Kyaw Heh remarks,

> *"We fight for what is right and believe that we will win someday,"*

underscoring a moral imperative that binds the Karen people together in their quest for self-determination. His description of increased cooperation among ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), when

> *"A group engages in fighting, the second group would launch the attack as well, and so does the third group,"*

reflects an evolving collective identity that extends beyond the Karen alone, resonating with a broader anti-regime sentiment across Myanmar. This growing inter-ethnic solidarity, which Baw Kyaw Heh believes will eventually lead to "a more simultaneous fashion" of resistance, as collective identity strengthens movements by building solidarity against a shared oppressor.

Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win's call for support—

> *"We want to end military rule and shift to a better nation based on federalism."*

— signals an appeal for similar allies inside and outside of Myanmar, one that reaches beyond just the Karen ethnic movement's reach, attempting instead to solidify relationships with other ethnic groups suffering under decades of Tatmadaw oppression. By associating the Karen cause with a wider national fight for freedom and against dictatorship, KNU leaders want to give their movement more support on both domestic and international fronts.

Ethnic Grievances and the Role of Tatmadaw

The Karen leaders' responses underscore the structural violence and deep-seated grievances fueling their resistance for over 70 years. Padoh Saw Taw Ni also highlights this continuing oppression after 2021 by emphasizing the Tatmadaw's continuous violations of agreements and violent repression of Karen autonomy. He notes that

"Around 500–600 conflicts have taken place in our region."

since the coup there has been continuing structural violence and battles against Karen people. And this history of decades-long subjugation is one reason for the Karen belief that they can only protect their identity and achieve autonomy through federalism. General Secretary Padoh Saw Tar Doh Moo goes into greater depth about these historical grievances, criticizing the Tatmadaw's methods of building nations by resorting to approaches of "ethnic or religious scapegoating" since the military's power grab in 1962. The state's scapegoating of ethnic minorities perpetuates systemic inequality and fuels resentment. In his statement, he also mentioned that Myanmar's "democratic regression" is inextricable from the demise of ethnic rights, supporting the Karen view that their grievances are not merely ethnic but reflect a broader structural problem embedded in Myanmar's centralized governance. On the other hand, General Baw Kyaw Heh's remarks highlight the underlying grievances fueling the Karen struggle, declaring,

"What is bad for us has to be rid of. What is wrong has to be righted."

This belief is rooted in decades of military oppression seen by the Karen as an existential threat to their autonomy and identity. The Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) sustained military engagement is a manifestation of this historical conflict, with federalism as a proposed remedy to systemic marginalization. Baw Kyaw Heh's emphasis on securing "freedoms of land" as the starting point before discussing

"Whether we will become an individual state or a federated state"

illustrates Karen's prioritization of de facto autonomy over theoretical discussions. The view that

"We have to first win the war and set a good foundation."

reflects a pragmatic understanding of federalism as something that cannot be negotiated without first securing military gains and self-governance. From a conflict theory perspective, the Karen leaders' responses underscore the structural violence and deep-seated grievances fueling their resistance because long-standing repression and the denial of self-determination drive ethnic groups toward rebellion[43].

Asymmetrical Federalism and the Concept of a Federal Army

The Karen leaders' view of federalism is a decentralized system that institutionalizes their autonomy and grants Karen State self-governance within an integrated political system of

43. Gurr, T. R. (1970). *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton University Press. Pp 155.

Myanmar. General Baw Kyaw Heh's assertion that

"The Karen Army's mobilization aims to liberate the land."

reflects a vision of federalism that prioritizes local governance and territorial control as foundational steps toward political autonomy. Baw Kyaw Heh's insistence on "regaining the administrative power" before determining the specifics of federalism highlights the Karen preference for a phased approach to autonomy.

This perspective is consistent with Stepan's theory of federalism, which maintains that asymmetrical governability arrangements may provide ethnic regions with the autonomy necessary to preserve cultural and self-governance autonomy within a larger national framework. Alfred Stepan's idea of asymmetrical federalism allows for (ethnic) regions that are culturally and historically distinct, like Karen State, to have extensive autonomy within the framework of the federal constitution [44]. Federalism, for the Karen, is a constitutional solution that also legitimizes their right to self-government but as a part of a unified state. Pado Saw Taw Ni's statement that the junta's plan for any model of a federal system would fundamentally lack the principles of equality and self-determination, which is the basis of a true federal system, and therefore any model imposed by the junta would in itself be flawed.

Furthermore, Pado Saw Taw Ni's call for the Karen people and the broader public to participate in resisting the military aligns with a vision of federalism rooted in democratic principles. Padoh Saw Tar Doh Moo goes further by detailing four primary political objectives, one of which includes establishing a federal army. This federal army would be distinct from the Tatmadaw and would serve to protect ethnic rights within a federal structure. The creation of a Federal Army represents a practical application of asymmetrical federalism, acknowledging the need for distinct military arrangements that safeguard the autonomy of ethnic regions.

Saw Tar Doh Moo's demand to exclude the Tatmadaw from politics corresponds with Stepan's analysis that asymmetrical federalism in post-conflict states frequently involves decentralized military structures sensitive to each region's security situation. For the Karen, a federal army would institutionalize their autonomy and provide an alternate source of power to check the Tatmadaw, long regarded as the instrument of oppression. Their vision closely resembles that of the asymmetrical federal system, which grants different

44. Stepan, A. (1999). Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), 68–72.

levels of autonomy to regions based on their unique cultural and political needs. Asymmetrical federalism posits that in ethnically diverse countries; uniform federal systems often fail to address the specific needs of minority regions.

Transitional Justice: Accountability as a Federal Imperative

The insistence on carving a path forward for the Karen for a "transitional justice mechanism," articulated by Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win, speaks to the Karen constituency that a federal arrangement is not enough without confronting the past and holding the Tatmadaw accountable for its past injustices. This mechanism would provide accountability for the military but also give a basis for rebuilding trust among Myanmar's ethnic groups so that federalism could remain a vehicle for peace and justice.

The demand for transitional justice well illustrates the Karen conviction that federalism must include ethical and legal frameworks that prevent the recurrence of military abuses. Post-conflict societies must confront their painful past in order to reach sustainable peace, according to transitional justice theory[45]. In emphasizing federal autonomy and accountability, the Karen leaders present it as a political solution as well as an ethical imperative to heal longstanding rifts perpetuated by decades of oppression. The importance of transitional justice, in the Karen leaders' statement, shows that they are not only interested in governance structures within federalism but also historical accountability.

Strategic Patience and Negotiation Dynamics

General Baw Kyaw Heh also highlights a blended practice of negotiations and armed conflict, which seems to reflect an understanding that value-oriented federalism has room for both diplomacy and resistance. He notes,

> *"If a negotiation has taken place and nothing has been implemented, nothing has been done; we cannot achieve the goals of such negotiation."*

In a way this is an expression of strategic patience on the Karen side, where peace talks are contingent upon real results rather than mere token gestures. His suspicion of previous negotiations that "produced nothing" embodies a space between an effort not to repeat historical mistakes in line with the attitude for Antonio Gramsci's "war of position," which emphasizes prolonged resistance until conditions turn more favorable toward meaningful gains[46].

For the Karen, federalism is not merely a constitutional framework but a hard-won achievement that must be implemented on the ground.

45. Teitel, R. (2000). *Transitional Justice*. Oxford University Press. 89.
46. Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers. 97

Furthermore, Baw Kyaw Heh's admission of the potential involvement of third-party intermediaries like Thailand, ASEAN or China indicates the influence that external backers can play in crafting a federal outcome. He notes that

> *"a mediator would also have to serve its own interest,"*

stressing the importance of outside interlocutors capable of helping negotiations while recognizing the autonomy and interests of ethnic groups. This mirrors a pragmatic perspective in the theory of federalism, where external mediation is considered as an instrument for stability provided it conduces to the self-determined aspirations of ethnic communities. Overall, General Baw Kyaw Heh's view on federalism reflects the Karen belief that autonomy is won through resistance as well as careful negotiation. General Baw Kyaw Heh's comments reflect a Karen conception of federalism as both a practical framework for autonomy and a moral imperative to rectify historical injustices. His "step-by-step" negotiating style, insistence on third-party mediation, and emphasis on territorial control prioritize foundational gains over rhetorical commitments. The statements of Karen leaders Pado Saw Taw Ni, Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win, and Padoh Saw Tar Doh Moo provide a coherent and strategic vision for a federal Myanmar. They further elucidate their vision of an asymmetrical federal model, with a federal army as a safeguard for ethnic rights and transitional justice as a necessary framework for addressing historical grievances.

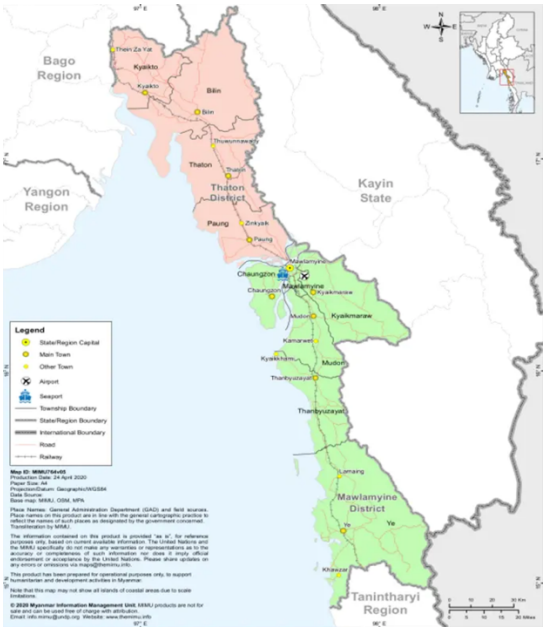
For the Karen, federalism is more than a governance structure—it is a means of survival, justice, and peace. Their vision of federalism, intertwined with demands for accountability, represents a pragmatic and ethical approach to building a democratic Myanmar that respects ethnic autonomy and protects against military oppression. The Karen leaders' perspectives thus provide a valuable blueprint for Myanmar's path toward a stable and inclusive federal system, highlighting the integral role of ethnic rights, transitional justice, and a decentralized military in shaping a post-conflict future.

6.1.5 Federalism, Ethnic Aspiration: Mon Army Leader and Mon Society

Name: Mon	Region: Rakhine State (also known as Arakan State) in Myanmar
the Mon State Federal Council (MSFC) and The Mon State Revolutionary Force, Mon State Defense Force's Chairman: Dr Thiri Mon Chan	Ideology: Confederation Model for Myanmar
Founded : in 2021	estimated strength as of 2024: (N/A) fighters
Active in: primarily active in Mon state	Significant operation: Numerous
Organization: The Mon State Revolutionary Force and Mon State Defense Force are minaly composed of Mon ethnics	Issues: Mon Ethnic troops are divided
Territorial Aspiration: Mon State	Political Wing: Mon State Interim Cooperation Committee (MSICC)
Total Population: around 2.5 Mil	Representation of Myanmar: around 0.5%

Table 6. 5. the Mon State Federal Council (MSFC) and The Mon State Revolutionary Force, Mon State Defense Force's Army Facts

Source: Myanmar Now News[47] & Myanmar Peace Monitor[48] (2024)



Map 6.6. Mon Region and Its territory

Source: MIMU (Myanmar Information Management Unit) [49] (2024)

47. **"Mon State."** *Myanmar Now*, 2024, https://myanmar-now.org/en/topics/mon-state/. Accessed 15 November 2024.
48. **"Mon State."** *Myanmar Peace Monitor*, 2024, https://mmpeacemonitor.org/?s=Mon+state. Accessed 15 November 2024.
49. **"Mon State."** *Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU)*, 2024, https://themimu.info/states_regions/mon. Accessed 15 November 2024

In an interview with Dr. Thiri Mon Chan[50], chairman of the Mon State Defense Force (MSDF) advocated for decentralized governance models. In a recent interview with CNI News, Dr. Thiri Mon Chan articulated the conditions under which a confederation might be realized:

> *"What is the strength of the Mon armed forces in Mon State? Armed forces are hard power and soft powers contain the patriotism of our people, culture, economy, education, social situation, and diplomatic affairs. If soft power and hard power come together and we have a strong national force, we can implement confederation or federation."*

His remarks reveal a nuanced understanding of power dynamics and governance structure, underscoring the interplay of military strength and societal cohesion in achieving political goals.

Confederalism: A Framework for Ethnic Autonomy

Confederalism, as Dr. Thiri Mon Chan describes it, entails states with separate sovereign powers.

> *"A state of a confederation has separate sovereignties and the powers for enacting laws, judiciary, monetary policy, national registration card, mining natural resources, and foreign relations. So, it is reportedly like a small country,"*

he explained. In a confederation, the member states remain sovereign and hold de facto power in all certain aspects of internal taxation, legislation, judiciary, military, law enforcement, and cooperating on specific agreed-upon matters, often limited to defense or foreign affairs.[51] This scheme is fundamentally different from other federalism models, in which sovereignty is constitutionally portioned out between a central government and its constituent states. The MSDF sees confederalism as a path to preserve ethnic autonomy and self-determination in Myanmar's multi-ethnic configuration. However, Dr. Thiri Mon Chan acknowledges the situational nature of governance structures:

> *"We are the same as the AA [Arakan Army]. But this depends on the situation. At least, a real federal union, an independent state that we accept because a federal state can win self-determination power."*

50. MON STATE – Dr. Thiri Mon Chan, the head of both the Mon State Defense Force (MSDF) and its political wing, the Mon State Federal Council (MSFC), lays out in an interview with CNI News what role he envisages for confederalism within Myanmar as a way to balance between hard power and soft power to enable decentralized government. On a more general level, it illustrates some of the wider patterns evident in EAOs seeking governance arrangements that prioritize autonomy and self-determination within Myanmar's multi-ethnic configuration. See CNI Myanmar (2023, September 19), *MSDF says it anticipates confederation*, available at: https://cnimyanmar.com/index.php/english-edition/17377-msdf-says-it-anticipates-confederation.
51. Riker, W. H. (1964). *Federalism: Origin, operation, significance*. Little, Brown, pp 78-98.

This fluidity indicates a practical attitude, understanding that federalism could at least be an interim solution but that ultimate aspirations maintain full sovereignty under a confederal model. In addition, he emphasizes that both soft and hard power must be incorporated into actualizing the confederal system: soft power pertains to culture, identity, economy, education, and diplomacy, while hard power refers to all armed forces, and each has its own objectives, but they cannot be separated in practice (Thiri Mon Chan 2023, 238). Confederalism therefore describes MSDF's strategic vision, suggesting that achieving confederalism requires both military strength and societal cohesion.

Federalism Versus Confederation in Myanmar's Context

Dr. Thiri Mon Chan stated that confederalism is dependent on circumstances, underscoring the dynamic tension between federalism and confederalism. When we generalize a basic definition of federalism, it is a form of governance with shared, though not necessarily equal, sovereignty and cooperation between the central government and subnational units. On the contrary, confederalism indicates a more relaxed union where the constituent states function almost as free agents. The MSDF's openness to the prospect of federalism as a temporary solution indicates practicality in terms of negotiating with other players and understanding political realities. The sovereign powers offered by confederalism—tax, judiciary, and foreign relations—attract ethnic groups looking to exercise maximum autonomy. However, the term's precise definition remains subject to interpretation.

> *"You should ask the AA about the confederation... But we are also supporting to build Myanmar as a federal democratic union."*

he said, adding to the murkiness of what it means. In the specific case of Myanmar, when transition models are seen from conflict resolution theory, it is clear that compromises between maximalist (confederal) and minimalist (federalism) demands may pave a way to stability.52 In advocating for one or the other model, both MSDF and AA seem to value self-determination and governing structures that respect ethnic autonomy amidst a fractured political landscape in Myanmar.

Challenges to Confederalism in Myanmar

Despite its appeal, confederalism faces significant challenges in Myanmar. The military junta's centralized control and the fragmented nature of EAOs (such as dividing and forming many different militias even among the same ethnic groups) complicate the

52. Horowitz, D. L. (1985). *Ethnic groups in conflict*. University of California Press, pp 97.

establishment of a unified confederal framework. Moreover, as Dr. Thiri Mon Chan observed, the success of confederalism or federalism depends on the alignment of hard and soft power within ethnic movements. The 2008 Constitution of Myanmar enshrines the military's control over critical sectors, making a shift toward confederalism politically implausible without a dramatic realignment of power dynamics. Although the UWSA provides a model for governance on de facto confederal powers (above) with full control over taxation, judiciary, and local administration as an aspiration for many EAOs like Mon, and Arakan; it may not be easy to replicate. Reproducing this template in Myanmar's ethnically varied peripheries is fraught with significant political, logistical, borderland, and military obstacles.

Implications for Ethnic Politics in Myanmar

Dr. Thiri Mon Chan's statement that "a federal union at least" also demonstrates an acknowledgment of the legitimacy of federalism that would afford self-determination as a compromise model. This is consistent with federalist theories, which were discussed in Chapter 3 that claim that decentralization constitutes an efficient tool for managing the ethnic diversity of divided societies. For Myanmar's multi-ethnic polity, a federal model may be a better fit, able to strike a balance between national unity and local autonomy. He also highlights the influence of armed resistance groups such as the MSDF on Myanmar's political direction. By positioning themselves as advocates for governance reform, these self-appointed defenders of the state converge the role of an armed movement as a security provider and political actor. As a result, the vision for confederalism of the MSDF is indicative of wider trends among Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations away from centralization and towards decentralized governance models.

Building on confederalism's focus on sovereignty and autonomy, the MSDF aligns itself with the AA and other EAOs who yearn for federalism that results in meaningful constitutional transformations. Yet significant challenges—from the junta's centralization of power to the potential for state disintegration—make this dream difficult to enact. As Myanmar sinks deeper into political crisis, the MSDF's pragmatic take that entertains possibilities of both confederation and federation could provide a way forward to negotiated reform. By analyzing the MSDF's aspirations, it becomes evident that sustainable governance in Myanmar requires innovative models capable of addressing ethnic diversity, promoting inclusivity, and mitigating conflict.

6.1.6 Federal Aspirations of Multiethnic Society in Myanmar

This analysis synthesizes insights from interviews with Sai Kyaw Nyunt, Joint Secretary of the People's Representatives Committee for Federalism (PRCF), conducted by *The Irrawaddy*[53], and Sai Leik of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD), interviewed by *Shan Herald*[54]. These perspectives offer a critical diagnosis of the PRCF's federal constitutional draft and of the broader federal aspirations of Myanmar's ethnically diverse society. The PRCF, launched by the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) in 2020, is composed of 12 multiethnic political parties (see below). After almost three years of deliberation, this alliance issued a draft federal constitution on February 12, 2024. The document outlines a decentralized governance structure to replace Myanmar's 2008 Constitution, which, according to PRCF leaders, entrenched centralization and marginalized ethnic representation.

UNA (Union Nationalities Alliance), a political alliance of nationalities parties in Myanmar, was established in 2020.

Its constituent political parties are

1. **ALD**: Arakan League for Democracy
2. **SNLD**: Shan Nationalities League for Democracy
3. **ZCD**: Zomi Congress for Democracy
4. **KNC**: Karen National Congress
5. **KNP (Karen)**: Karen National Party (Karen)
6. **KNP (Kayan)**: Kayan National Party
7. **KNP (Khami)**: Khami National Party
8. **MNDP**: Mon National Democratic Party
9. **SNSP**: Shan-Ni Solidarity Party

53. The Irrawaddy. (2024). "People's Charter Puts Federalism at the Heart of Myanmar's Democratic Future." Retrieved from https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/peoples-charter-puts-federalism-at-the-heart-of-myanmars-democratic-future.html.
54. Shan Herald. (n.d.). PRCF aims for federal constitution draft as Myanmar struggles with conflict. Retrieved November 15, 2024, from https://english.shannews.org/archives/26937
55. The Irrawaddy. (2024). Ibid

10. **SSKDP**: South Shan/Kayah Democratic Party
11. **DNDP**: Dawei Nationalities Democratic Party
12. **UNDP**: United Nationalities Democratic Party

Each of these parties represents specific ethnic communities and interests within Myanmar, emphasizing the inclusive and multiethnic nature of the UNA alliance.

Three basic motives stood at the back of the PRCF's drafting process: denouncing the illegitimate rule of the military junta after the 2021 coup, fixing the insufficiencies of the 2008 Constitution, and creating a constitutional framework appropriate to the unique multi-ethnic character of Myanmar. Despite serious challenges—including leadership vacancies resulting from imprisoned party leaders, re-registration of political organizations under junta-imposed conditions, and logistical hurdles due to conflicts in the regions—the PRCF endeavored to go beyond the UNA framework. That inclusivity functioned as an indication of the PRCF's commitment to collaboration across ethnic lines and its larger vision for federalism.

The PRCF's draft constitution represents a federalist response to Myanmar's political crisis. Its goal is to create a representative and decentralized union based on ethnic inclusion and democratic governance. As Sai Kyaw Nyunt stresses, federalism is the most realistic governance model that could give some form of representation to Myanmar's intensely diverse and multiethnic populace. It builds up these principles around regional autonomy and mutual respect, which are foundational principles for sustainable unity. Positioning the PRCF's federalist proposals within wider frames of federal theory, conflict resolution, and multi-ethnic coalition-building, this analysis highlights federalism as the only viable road to peace and inclusion in Myanmar's deeply divided society. Representing a paradigm shift, the draft constitution is an important step toward a pluralistic and democratic future for the nation.

Federalism as a Remedy for Structural Oppression

The PRCF's constitution is also a response to structural oppression, which has resulted in both socio-political inequalities and inequitable power balances in Myanmar.

Kyaw Nyunt notes that

> "*The conflict in our country since independence is deeply connected to the constitutional flaws,"*

indicating that centralized governance has consistently fueled ethnic grievances. By advocating a federal democratic constitution, the PRCF aims to establish a federal democratic constitution that ensures self-governance for its ethnic groups, countering decades of repression and exclusion under Myanmar's military rule. The PRCF's constitution not only proposes a decentralized structure, but its constitution also sets up safeguards against authoritarianism so that ethnic communities are protected from any further encroachment by central powers. As Kyaw Nyunt emphasizes,

> *"We can't accept any form of dictatorship, either military dictatorship or civilian dictatorship,"*

confirming that a federal democratic model is crucial for ensuring that Myanmar's government remains accountable to all its citizens. Federalism, in this context, represents more than a distribution of powers; it is a mechanism for structural change that addresses the root causes of conflict by empowering ethnic regions to govern autonomously. The PRCF's federal structure would dismantle the militaristic state apparatuses that for decades have ensured suppression by suppressing ethnic minorities who have consistently been denied fair representation and self-determination. Sai Leik underscores this objective, stating,

> *"Dealing with the dictatorship is the most challenging aspect... some consider armed resistance to be the only viable strategy for opposing the military regime."*

Here, federalism is not merely a political preference but an essential mechanism to ensure that ethnic groups can exercise self-governance and escape the structural constraints imposed by centralized military rule. The federal charter's explicit rejection of military participation in civilian governance further highlights the PRCF's commitment to a political structure that addresses ethnic grievances.

> *"We are indifferent to the viability of the general elections organized within the framework outlined by the 2008 constitution,"*

As Sai Leik put it, echoing the PRCF's position, we can't coexist democracy with a military-based constitution. Federalism here is seen as a vehicle for Myanmar's ethnic communities to assert themselves politically and build in their rights into a system of government that will protect them from past and present central repression.

Asymmetrical Federalism with a Democratic Framework and the Decentralization of Authority

The PRCF's draft constitution proposes a federal system that respects the distinct political and cultural aspirations of Myanmar's ethnic areas. The PRCF's constitution, with its stress on decentralization, fits into the pattern of asymmetrical federalism, which holds that ethnically diverse states can maintain stability by giving regions differing degrees of autonomy[56]. According to Sai Leik of the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD),

> *"Our political crisis continues to be characterized by an increasing frequency of military coups… The military-drafted constitution further sowed the seeds for protracted civil unrest in the country by failing to sufficiently embody the expressed concerns of its people."*

This criticism highlights the idea that only a federal constitution that guarantees local autonomy and democratic representation can end Myanmar's long-standing conflicts and power disputes. As Sai Kyaw Nyunt adds,

> *"Federalism alone is not enough. There must also be democracy,"*

emphasizing that in order for the nation to thrive, a federal democratic structure is critical. The PRCF most notably proposes a plan for governance that incorporates both federalism and democracy—a structure that accommodates local autonomy in the regions while upholding the collective unity of the nation. The PRCF constitution tackles matters like financial independence, inter-agency relations, and public service management to signal its commitment to decentralizing decision-making from the central government to local entities. These areas, which had been largely controlled by Myanmar's central military regime under the 2008 Constitution, would be a matter of local decision-making, giving ethnic regions the chance to manage their own communities as they see fit. Such redistribution exemplifies the concept of asymmetrical federalism through the lens of self-determination articulated by Stepan, as it places elements of governance on a fundamentally different basis—one better attuned to regional circumstances rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to governance across heterogeneous geographical and social contexts.

The PRCF's framework stresses that "sovereign power resides in the people," denounces military hegemony, and underscores the need for a model of governance led by civilians. This makes sense from the perspective of covenantal federalism theory (as articulated by Daniel Elazar) [57], since federal systems are best suited to diverse societies when

56. Stepan, A. (1999). "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model." *Journal of Democracy*, 10(4), 68–72.
57. Elazar, D. (1987). *Exploring Federalism*. University of Alabama Press, pp 168.

power-sharing arrangements respect regional autonomy and community values. The PRCF's goal to promote decentralization while ensuring a unified federal system seeks to ensure autonomy without the threat of secession with the ultimate aim of a lasting and stable federation that compromises for unity while respecting regional identity.

Multi-Ethnic Coalition-Building and Inclusivity: A Cooperative Federal Model

The PRCF's provisional constitution seeks to represent the aspirations of Myanmar's ethnic groups through a multi-ethnic alliance, namely between political parties representing ethnics including Shan, Karen, Zomi (Chin), Danu, and Mon, who advocate for federalism as a unifying solution. Therefore, federalism becomes a source of political contract that reconciles diverse interests through shared governance.

The PRCF then features parties from multiple ethnic backgrounds—Shan, Karen, Mon, and Zomi—giving force to the claim in the interview that "peaceful co-existence" is at the core of their vision of federalism. This coexistence principle reinforces not only the need for ethnic inclusivity in Myanmar's governance but also a common belief that only federalism can create real unity. The PRCF's multiethnic membership underscores its commitment to an inclusive political process, as Sai Leik notes:

> *"Within our PRCF, we have established a comprehensive framework that extends beyond political parties... including young individuals, students, and activists."*

Myanmar's ethnic communities have a broad range of interests, and it is essential that these interests are reflected in the constitution, not just the interests of various sectors with formal political power. The difficulties encountered in the drafting process demonstrate the complexity of coalition-building in a multi-ethnic federation.

According to Sai Leik,

> *"Some political parties "faced uncertainty over whether they would participate in the elections as their leaders were behind bars… [and] those such as Kokang and Kayan met with obstacles … due to continued conflicts there."*

These logistical and political challenges illustrate how hard it is to get disparate ethnicities in line, though the PRCF's approach fits a larger pattern of strategic pragmatism toward building an all-encompassing coalition. In holding a common front against the center's military rule, it is the PRCF's federalism that articulates both an ethnic identity—collective security indeed but for autonomy in a federal order. This is a federalist model, not of the

competitive but of the cooperative type, in which regional and central authorities cooperate over national issues while preserving the regional autonomy. As Kyaw Nyunt states, the PRCF's constitution is built upon

> *"Documents of ethnic armed organizations, ethnic political organizations, and ethnic Bamar organizations,"*

reflecting a vision that transcends individual ethnic agendas and instead promotes a system of shared governance. In casting a federal system based on inclusivity and mutual cooperation, the PRCF presents federalism as a way to harmonize diverse communities across Myanmar through a common framework, alleviating friction and building solidarity.

Strategic Pragmatism: Flexible Federalism and Ongoing Negotiation

The PRCF's position on federalism is pragmatic in nature, walking a fine line between the need for control over regional autonomy while maintaining national cohesion. The PRCF's constitution emphasizes that

> *"Concerted efforts are imperative to dismantle the prevailing military-dominated political structure,"*

underscoring the coalition's intention to achieve federalism in stages. Sai Leik further notes,

> "It is a three-step process*, with the determination of which step to undertake* depending *upon prevailing circumstances,"*

signifying that strategic maneuverability is responding to change in Myanmar's political landscape. The PRCF's readiness to accommodate constitutional changes that are consistent with broad principles is an embodiment of a flexible process. Kyaw Nyunt asserts that they

> *"are willing to accept any recommendation that does not go against our principles,"*

reflective of a practical approach to federalism that prioritizes inclusivity and collaboration while preserving the principles of autonomy and democracy. This incremental path towards federalism demonstrates Allegra's pursuit of compromise between ethnic factions and the need to find a common purpose in a federal arrangement. This ensures the new vision is adjusted by not closing the door on the ideas of vaporized moderate forces, nor is it likely to further inflame regional tensions, making federalism a process by which consensus and not a framework is sought.

This flexible stance also extends to future dialogues with the central government. While the PRCF's federal model is designed to counter the military's centralized control, Kyaw Nyunt recognizes the need for a federal constitution that

> *"is acceptable to all by negotiating between all stakeholders."*

This commitment to collective bargaining and compromise is a signal that the PRCF intends to formulate a federalist framework that is both resilient and adaptable and that engages federalism as both a pragmatic and an inclusive solution for the multi-ethnic context of Myanmar.

Through federalism, the PRCF hopes for a Myanmar that honors and does not marginalize diversity. This dedication to federalism, in the words of Kyaw Nyunt, aims at creating a union where 'peaceful co-existence' and self-determination are not just ideals but rather grounded in the nation's political framework. So, the draft constitution of the PRCF may serve as a blueprint for a federal Myanmar, based on commonality yet pluralistic, that will uphold justice and equality alongside autonomy and mutual respect. Federalism, as understood by the PRCF, is not just a constitutional framework but an alternative political agenda inspired by Myanmar's democratic socio-political context—aimed at ending decades of centralized oppression with a system that reflects the values and aspirations of all people in diverse communities.

Part 2

6.2 Federal Models and Their Applicability in Myanmar Context

Table 6.6. Federal Aspirations, Findings from part 1

Leader Name and Rank	Affiliation	Type of Federalism Advocated	Rationale	Worldview and Key Points
Tun Myat Naing, Chief	Arakan Army (AA)	Confederation Federal Model	AA seeks maximum autonomy and local control over Rakhine state, viewing the centralized state as a source of economic and cultural marginalization.	Emphasizes broad-based alliances including Bamar; rejects ethnonationalism; promotes collective struggle against military rule as a unifying cause.
Padoh Saw Kwe Htoo Win	Karen National Union (KNU)	Decentralized Ethnic-based Federalism with democratic principles	Emphasizes the need for genuine equality and autonomy for ethnic groups through a democratic federal union.	Federalism alone is not a cure; transitional justice is essential. Calls for accountability of Tatmadaw and views federalism as a way to regain trust and restore peace.
General Gun Maw	Kachin Independence Army (KIA)	**Asymmetrical Federal State**	Believes federalism should come from the people, ensuring guaranteed ethnic rights and representation.	Supports the idea of a union built on trust and equality; stresses the importance of federalism being people-centered, not top-down.
Lieutenant General Yawd Serk	Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)	Ethnic-based Federalism with autonomy	Federalism seen as a way to preserve Shan identity and autonomy within a union framework.	Advocates for equality and autonomy for Shan people; cautious about the military's role and stresses political solution through inclusive federalism.
Lieutenant General N'Ban La	Northern Alliance / KIA	Inclusive Federal Union	Aims to unify various ethnic groups under one federal union to end decades of conflict.	Emphasizes cooperation among ethnic armed organizations; supports collective action to achieve federal goals.
Dr. Salai Lian Hmung Sakhong, and the 2023 Chinland Constitution	the Chin National Front (CNF)	**Asymmetrical Federal State**	For the Chin people, as represented by Dr Sakhong, federalism is not simply a political preference but an essential framework for self-determination, equality, and the preservation of their identity within Myanmar.	federalism is not simply a political choice but is fundamentally the only viable model for self-determination, equity, and the preservation of their identity in Myanmar.
The People's Representatives Committee for Federalism (PRCF) and Multi-Ethnic Constitutional Reform	UNA (Union Nationalities Alliance)	decentralized Federalism	Its goal is to create a representative and decentralized union based on ethnic inclusion and democratic governance	Federalism must represent more than a distribution of powers; it is a mechanism for structural change that addresses the root causes of conflict by empowering ethnic regions to govern autonomously.

The findings from my own interviews, as well as the above discourse analysis of Myanmar's conflict dynamics and ethnic aspirations (as summarized in Table 6), highlight important

themes that have a bearing on the future course of Myanmar's polity. During the post-coup period, fragmentation, which has been a constant feature of Myanmar's ethnic wars, has increased and presents a major challenge to developing federalism and national unity. The above ethnographic content analysis, as summarized in table 6, and discussions contextualize the findings, highlighting the risks of ongoing divisions, the inadequacies of negotiations with the Tatmadaw, and the need for transitional justice to lay the ground for a united federal future.

This part 2 presents an in-depth discussion of the federal models, their applicability to Myanmar's unique situation, and a reflection on the key themes emerging from the empirical findings of previous sections. It examines how the dysfunctions of fragmentation, failed negotiation, and the rise of ethnic consciousness have informed Myanmar's political course. Federalism, as an attractive structural solution, depends on the context, historical memory and readiness of institutions. There is no system that is ideal, since models that are centrifugal, centripetal, ethnocentric, confederal, or hybrid have been compared. Instead, Myanmar needs to sustain its own version of the model, shaped by the global example but tailored to its own political, economic, and cultural context.

6.2.1 Centripetal Federalism

Centripetal federalism, also known as "federation by aggregation," describes a model in which previously autonomous or sovereign units voluntarily coalesce to form a federal union. This bottom-up process is predicated on the pursuit of a common federal identity that transcends constituent heterogeneity. Classical examples include the United States, Switzerland, and Australia, wherein independent colonies or cantons aggregated into a unified federal polity to enhance mutual security, economic coordination, and collective sovereignty.[58] In these systems, federal structures are shaped by a deliberate accommodation of multiple pre-existing identities into a new, overarching national identity.

Centripetal federalism, or federation by aggregation, is the process by which formerly independent or sovereign units unify into a federal union voluntarily. This is a bottom-up approach, driven by the quest for a singular federal identity that overrides component heterogeneity. Prime examples have included the United States, Switzerland, and Australia, where separately sovereign colonies or cantons merged to form a single federal structure in order to forge a collective security, economic coordination, and shared sovereignty. [59] In

58. Ronald L. Watts, *Comparing Federal Systems*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).
59. Ibid.

these systems, federal states emerge from an intentional inclusion of multiple pre-existing identities into a new state identity. Theoretically, centripetal federalism assumes a pre-federal state comprised of separate self-governing units, each possessing sufficient institutional maturity and political coherence to negotiate entry into a union. As Topperwien notes, the essence of such systems lies in their capacity to forge unity from diversity, enabling a federation to emerge not as a fragmented compromise but as an intentional political synthesis.[60] In the Myanmar context, the applicability of centripetal federalism is notably constrained. The country does not possess a history of truly sovereign ethnic regions voluntarily merging into a federal structure. Instead, many of its ethnic states were historically integrated into a unitary colonial and post-colonial framework, often through coercion or administrative fiat.[61] The lack of institutional autonomy among constituent units, combined with the central state's coercive assimilation policies, significantly undermines the foundational prerequisites of centripetalism. Consequently, centripetal federalism is not structurally suitable for Myanmar. However, its normative features—mutual consent, recognition, and inclusive identity formation—may inform future political negotiations as aspirational goals.

6.2.2 Centrifugal Federalism

By contrast, centrifugal federalism is a process of devolution by an established centralized state to subnational units of government, creating a federal system. Top-down formal devolution pursued in order to manage regional identities or to prevent secessionist politics is exemplified by countries like Spain, Belgium, Nigeria, Germany, or Nepal. [62] In such instances federalism is constructed not from autonomous pre-union states; rather, it is derived from what was once a unitary polity reorganizing its territories to accommodate internal demands. This type of federalism is marked by more institutions and political fragility. The process requires tremendous negotiation over the distribution of power, competencies, fiscal arrangements, and symbolic recognition of identity. This model is frequently found in states that seek to preserve unity amid diversity—through formal decentralization rather than fragmentation, as Alfred Stepan notes of "holding together" federalism. [63] The postcolonial statehood structure in Myanmar of centralized rule and long-standing ethnic insurgencies is more historically and politically feasible in a centrifugal federal solution. The 2008 Constitution nominally establishes a form of federalism, but its centralized features—particularly the military's entrenched authority—undermine genuine decentralization.[64] However, the rising demands for federalism, as we found in the

60. Julia Topperwien, "Federalism and the Accommodation of Ethnic Diversity: Comparative Perspectives," *Occasional Paper Series*, Forum of Federations, 2009.
61. Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).
62. Watts, *Comparing Federal Systems*. Ibid.
63. Alfred Stepan, *Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model*, Journal of Democracy, 10(4), 1999.
64. *The Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar*. State Peace and Development Council, 2008. https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/mya132824.pdf.

above analysis, expressed also in the Panglong Agreements as in Chapter 1 and more recent peace processes, highlights the need for Myanmar to reconceptualize its centralized governance. Centrifugal federalism, if formulated rightly, may provide a credible formula for meeting the varied aspirations of Myanmar's ethnic nationalities without compromising the territorial integrity of the Union. More importantly, it is true to the reality of Myanmar's constitutional development, which has never involved any deeper horizontal coordination among its ethnic states. Myanmar's course toward this shift to a workable model of centrifugal federalism is still riddled with obstacles. The old institutional imbalances, a deep distrust in politics and above all else—the military's iron grip on power remain an impediment to any meaningful attempt to make real change. Whether such a federal system can actually take hold depends not merely on surface changes, but also on solid constitutional promises, tangible institutional reorganization and, crucially, true political will among authorities to cede power instead of just talk about it.

But the increasing demand for federalism, rebounding off of the Panglong Agreements and echoed by recent peace talks, indicates an urgency to rethink how Myanmar arranges its political geography. There is a way out, perhaps—a well-structured centrifugal system that respects the distinct voices of ethnic communities while keeping the Union intact. More importantly, it is true to the reality of Myanmar's constitutional development, which has never involved any deeper horizontal coordination between its ethnic states. Centrifugal federalism, in reality, remains blocked by entrenched institutional asymmetries, political distrust, and a military that lords over any potential governance arrangement. The likelihood of a sustainable centrifugal model will depend to a large degree on durable constitutional guarantees, and institutional reform, as well as a real political commitment to transfer sizeable authority to the ground.

Suitability for Myanmar

In consideration of the degree of suitability of the federal model to the country and the implementation, centrifugal federalism is found to be more appropriate in structural terms because the country's historical development has occurred as a unitary state that was characterized by an authoritarian centralism as well as conflict. What is urgently required in Myanmar is a federation where significant self-determination is possible while the Union is maintained, and centrifugal federalism provides the rough template. However, transplanting centrifugal federalism alone is not enough. It must be aligned with Myanmar's complex ethno-political mosaic. The country lacks institutional balance between its constituent units and the central state, and there is a pervasive absence of trust. Moreover, the military's constitutional role and economic control render devolution largely theoretical without a fundamental reconstitution of state authority.[65]

65. International Crisis Group. *Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process.* Asia Report No. 308, 19 June 2020, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/308-rebooting-myanmars-stalled-peace-process

While Centripetal federalism may not perfectly mirror Myanmar's present structure, it conveys deeper values that are difficult to brush under the carpet: voluntary unity and mutual respect—even celebration of diversity. These ideals may feel distant, even utopian, in the present environment—but they could well be the principles on which a new constitutional settlement is based once conflict cools. Rebuilding trust and legitimacy could potentially start from this very foundation.

6.2.3 Ethnocentric or Identity-Based Federalism

Federal systems are generally categorized based on the principles that underpin the creation of federating units: administrative (geographical) or ethnic (identity-based) federalism. Ethnic or identity-based federalism (also known as cultural or non-geographical federalism) creates federations through aggregation of historically and geographically non-contiguous regions that share one or more cultural, ethnic, linguistic, or religious trait(s). In the past, it was used in multicultural societies to preserve the identity of minority communities and achieve their fair representation in the central institutions of government. Ethiopia is the quintessential example of ethnic federalism, featuring constitutional recognition on the basis of ethnonational identity and the right to secede.[66] Nations like India and Pakistan have established federal systems that allow for language and cultural diversity but identity was not the exclusive foundation for state-making. Ethnic federalism is usually seen as design to address previous perceptions of grievance, marginalization, and foster national integration through recognition of diversity. But it's also criticized for institutionalizing divisions, entrenching ethnic lines, and cultivating zero-sum politics when a stronger ethnic group forms its advantage over others.[67]

The commander of the Arakan Army, Tun Myat Naing, offers a critical perspective on the limits of ethnocentric federalism in Myanmar. He outlines a move away from narrowly conceived ethno-politics, cautioning that "concentrating on a single ethnic objective will not produce a full victory (over militarization issues and its authoritarian mindset)"[68]. This statement captures a growing tendency for ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) to move beyond narrow identity demands with a broader federated aspiration, one that embraces minority and majority Bamar alike. The narrative of different resistance groups, meanwhile, is changing. The military junta is coming increasingly to be seen as a common foe—not just of one ethnic class, but of many. The focus is more on building solidarity across group lines than on autonomy for a single ethnic category, with that unity based in shared political and economic struggles. This development is also in line with what social movement theorists have long known: when groups come together across multiple identities, they are more likely to threaten deeply entrenched regimes. By highlighting

66. 22. Fessha, Yonatan Tesfaye. *Ethnic Diversity and Federalism: Constitution Making in South Africa and Ethiopia.* Ashgate Publishing, 2010, pp. 95–132.
67. Adeney, Katharine. "Federalism and Ethnic Conflict Regulation in India and Pakistan." *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2007, pp. 45–72.
68. see detail analysis in 6.1.1 above

the necessity of alliances "not only with ethnic minorities but also with the majority ethnic Burmese," Tun Myat Naing envisions a federated resistance rather than an ethnically confederated federation. Such evolving political discourse challenges the premise of rigid ethnocentric federalism. Although the need for identity recognition is critical to many EAOs (identity is), there is growing recognition that the constitutionalization of ethnicity as the primary grounds for federal units is likely to replicate exclusionary dynamics and block the emergence of a common federated national governance. In contrast, a federal model that accommodates both cultural autonomy and civic nationalism will provide a more inclusive basis for post-authoritarian reconstruction.

Its Unsuitability for Myanmar

The applicability of ethnocentric federalism requires a delicate balance between the recognition of diversity and national integration for Myanmar. For some ethnic minorities, identity-based federalism is seen as a remedy for decades of exclusion and centralization, but others—especially those now advocating pan-ethnic alliances—are wary of its divisive fragmentation potential. Ethnic federalism can work, in the way that scholars like Brendan O'Leary claim, when it is underwritten by a sense of mutual trust, supplemented by institutional guarantees, and realized through the appropriate form of power-sharing, but it risks instability when implemented in highly divided societies with weak state institutions[67] (such as in Myanmar).

Nevertheless, aspects of identity-based federalism—self-determination for cultures and languages and regional autonomy—can be adapted into a general framework of asymmetrical federalism. This would allow for differentiated autonomy without ethnic division. Such models exist in Canada (Québec), Spain (Catalonia and the Basque Country)[69] and India (Nagaland)[70], where federal designs will allow identity-specific claims while protecting the integrity of the central state.

In summary, identity-based federalism cannot be outright rejected in the future constitutional order of Myanmar. However, it has to transcend its most rigid formulations to accommodate both pluralistic representation and inclusive citizenship. The above research analysis emanating from ethnic leaders suggests an increasing preference for flexible cross-ethnic alliances over ethnically exclusive governance—a critical fact for formulating a federal system that is both just and sustainable for everyone in the country.

69. Kymlicka, Will, Jean-Robert Raviot, and Seokwoo Lee. "Living Together: International Aspects of Federal Systems." *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 15, 1997, pp. 17–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.1997.11014336.
70. Adeney, Katharine, and Wilfried Swenden. "Multinational Democratic Federations: Comparing India with Multi-level Systems from the Global North." *Indian Politics and Policy*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/23210230241291357.

6.2.4 Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Federalism: Applicability to Myanmar

Federal systems are commonly distinguished along a gradient of symmetry, from those advocating a completely uniform distribution of power (symmetrical federalism) to those providing for variation among the units of their federation (asymmetrical federalism). And it is this distinction that is most relevant in Myanmar, where embedded asymmetries of history, identity, development, and governance systems make a one-size-fits-all federal model problematic in practice.

Limitations of Symmetrical Federalism in the Context of Myanmar

Symmetrical federalism, which is exercised across the globe in countries like America and Germany, emphasizes uniformity in constitutional powers and institutional representation among the states or regions. In the US, each state has equal representation in the Senate regardless of how many people live in it. Similarly, in Germany, every division of the German state creates a division known as Länder which share equivalent constitutional status and rights, reflecting a commitment to egalitarian federalism.[71]

Yet the symmetrical model assumes a common historical path, and broad intrastate balance of development and institutions—which are largely missing in Myanmar. The ethnic regions like the Kachin, Shan, or Rakhine have had their own historical background, identity, and developments that largely relate back to their marginalization or engagement in conflict.[72] Symmetrical federalism under such conditions would tend to overlook inequalities and thus reproduce systemic injustices. Symmetrical federalism also assumes some basis of trust between the central government and constituent units. But in Myanmar this confidence has been catastrophically eroded through decades of authoritarianism, militarization, and exclusionary state behavior. [73]

Additionally, the structural inequalities that currently exist in Myanmar–in which Bamar-majority areas receive a disproportionately overwhelming share of infrastructure and investment–would likely be exacerbated under a symmetrical model that fails to deliver targeted redress for historically disadvantaged areas[74]. The risk of perceived majoritarianism, especially by the Bamar majority, further undermines the model's credibility in multiethnic contexts.

71. Ronald L. Watts, *Comparing Federal Systems*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), pp. 67–70; Arthur B. Gunlicks, *The Länder and German Federalism* (Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 50–55.
72. Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 120–140.
73. Richard Horsey, "Fragmentation and Federalism in Myanmar," *International Crisis Group Report*, 2023, p. 42.
74. Matteo Fumagalli and Achim Kemmerling, "Development Aid and Domestic Regional Inequality: The Case of Myanmar," *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2022, pp. 486–515.

The Promise and Complexity of Asymmetrical Federalism

On the other hand, asymmetrical federalism can develop varying levels of autonomy; the structure of governance becomes adapted according to the specific requirements and histories of the states. It has been effectively utilized in states such as Canada—where Quebec has established very significant degrees of cultural and linguistic independence—and Russia, where republics such as Tatarstan have negotiated their own specific deals within the federation.[75]

Asymmetrical federalism resonates strongly with the aspirations of Myanmar's ethnic leaders. The KNU, for instance, has always argued for local control over education, culture, and development. The Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) similarly demands resource sovereignty and local governance as preconditions for peace. These requests are a reflection of and demand for substantive self-determination in the Union—not merely symbolic inclusion.

Such a model has several advantages: it allows regions to govern themselves in ways that are culturally respectful, it addresses economic inequality by policy design, and it allows for the preservation of cultural identity without fracturing the country.[76] And it offers a practical path to establishing trust by visibly acknowledging and institutionalizing the distinctiveness of Myanmar's diverse regions.

Suitability for Myanmar

Asymmetrical federalism is by no means a cure-all, but it is a context-sensitive and flexible administrative arrangement that is better suited for a state like Myanmar. Its degree of flexibility to deal with diversity, correct historical injustices, and its potential for strong local government also make it a more hopeful foundation on which the federation can be remade in Myanmar than symmetrical models. But this approach needs strong constitutional checks to prevent further splintering and radicalizing of local aspirations so that autonomy is not perverted into a kind of separatism. It also demands political will—from center and periphery alike. Transitional justice mechanisms—truth commissions, reparations, and inclusive dialogue—are also needed to rebuild trust and cooperation.

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75. Linda Cardinal, "Asymmetrical Federalism and Language Policy in Canada," in *Asymmetrical Federalism and Minority Rights*, eds. Alain-G. Gagnon and James Tully (Routledge, 2001), pp. 183–202; Cameron Ross, "Federalism and Democratization in Russia," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2001, pp. 395–411.
76. Liam D. Anderson, *Federal Solutions to Ethnic Problems: Accommodating Diversity* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 143–148.

There should be open and fair negotiation of autonomy arrangements, with intra-governmental coordination, and protection of minority rights. Without these tools, asymmetry can turn into a pretext for political manipulation or elite capture. And in the end, the country's multiethnic character, as well as its difficult political history, demands a federal resolution that moves beyond uniform rule. If thoughtfully implemented, asymmetrical federalism might provide balance between unity and diversity—the constitutional base that both acknowledges the historical injustices and serves as a road map to a future aspiration of its peoples.

6.2.5 Decentralized and Centralized Federalism

Another dimension can be categorized as centralized federalism and decentralized federalism. Decentralized federalism stresses autonomy of the region; centralized federalism emphasizes more in centralization, where regions have less maneuverability. For a country such as Myanmar, which is deeply divided, with ethnic fragmentation, contested sovereignty, and weak institutional infrastructure, it is necessary for the two approaches to be scrutinized in terms of their theoretical foundations. Decentralized Federalism and Its Relevance for Myanmar Swiss and Belgian experiences with decentralized federalism demonstrate the possibility of creating regional governance structures that contribute to maintaining identity while promoting self-rule as well as democratic accountability.

Decentralized Federalism and Its Applicability in Myanmar

Switzerland and Belgium's decentralized federalism show that designing regional forms of governance can uphold identity while promoting self-rule and democratic accountability. In Switzerland, cantons wield considerable authority on tax, education, and internal administrative matters while working together on key national functions like defense and foreign policy. Likewise, division into linguistic frontiers in Belgium has given rise to cultural autonomy and identity through creating conditions for identity preservation within a harmonious legal and economic environment.[77]This is a model that appeals to some of Myanmar's ethnic minorities, who want to have control over education, resource management, internal security, and more. In Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine states in particular there have been continual calls for a model of governance along the lines of self-determination. Decentralized federalism could potentially contribute by allowing the regions to shape policies and cultural frameworks while addressing historical grievances of exclusion and marginalization[78]. But decentralized federalism is only as strong as a firm and fair central guarantor of interregional coordination, dispute mediation, and constitutional protection.

77. Somin, Ilya. *The Case for Decentralized Federalism*. Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 23–78.
78. De Visser, Jaap. *Developmental Local Government: A Case Study of South Africa*. Intersentia, 2005, pp. 72–90.

uphold constitutional principles. The central government in Myanmar, which has long been dominated by the Tatmadaw is with illegitimate authority to the ethnic minorities and remains institutionally weak. In which case, devolution of power runs the risk of creating power vacuums, elite capture, or a recycled ethnic antagonism.[79]

There is also the danger of disintegration. Some regions, like Rakhine or Shan, privileged with natural resources and relatively stronger political institutions, can assert more independent, functioning autonomy or secession, further repeating the integrity of the state. Poorer states like Chin or Kayah, on the other hand, may face difficulties with administrative capacity, further deepening disparities in governance and development.[80] Decentralized federalism also assumes regional bureaucracies capable of democratic governance, fiscal management, and policy formulation. But regional institutions are still fledgling in Myanmar and are susceptible to corruption, capacity limitations, and political co-optation. Decentralization in the absence of a meaningful process of institutional reform and transitional justice can exacerbate and not alleviate Myanmar's crisis of governance.

Centralized Federalism and Its Merits and Risks in Myanmar

Centralized federalism, on the other hand, minimizes regional autonomy but maximizes national solidarity and policy coherence. Models in South Africa and India depict how it works. In South Africa, defense, finance, and intergovernmental policy are more centralized, while provinces have some power. The central government of India has the power to override the power of provincial governments through Article 356 (President's Rule), a mechanism to maintain national stability. [81]

Centralized federalism could theoretically prevent secession, promote equitable policy, and ensure the territorial integrity of Myanmar. It could also give the federal government the power to rationalize social services and to settle disputes among states. [82] But those virtues are far outweighed by the history and structural realities of Myanmar. Myanmar's tradition of centralized performative governance has been synonymous with ethnic marginalization, military authoritarianism, and Bamar hegemony. Minority regions see it as an act of suppression rather than bringing together cohesion. And any federal model that curtails regional autonomy is almost certain to be interpreted as a continuation of historical injustices. [83]

79. Horsey, Richard. "Fragmentation and Federalism in Myanmar." *International Crisis Group Report*, 2023, pp. 38–45.
80. Fumagalli, Matteo, and Achim Kemmerling. "Development Aid and Domestic Regional Inequality: The Case of Myanmar." *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 65, no. 4, 2022, pp. 486–515.
81. Chhibber, Pradeep K. *Democracy Without Associations: Transformation of the Party System and Social Cleavages in India*. University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 73–85.
82. Holliday, Ian. *Burma Redux: Global Justice and the Quest for Political Reform in Myanmar*. Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 98–102.
83. South, Ashley. *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. Routledge, 2008, pp. 85–92.

More importantly, centralized federalism could entrench majoritarianism. With the Bamar majority running the state and economy, the ethnic minorities fear an exclusion from decision-makers. The model also restricts regionalization, thereby undermining cultural autonomy and subordinating regional developmental priorities. Most critically, it has the potential to enshrine the Tatmadaw's authority, particularly if there are no constitutional barriers to military interference in regional administration. Ethnic communities that have suffered under military violence are unlikely to accept any federal proposal that leaves the military with virtually unchecked authority. [84]

Suitability for Myanmar

Both decentralized and centralized federalism contain significant dangers if they are considered in isolation. Decentralization without the necessary building of capacity and fair means of resolving conflict risks dividing societies and widening the gap between rich and poor. Centralization absent of institutional reform will always have the tool of repression and grievances carried out by majority ethnic groups. The future of Myanmar requires a finely modulated balance: the type of autonomy and meaningful self-determination for ethnic states that is matched by such a reformed, inclusive federal center that can sustain national coherence. Any such hybrid will have to be based on constitutional pluralism, transitional justice, and institutional reform. Without all these features, no model—decentralized or centralized—can tackle sustainably the multi-dimensional conflict landscape in Myanmar.

6.2.6 Confederal Federalism & Its Unsuitability in the Myanmar Context

Confederalism, or a confederal union, is a political arrangement of states in which constituent units retain substantial sovereignty and delegate limited powers to a central authority (e.g. in defense, or in terms of customs, information, or enforcement). Unlike a federation, which is formed through constitutional integration, confederations are unions by consent, with cooperation often remaining voluntary and revocable. Historic models, such as pre-1848 Switzerland and the European Union, demonstrate both what is achievable and the limitations of this model.[85]

The concept of confederal federalism has also been appealing in Myanmar, where ethnic groups from the AA and the KNPP show an interest in the proposed framework, which

84. Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*. Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 77–101.
85. Elazar, Daniel J. *Exploring Federalism*. University of Alabama Press, 1987, pp. 34–36.

essentially that they can exercise self-government in their territories and selectively cooperate on matters of the nation. This is appealing because it allows for the greatest measure of local control, ensuring that regional governments reflect the cultural, economic, and political hopes of neglected ethnic power. [86] That pattern is consistent with Myanmar's historical dimensions of ethnic grievances, particularly in the related areas of self-determination, cultural preservation, and local control over resources. Confederal federalism would allow the preservation of native languages, customs, and institutions while allowing for practical regional cooperation on issues such as infrastructure and trade without leaving local priorities.[87]

Challenges of Confederal Federalism in Myanmar

Despite these normative attractions, the implementation of a confederal system in Myanmar would be fraught with risks. First and foremost, the absence of a strong central government would create a governance vacuum vulnerable to military exploitation. Given the Tatmadaw's history of filling power vacuums with authoritarian rule, a weak confederal center might merely pave the way for its reassertion—repeating historical cycles of domination and conflict.[88]

Confederal federalism lacks strong conflict resolution mechanisms. These interstate disputes—for example, when Shan, Palaung, Kachin, Rakhine and Chin are bumping up against each other with overlapping territorial claims—could continue to escalate and clash without a central arbitrator. Full cooperation is based on mutual trust, something in short supply after decades of civil war, ethnic repression, and failed peace agreements. [89] Further, the system could lead towards "Balkanization"— where a state divides into hostile or rival factions. More affluent ethnic states, such as Shan, Kachin, and Rakhine, may dominate resource flows and take paths towards secession, while poor areas such as Chin and Kayah will continue to struggle through lack of infrastructure, administrative experience, and so on. [90]

The structural risks are magnified by the institutional frailty of Myanmar. Regional jurisdictions do not have the administrative capabilities to accommodate significant autonomy, and the legal instruments of enforcement are either weak or politically compromise.

86. Linder, Wolf. *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*, 3rd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 15–18.
87. McCormick, John. *Understanding the European Union: A Concise Introduction*, 7th ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 67–70.
88. Linder, Wolf, and Isabelle Mueller. *Swiss Democracy: Possible Solutions to Conflict in Multicultural Societies*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 45–79.
89. Lian, Pau Sian. *Federalism in Myanmar*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2023, pp. 85–102.
90. Sriram, Chandra Lekha. *Transitional Justice in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 89–95.

The system could also collapse into dysfunction if there's not plausible dispute resolution and fiscal equalization. [91]

Political Nuances and Implications

Yet, any confederal federalism will have to deal with the entrenched Tatmadaw hegemony, which has consistently opposed any form of decentralization that curtails its control of resource-rich ethnic areas. It would likely diminish their power and influence, bring military opposition, and provoke instability as always. [92]

In addition, intra-ethnic imbalances of power could reproduce national domination on the regional level. Shan State, rich in resources and geographically strategic, might, for instance, "be a regional hegemon" that furthers rivalry and reconstitutes patterns of exclusion witnessed under the Barman centralized state. The danger is not only of vertical fragmentation but also of horizontal inequality. Years of fighting have eroded the bonds of trust between ethnic regions and the central state. Confederalism, based on mutual consent, cannot endure unless there is reconciliation and historical justice. So much is supposed to happen in this assumption, from transitional justice mechanisms to truth-telling initiatives, resource sharing, and guarantees of equitable power-sharing.

Why Confederal Federalism Is Structurally Unsuitable for Myanmar

With its appealing normative aspirations—this form of federalism promises autonomy, dignity, and identity preservation, among other things—its structure, as argued, could render it unfit for Myanmar's fragile context. The absence of a benign median puts the model at risk for coup, interstate war, and secession. Because it cannot tackle institutional weakness and historical injustice, this model is not cut out for Myanmar's realities, which has a deeply divided society shaped by decades of conflict. Myanmar has to adopt the federal structure that strikes a balance between devolution and centralism, mending its institutions and putting up an institutionalized transitional justice as one of its guiding principles for achieving sustainable peace and inclusivity. Therefore, confederalism, in its pure form, cannot achieve this balance.

6.2.7 Cooperative and Hybrid Federalism: Comparative Potential and Constraints

Cooperative federalism is sometimes known as "marble cake federalism," in which state and federal governments exercise shared duties for national matters. This more

91. Anderson, Liam D. *Federal Solutions to Ethnic Problems: Accommodating Diversity*. Routledge, 2013, pp. 135–152.
92. South, Ashley. *Ethnic Politics in Burma: States of Conflict*. Routledge, 2008, pp. 94–98.

interdependent, joint policy-making system is common in countries such as Australia and Germany.[93]

Hybrid federalism, in contrast, combines different federal types—in the first place, asymmetrical and cooperative federalism—to form a flexible and variably applicable model. Some countries—Spain and Malaysia, for instance—have hybrid settlements in which they grant regions varying degrees of autonomy, taking into account their historical, cultural, or political context.[94]

Global Practices and Lessons

In Australia, cooperative federalism is implemented through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), which enables collective government decision-making in areas such as health and education.[95] Germany's Basic Law of 1949 institutionalized cooperative federalism with shared decision-making in important areas, with the Bundesrat acting to safeguard state interests at the federal level. Financial adjustment mechanisms (Finanzausgleich) add to the reduction in regional imbalances.[96] Spain has a hybrid federalism in which areas such as Catalonia and the Basque Country enjoy significant autonomy in the realm of culture and economy, but national competencies are vested with Madrid. [97] Malaysia provides a customized hybrid arrangement in which Sabah and Sarawak have more state autonomy due to their unique entry into the federation.[98]

Concerns and Challenges for Myanmar

Both offer instructive value for Myanmar. Cooperative federalism would lead to joint policy-making on issues of national interest, such as infrastructure or disaster response, from which ethnic states would be meaningfully involved in decision-making. Some sort of hybrid federalism could offer a middle path to giving autonomy for states like Rakhine, Shan and Kachin but continuing with one national structure. Yet Myanmar's sociopolitical environment remains fraught with challenges. Cooperative federalism involves a great degree of trust between the center and the states, which is lacking in Myanmar at present. With Myanmar's long history of military suppression, today's ethnic minorities, who experienced generations of exclusion under centralized control, are especially wary of "shared governance" that may disguise continued

93. Kincaid, John. "From Cooperative to Coercive Federalism." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 509, 1990, pp. 139–152.
94. 50. Requejo, Ferran, and Klaus-Jurgen Nagel. *Federalism Beyond Federations: Asymmetry and Processes of Resymmetrisation in Europe*. Routledge, 2011, pp. 133-138.
95. Hollander, Robyn, and Haig Patapan. "Pragmatic Federalism: Australian Federalism from Hawke to Howard." *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2007, pp. 280–297.
96. Benz, Arthur. "From Unitary to Asymmetric Federalism in Germany: Taking Stock after 50 Years." *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2006, pp. 517–540.
97. Requejo, Ferran, and Klaus-Jurgen Nagel. Federalism Beyond Federations: Asymmetry and Processes of Resymmetrisation in Europe. Routledge, 2011, pp. 133-138.
98. Singh, H. S. *Federalism in Malaysia: An Historical and Political Analysis*. Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 78-81.

domination and the continuation of one group's rule.

Hybrid federalism, ultimately, is still predicated upon institutional competence and legal clarity. Myanmar has weak administrative and legal institutions as well as historical grievances that have been left unresolved, which makes it more difficult to implement hybrid models of governance. Powerful ethnic areas too may utilize hybrids for more autonomy, risking fragmentation unless clear constitutional safeguards are in place.

Political Nuances and Strategic Considerations

The Tatmadaw's institutionalized role is still the most significant obstacle to transforming real cooperative and hybrid federalism. There is a significant history of the military and its refusal to any kind of decentralization; will likely never support any federal model that dilutes central control. For either to be realistic, transitional justice, trust-building, and citizen oversight of the military need to be non-negotiables in the reform efforts. Moreover, institutional reforms are essential. Local governments require capacity building to manage devolved powers effectively. The extent of local-level corruption, inefficiency, and underdevelopment of the legal infrastructure will impose obstacles that could undermine the effectiveness of cooperative mechanisms or the balance intended by hybrid arrangements.

Why Hybrid-Cooperative Federalism Offers Conditional Promise

Despite these limitations, a well-structured combination of cooperative and hybrid federalism offers hope for Myanmar. It matches ethnic desires for self-rule yet leaves the door open to national-level coordination. Provisions for proportional representation, financial equalization, and the dispute mechanism should be built into the federal structure so that it is inclusive and stable. While purely cooperative federalism may falter under Myanmar's broken trust environment, a mixed model grounded in differentiated autonomy and intergovernmental cooperation may be a sustainable model for post-conflict federal governance in Myanmar.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how Myanmar might federalize through two interlocking modes of inquiry: an ethnographic content analysis of political imaginaries articulated by EAO leadership and a critical institutional analysis of federal design and how it might (or might not) be applied to the messy, conflict-ridden reality of the country. The first part showed that EAO leaders' envisioned federalism is not just a technical system of governance but a

fundamentally political and historical one that responds to state violence, militarism, and ethnonational domination. These visions stress capacity, justice, demilitarization, and ethnic dignity—anchored frequently in narratives of armed resistance, cultural dispossession, and state betrayal. The desire for a federal union is therefore framed not as decentralization from the center, but as the refounding of the state through negotiated coexistence and mutual recognition.

The chapter then carefully dissected the practical dimensions of federal design; specifically, its consonance with Myanmar's patchwork sovereignty, uneven development, and history of Barman majoritarianism. The analysis did not advocate for any specific federal model, but instead identified elements that are suitable for Myanmar's situation. Empirically, this work thus locates Myanmar not as an empty institutional canvas but as a multilayered postcolonial polity, the federal future of which will depend on both structural invention and moral regeneration. The fact that the culture of fractured "lone ranger" resistance persists among ethnic armed groups has also enabled the military to play off these divisions, further sabotaging the spirit of cooperation that federalism demands. Such federal design flaws would indeed need to be overcome, but so too would mutual distrust and power imbalances.

The chapter contributes to existing literature on federalism, post-conflict governance, and contentious politics by emphasizing the views of those non-state actors usually marginalized within formal constitutional debate. Methodologically, it posits an ethnographically grounded, decolonial approach to institutional analysis—one that opposes top-down design paradigms and instead follows the vision of an institution that is bottom-up, formed by resistance, displacement, and historical grievance. Amid war and disintegration, federalism is not simply a normative ideal but a road toward political survival, dignity, and sustainable peace.

There is no "one-size fits all" federal model that will fit Myanmar, but the ability to integrate ethnic autonomy with an inclusive mode of governance and responsible institutions provides Myanmar with its best ticket to unity in diversity. The federal future of the country, as conceived by those who are bearing and suffering from Myanmar's current crises, cannot be separated from everyday realities; it must be participatory and accountable to people, rooted in the internal diversity of its regions, and grounded in the country's complex historical and socio-political landscape.

Chapter 7

Discussion on the Findings, and New Social Movement Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter integrates the empirical observations and analytical insights from field interviews, comparative framings, and critical analysis to interpret the tortuous pathways of Myanmar's post-coup resistance. Rather than view the Spring Revolution as a straightforward struggle between containment and emancipation, it is approached as a processual transformation involving paradoxes, tactical shifts, ideological disarticulation, and profound structural limits. It draws on the literature on contentious and social movements, internal colonialism, and federal constitutionalism to unpack why the resistance has transitioned from rank nonviolence to armed insurrection, from demands for the restoration of the democratic order to concessions towards refounding a new order of things. Each chapter examines a central tension—between moral courage and the logic of survival, between pluralistic aspiration and political fragmentation—locating Myanmar's revolt within its historical legacy and within broader patterns of resistance today.

The focus of this chapter's Part 1 is the dynamic imagination of a federal democratic Myanmar, not as a blueprint but as a site of struggle. The conversation recounts how various parties—from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and People's Defence Forces (PDFs) and civil society to the National Unity Government (NUG)—have made their way through trust deficits, logistical imbalances, ideological incoherence and geopolitical loneliness. It also grapples with challenging questions: Can nonviolence weather totalitarian brutality? Can federalism remain effective without reform of the institution? What is the future of symbolic resistance without material infrastructure? In asking these questions, the chapter does not aim to romanticize or condemn the revolution but rather to "emplace" it; that is, to confront it in the form of its contradictions and the open spaces of revolutionary transformation under the most severe of conditions of coercion and atomization.

After review of the empirical contours of post-coup resistance in Myanmar—its fragmented alliance formation, adaptive tactics, and shifting discursive demands for federal

democracy—the next section (Part 2) delves into the broader theoretical implications of these findings. Myanmar's political path calls into question the dominant paradigms of political science, according to which transitions follow a linear trajectory toward liberalization, state-building, or regime survival. The country's pendulum swing between military authoritarianism and democratic aspiration, mired in ethnolinguistic cleavages and postcolonial legacies, underscores the shortcomings of prevailing lenses such as modernization theory, authoritarian endurance, or standard state-building templates. Finally, Part 2 suggests a re-theorization, one that combines elements of contentious politics, historical institutionalism, and identity-based statecraft to unpack the inherently punitive, fragmenting, and contested dynamics in and through which Myanmar is peculiarly ensnared. Such theoretical recalibration is necessary not only for understanding Myanmar's present but also for thinking about future possibilities for postcolonial shattered (fragmented) states caught between resistive and reconstructive processes.

Part 1

7.1 Discussion on the Findings

7.1.1 Paradox of Repression

The 2021 coup in Myanmar presents a clear example of what Tarrow calls the "paradox of repression"—the fact that state violence often breeds, rather than quashes, resistance. The Tatmadaw's methodical campaign of coercive deprivation—mass killing and random destruction of infrastructure, as well as the choking of the economy—was aimed at breaking civilian support for protest. But far from silencing the protesters, this approch created a cycle of rage and mobilization. Violence didn't tamp the struggle down; it fueled it.

This turnaround can best be assimilated through Davies' "J-curve" model, where escalated expectations suddenly reversed result in a moral shock and political turmoil. The abrupt collapse of collective political expectations, following a decade of quasi-democratization, under military rule was quite a shock. Demonstrators saw the coup as not just a political betrayal but an existential break. This affective dislocation in turn provided the foundation for mass participation, especially by social groups who had been detached from armed politics, such as urban professionals and civil servants.

Ironically, the Tatmadaw's crackdown has instead hastened the growth of alternative state structures such as the National Unity Government or the local People's Defense Forces. These structures achieved symbolic and practical authority through their landscaping of a power vacuum created by state collapse. The coup has also featured the most extraordinary cooperation between historically antagonistic pro-democracy forces and ethnic armed organizations; each being bound together by mutual grievance and a reinvented vision of federalism.

Note that in this respect, Myanmar challenges the standard models of authoritarian durability. Repression loses its character of distinction and legitimacy, and coercion is no longer the function of domination but the factor of revolutionary transformation. The Tatmadaw's mistake was, of course, not just in its brutality but a profound miscalculation of fear: it believed violence would shut down dissent, but in fact it energized insurrection.

While repression has had an initially galvanizing effect, the Spring Revolution—five years in—illuminates painfully the sobering boundaries of a sustained insurgency. Tatmadaw and opposition forces alike are on the brink of exhaustion of resources, stalemate in terms of territory, and a humanitarian catastrophe. The revolutionary fervor that once fueled

moral outrage has now fragmented into many disconnected pieces due to logistical stress, internal squabbling, having no chain of command, no decisive leadership and war weariness. In between the air raids, economic collapse, and marches of displacement, civilian populations now subsist in prolonged hardship with little prospect of near-term relief. The paradox of repression may have sparked resistance, but it has not ensured its triumph; rather, it has left us in a destructive stalemate that is eating away at the social base of the revolution in material and spiritual terms.

7.1.2 From Symbolic Peaceful Resistance to Armed Insurgency

The coup in 2021 prompted an initial wave of symbolic, peaceful resistance. With mass strikes, pot-banging, digital activism, and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), ordinary citizens took back the public sphere without resorting to killing. Such tactics were founded not only in normative commitments to nonviolence but also on calculations of expediency—peaceful resistance offered the prospect of greater legitimacy and reduced the likelihood of state repression. But the military's onslaught broke this calculus. Mass killings, arrests, and sexual violence—as well as the targeting of hospitals and schools—prompted witness groups of all kinds (including governments) to recognize a state that was willing to handle unarmed civilians as enemy combatants. Under that sort of existential threat, symbolic protest no longer makes sense as a tactic. "They turned it into a battlefield, not a protest," one activist said.

As discussed in Chapters 4 & 5, the shift from peaceful protest to armed engagement illustrates the constraints of non-violent resistance in the context of severe state repression. It was initially successful in crippling parts of the junta's operations, but the movement met with brutal suppression that highlighted the vulnerabilities of non-cooperation tactics. The turn toward armed struggle, as in the teacher's husband's journey, highlights the difficulties of overcoming a regime willing to employ unchecked violence. This shift is consistent with a common pattern in contentious politics, where nonviolent movements are compelled to respond to overwhelming state violence. However, such transitions also pose risks of fragmentation and the erosion of moral high ground, complicating the movement's coherence and long-term objectives.

This impasse led to a rational appraisal of risk. In McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's (2001) model of contentious politics, actors involved in closed regimes retool their shared strategy when repression is increased and when political opportunities evaporate. The logic of survival fused, for many in Myanmar, with the logic of resistance. It was no longer a matter of violence versus nonviolence, but between submission and self-defense. This shift was manifested in the creation of People's Defense Forces (PDFs) among populist circles and tactical alliances between the army and ethnic armed groups (such as KNU, KIA). This was

not an expression of sudden descent into violence but a strategic reformation of the movement's sane core. It enabled city youths who had grown up unused to armed struggle to tap into the inherited military structures and transformed both the terrain of the struggle beyond the symbolic urban centers and the sectional demands of various nationalist factions.

But this tactical shift has created new contradictions. The resistance took up arms against the Tatmadaw in contested areas, but it also subjected the opposition to the costs of a long-running insurgency: scant resources, uneven coordination, and the brutal logic of an asymmetrical war. The essential ethic-moral solidarity of the primitive movement broke up in the end under the opposing stresses of business. The legitimacy of the movement is now given less-sympathetic scrutiny, in particular by the international community and by local communities that have grown war-weary, regarding the questions of proportionality, discipline, and the protection of civilians. If violence became instrumental under repression, however, it also undermined the coherence and normative certainty that had characterized the revolution at the outset.

Myanmar's shift from civil resistance to armed insurgency, therefore, was not a betrayal of principle but a response to total state-based violence. The logic of survival that drove this transition was sensible, even mandatory—at a cost. The question now is how to hold the principles in place without undermining them with such half-measures and to picture a political future that exists beyond insurgency. The protest repertoire changed under fire, but its future hinges on whether it can translate tactical adaptation into enduring transformation.

The armed resistance, although initially promising, has faced difficulties in uniting as a revolutionary force. The movement's former lack of leaders—a source of horizontal mobilization—has resulted instead in fragmentation, jostling agendas, and no clear command. Resource shortages have hampered operational capabilities as many units have turned to illicit activity for their very existence, including unofficial duties, various forms of contraband transfer, and, in some cases, participation in the drug trade itself. Practically, the strategies undercut moral legitimacy and squandered support among civilians. With no central command and no sustainable budget, the revolution threatens to splinter into a patchwork of local militias, more defensive than offensive, more desperate than inspirational. As one former soldier recalled, Nietzsche's admonition that "when you stare into the abyss, the abyss also stares into you" epitomizes the ethical corrosion that besets Myanmar's resistance fighters, whose long confinement in the realm of violence raises the risk that they will simply replicate the very authoritarianism against which they first stood.

7.1.3 The Evolution of Movement's Framing

The trajectory of Myanmar's Spring Revolution evidences a decisive ideological development: from a reactive demand for democratic restitution to a systemic critique of internal colonization. Even the initial calls for restoring the 2020 election result gave way under the force of violent repression and long-standing ethnic exclusion to a more thoroughgoing political consciousness. Activists, especially from ethnic communities and borderlands, have attempted to recast the revolution as a project of decolonization from within. The refiguring of the centralized Bamar-Buddhist nationalist state as not a neutral polity but a colonial form that exploits physical violence, economic extraction, and cultural subordination to rule over its ethnic minorities.

Internal colonialism, in which the dominant ethnic or national group subjugates and marginalizes outlying communities within a single state, provides a sharp analytical lens for understanding the post-independence condition of Myanmar. British imperial divide-and-rule was replaced not by national unity but by Bamar-majority consolidation in successive dispensations from the Burma Socialist Programme Party of Ne Win to the formally inscribed authoritarianism of the Tatmadaw. Within this backdrop, the Tatmadaw became custodian of the nation as well as the colonial enforcer, maintaining structural inequalities in the guise of national sovereignty. Years of shattered cease-fires, unmet promises of greater autonomy, and scorched-earth tactics solidified mutual distrust and racialized hierarchies that endure to the present day.

This shift is also reinforced through the Spring Revolution's rejection of previous liberal-nationalist framings—especially under the NLD. For all its electoral triumph, the NLD did not weaken the military's stranglehold on power or meaningfully address the demands of the ethnic minorities. Silent over the crisis involving the Rohingyas and centralizing governance, it alienated non-Bamar communities. The 2021 coup thus did more than reveal the fragility of electoral democracy; it illuminated the boundaries of majoritarian liberalism. Significantly, for many, particularly in the ethnic states, authentic freedom is now considered to depend not on a return to pre-coup conditions, but rather on the construction of a new peace order that would essentially dismantle the Bamar-centered state and reimagine the nation as a federal and pluralist constellation.

In this reimagining, the demand for a federal democratic union is not merely administrative; it's decolonial. It involves a refashioning of sovereignty grounded in those groups' joint autonomy, land rights, cultural recognition, and security guarantees. The resistance movement's radical edge is in its ability to reimagine Myanmar not as a failed post-colony but as an ongoing colony—a colony whose liberation must begin with itself. If that revolution is to succeed, it will not only have to remove the military from power but

also dismantle the internal colonial order that it secures. Only then will Myanmar cease to be a patchwork of domination that developed under colonialism and become a genuinely plural, post-colonial polity.

7.1.4 The CDM's Decline Reflects Structural Asymmetry, Not Strategic Failure

Once among the narratives of Myanmar's resistance, the CDM, and Myanmar's apparent revolution, after four years, a more sober assessment reveals that the transition of the CDM is one of the most painful dismantlements, resulting not from any ideological collapse but structural imbalance. In the early days, the CDM showed remarkable moral clarity and civic courage, shutting down large swaths of the public service, health, and educational institutions through mass movement and non-cooperation. But its seeming weakness should not be mistaken for a lack of will; rather, it is a testament to Myanmar's exceptional nature as a uniquely repressive political environment—a regime unencumbered by the check of the law, which has remained unaffected by reputational costs and unresponsive to moral suasion. Unlike movements such as Gandhi's CDM or Poland's Solidarity, Myanmar's activists work under conditions of resistance that are criminalized to the point of existence being erased.

The narrative of CDM teacher's comparative analysis in Chapter 5 highlights this asymmetry: Gandhi's campaign faced a colonial state beholden to international scrutiny and constrained, however imperfectly, by public opinion and legal norms. Myanmar's Tatmadaw, by comparison, rules with complete impunity—stripping people of legal personhood, going after their families, and weaponizing economic collapse against dissenters. The transition from mass disruption to survival resistance—the phenomenon that leads to underground schools, mobile clinics, and collaboration with ethnic militias—should not be seen as a betrayal of nonviolence but as an adaptive repertoire under conditions of coercion. Tilly's theory of contentious politics is a sobering reminder to us that the movements transform to respond to state repression, and the Myanmar CDM appears a cautionary tale of the classical nonviolent theorizations in the absence of structural prerequisites.

Critically, the CDM's strategic mutation into fragmented, clandestine, and occasionally armed resistance reflects not poor planning but abandonment—both international and domestic. Interviewees frequently mentioned the ongoing trauma of violence, lack of material support, and the absence of legal refuge. Teachers and medics ran into the jungles; urban organizers were hunted or disappeared. The movement's moral center survived, but its logistical core was gutted by the harsh fact of continuous authoritarian violence. Lacking a culture of international solidarity, actual sanctions, or enforceable humanitarian

corridors, the CDM could not maintain the infrastructural consistency necessary for nonviolent movements. In such a framework, minimal survival itself constituted a form of resistance.

This slide into tactical weariness and moral blur brings up pressing questions for the students and defenders of nonviolent struggle: What should we do when logistics prevent the use of nonviolence? How are we to measure a movement not by its "success" in classical terms but by its ability to maintain ethical integrity under annihilatory pressure? Myanmar's CDM doesn't fail—it overstays. But it also forces us to reckon with the limits of moral idealism in the face of impunity. With survival the only option on the table, what kinds of solidarity and support are required to ensure that moral resistance does not remain noble but futile?

7.1.5 What do ethnic fighters want?

Though ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) are frequently characterized by international observers as natural allies of Myanmar's anti-junta resistance, the internal realities are more fractured and ambivalent. Efforts by the National Unity Government (NUG) to form a united front have exposed long-standing tensions dating back to ethnic exclusion and political marginalization. For several EAOs, the NUG represents the repackaging of Bamar-majoritarianism and is assumed to be the continuation of the National League for Democracy (NLD). Symbolic missteps—like the NLD's refusal to allow the election of ethnic chief ministers in accordance with electoral mandates—have only reinforced the sense that tokenism prevails and that trust is elusive. Ethnic leaders remain, for the most part, aspirational, rather than operational for the unity, seeing the promised federalism and political inclusion, to be negotiated under conditions of duress, rather than rooted in solid constitutional commitment.

This legacy of mistrust is also the reason why EAOs continue to be wary of the loss of freedom if they were to come to operate under a unified resistance structure. While they have a common adversary in the Tatmadaw, coordination has been ad hoc, as much built on expediency as ideological sympathy. The "lone ranger" approach, where some ethnic groups fight alone while others remain bystanders, is a structural legacy of the dismantled insurgency and rebellion from decades past. As one Karen solider has said, "if one ethnic group is at war, others look on as bystanders." This disunity has repeatedly enabled the Tatmadaw to play off inter-ethnic suspicions, striking selective ceasefires or bribing neutral groups while killing and squeezing other areas out of existence. The result is a resistance that is widely distributed but lacks the unifying core to effectively combat centralized militarist power.

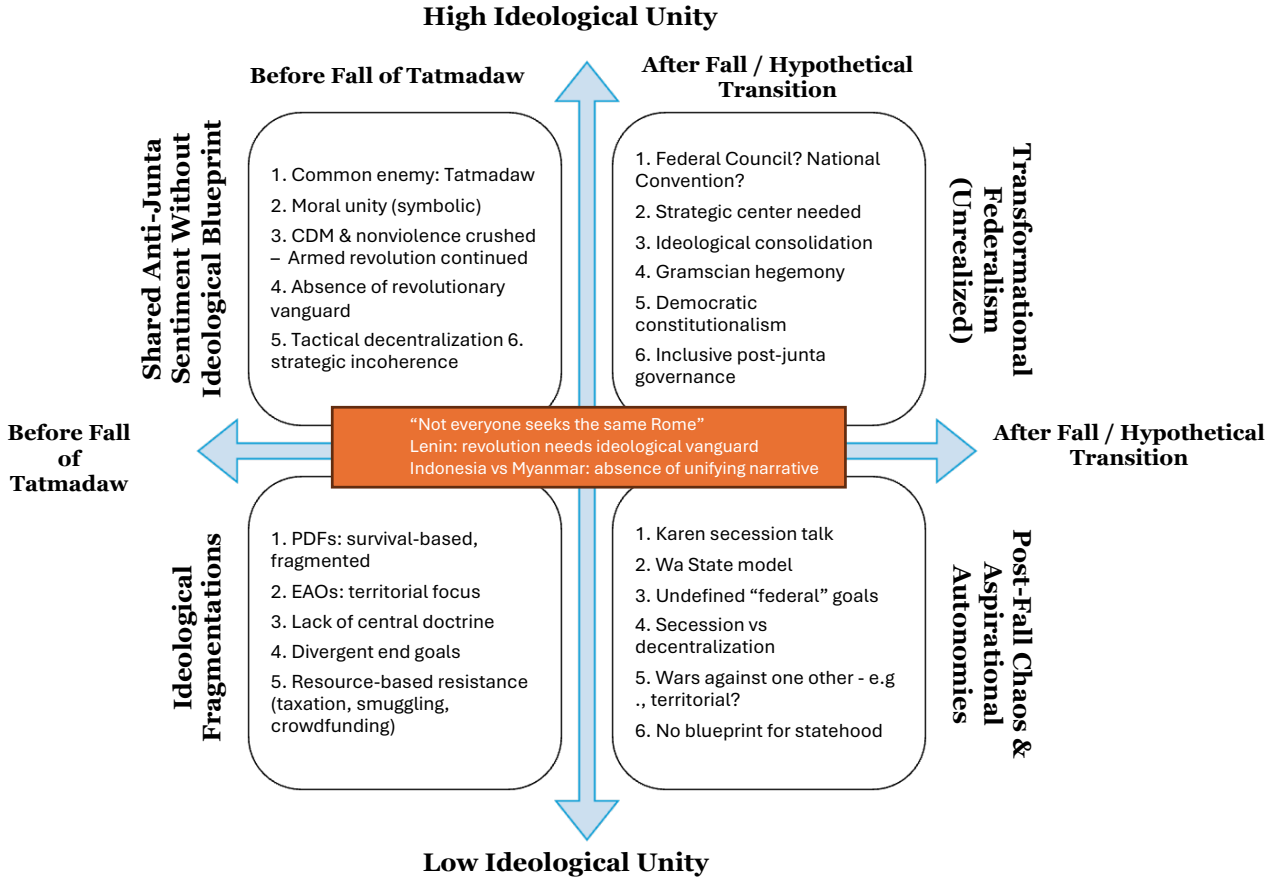
A pervasive sense of skepticism surrounds any negotiation with the Tatmadaw. Historically, so-called "peace agreements," such as the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, have functioned less as genuine moves toward reconciliation and more as calculated maneuvers to advance military interests. Genuine political transformation remains elusive. It is true that EAOs correctly refer to the junta's chronic violating of "ceasefires," bad-faith dialogue, and non-implementation as proof that the junta is unwilling to share power. It is a searing paradox: diplomacy frequently fails, but, on the other hand, endless armed resistance alone will not bring on its own, a viable federal future. This tension, for some leaders, indicates the necessity of pursuing a dual-track approach—namely, a strategic resistance combined with principled, conditional diplomacy.

Even in places where the EAOs have de facto control, this facade of stability obscures deeper fragility. And autonomous zones have such limited infrastructure, scarcity of resources, and little international recognition that it falls short of its developmental potentials. As much as local rule may offer temporary respite, it doesn't address the systemic question of what holds a nation together. While the Wa State is often cited as a model of effective autonomy, envied by many EAOs, its circumstances are far from universally applicable. The Wa arrangement is deeply contingent on external support—from China—and exists within a unique geostrategic framework. Suggesting a broad replication of this template across Myanmar's diverse ethnic landscape ignores these critical dependencies. In the absence of a substantive political accord that meaningfully integrates ethnic aspirations with the broader national vision, Myanmar risks fracturing into a patchwork of semi-autonomous regions. Such entities may project an appearance of stability, but they lack the institutional capacity to foster enduring peace, functional governance, or truly inclusive sovereignty.

Moreover, idealizing ethnic organizations as inherently progressive agents of federal democracy risks obscuring the complex, and sometimes problematic, political economies and internal contradictions that define their operations. The reality is considerably more nuanced than this romanticized narrative allows. The governance structure of most EAO territories is opaque, marked by authoritarian practices, limited transparency, and elite dominance. In no sense are these regions 'democratic ideals'; many of them have informal taxation, forced inscription, patronage networks, and control over illicit economies. Myanmar is still one of the world's top producers of heroin and methamphetamines, and most border-based EAOs are caught up—explicitly or tacitly—in the transnational narcotics trade, arms trafficking, and illegal extractive industries. Calls for federalism, in this situation, may disguise resource control rather than principled commitments to democratic pluralism. Without confronting such internal asymmetries, the quest for an ethnic autonomy would only succeed in reproducing localized authoritarianisms in the name of liberation.

7.1.6 Lack of Shared Ideology and Central Coordinating Institution

Diagram 7.1. Myanmar's Fragmentation, Lack of Shared Ideology and Fragmentation Matrix



Source: Author's visualization, based on field interviews and EAO/PDF organizational data, 2023.

Despite its unprecedented scope, Myanmar's anti-junta resistance remains fragmented due to a lack of shared ideological vision and an authoritative coordinating institution, as shown in diagram 1. While opposition forces agree on rejecting military rule, there is no coherent political doctrine or institutional mechanism that binds ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), People's Defence Forces (PDFs), and civil society actors into a unified project of transformation. Though all opposition forces from EAOs, PDFs, and civil society actors oppose the Tatmadaw, this shared ground crumbles once their respective political endgames come under scrutiny. Simply put, all roads may lead to Rome, but in this movement, not everyone seeks the same Rome.

Before the anticipated fall of the Tatmadaw, most actors against the Tatmadaw are waging parallel but uncoordinated, battles. A number of the EAOs have taken the opportunity to recapture highly contested territory and to reestablish regional autonomy that they, as an

alternative, would rather have had than the complete dismantling of military rule or the redesign of national governance. Their strategies are more based on historical grievances and territorial logic than on ideological reformism. In contrast, central Myanmar has seen two main methods of opposition: the first is the nonviolent civil disobedience movement (CDM) characterized by mass boycotts, demonstrations, and strikes—a pattern quickly silenced through murderous repression—and the second is the violent resistance, a scattered, burgeoning network of armed PDFs, again without doctrinal planning but heavily reliant on crowdfunding, illicit trade, and local taxation. It's not ideology, but survival, that binds these movements together.

When thinking beyond the hypothetical collapse of the Tatmadaw—an unlikely outcome that would itself require a miracle of coordination—the ideological polarization becomes starker. Central actors such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and PDFs have advocated for its promise of federal democracy and power-sharing, while EAOs pursue a diversity of goals that range from regional autonomy to ethnic federalism, often under-defined or even blurred. Some aspirations verge on secessionism, as with emergent factions of the Karen National Union; others, like the model of the United Wa State Army, rely heavily on neighboring country, semi-sovereign political-economic autonomy as a precedent. But the chances for such structures are questionable given international non-recognition, weak diplomatic support, and historical cautionary tales—from the Balkan splinters to post-Soviet unrecognized republics.

Although most of the Karen political leadership has adhered to a federalist reformation of Burma, a small yet outspoken group has called for ultimate independence and the creation of a sovereign Karen state—typically using the symbolic notion of Kawthoolei.[148] Although these aspirations are richly informed by histories of ethnic marginalization, they also encounter significant geopolitical challenges. Secessionist challengers to imperial status rarely receive international recognition, usually due to the strategic interests of neighboring powers. Thailand, with its long and porous border with Karen territories, has historically wavered between tacit backing and cautious containment of the Karen armed struggle. With its own border stability issues, its closeness to the Myanmar Junta and separatist aspirations in its south, Bangkok is probably not willing to support a Karen breakaway state. On a regional scale, ASEAN itself is wedded to the principle of non-interference in states internal affairs and to ensuring respect for territorial integrity, and there is ample international precedent—from Bosnia to Somaliland—demonstrating that successful secession requires not only internal legitimacy but also robust external patronage, which the Karen movement currently lacks.

This structural impasse is not just a logistical obstacle but indicates a profound crisis of political imagination. There is, as of yet, no shared revolutionary doctrine or central

institution capable of coordinating Myanmar's plural resistance into a transformative political force. The NUG, which declared itself a government-in-exile, does not have real control over the PDFs and has little ability to broker strategic coherence among the EAOs. Therefore, it is seen by many—and particularly the EAOs—as simply a continuation of elite Bamar hegemony in federalist new clothing. This deficiency is not merely tactical; it reflects the country's postcolonial inheritance of centralized ethnocracy and ideological ambivalence.

The current armed resistance has also marked a significant departure from Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's long-standing adherence to non-violence,[1] which had historically underpinned the moral legitimacy of the democratic struggle. By contrast, the revolution today has made armed resistance and warfare itself routine and dispersed, moving the ideological fulcrum away from Gandhian pacifism towards militarized pragmatism—but without fashioning a new normative doctrine to replace this empty vacuum.[2]

As Lenin emphasized, successful revolutionary movements require a vanguard organization capable of coordinating action and articulating ideological goals. Myanmar's NUG does not function as such. It lacks strategic control over most PDFs, cannot convene a binding consensus among EAOs, and has yet to produce a compelling ideological blueprint for a post-junta future. Thus, it has taken the form of, in Gramscian terms, a "war of position" but without ideological hegemony—a terrain of struggle soaked in resistance but lacking direction.[3]. In contrast, revolutionary victories like those of the ANC in South Africa and the Viet Minh in Vietnam depended upon at least some combination of institutional centrality and ideological coherence. One of the clearest counterexamples is Indonesia, home to more than 17,000 islands and hundreds of ethnic and linguistic groups, more than in Myanmar; its independence movement was organized around the slogan "Satu Nusa, Satu Bangsa, Satu Bahasa" (One Nation, One People, One Language). A melting-pot nationalist narrative—hence championed by Sukarno—enabled a point of ontological fusion in a notoriously heterogeneous society, capable of overcoming fragmentation in terms of a shared anti-colonial identity and unitary institutional vision.[4]

Myanmar's resistance, on the other hand, is characterized by asymmetrical alliances and doctrinal fragmentation. Decentralization—what is often seen as a strength of the strategic situation—has in effect created militarized localism as PDFs were allowed to operate independently and EAOs retained influence in local economies and territorial

1. BBC News, 2022. *Myanmar: Why once peaceful protesters are now choosing violence*. *BBC News*, [online] 30 Jan. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-60137053

2. Mark, S.S., 2023. *Forging the Nation: Land Struggles in Myanmar's Transition Period*. London: Routledge. Available via: https://books.google.com/books?id=j7mTEAAAQBAJ [Accessed 14 Jul. 2025].

3. Casci, R.O., 2006. *Organising and Sustaining Hegemony: A Gramscian Perspective on Suharto's New Order Indonesia*. [online] University of Waikato Research Commons. Available at: https://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/items/9916baae-2524-48c1-a699-d5b97828d51c [Accessed 14 Jul. 2025].

4. Gunn, G., 2025. *Towards the Indonesian Republic: Marxist Lineages in the National Revolution*. [online] Google Books. Available at: https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=XgVjEQAAQBAJ [Accessed 14 Jul. 2025].

governance. With no centralized institution and no centralized command through which to mediate between the various group interests and ideologies and the translation of local struggles into a national political strategy, unity remains aspirational. The path ahead requires more than coalition-building, but rather the building of an institution to act as an ideological compass and strategic coordinator. Without a common ideological framework or a central mechanism of coordination—whether a federal council, a national convention, or a representative wartime assembly—the resistance runs the risk of falling into the very swamps that it denounces: fragmentation, opacity, and an elite-driven politics of territorialism. A revolution that is not ideologically coherent probably cannot bring any transformation; it is nothing more than endless revolutionary war. While it may be heroic, perhaps, but it lacks direction.

So, the problem going forward is not only defeating the junta but also establishing a moral and strategic center. This demands an institution able to distill incoherent aspirations into a clear political framework—an ideological compass as much as a command structure. Until it does, the Myanmar revolution is in danger of being just another tragic event in history written and rewritten in blood, yet never fully inscribed with enduring political meaning and change.

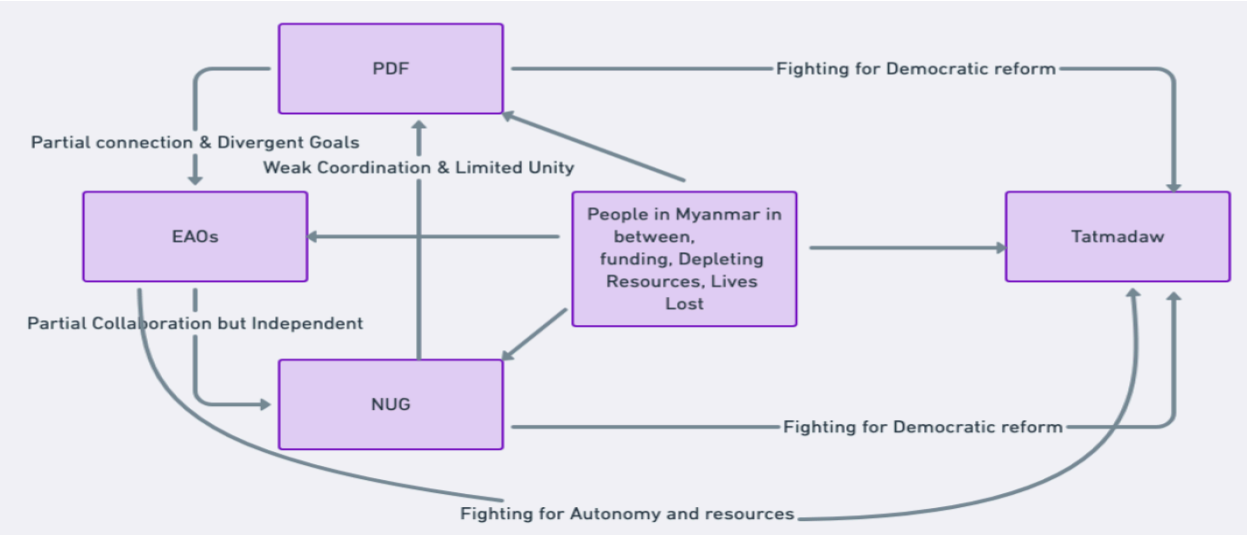
7.1.7 The Rising Danger of Fragmentation

As I highlighted in Chapters 1–6, after the 2021 military coup, Myanmar is experiencing an unprecedented scale of resistance against the military (Tatmadaw), the largest social movement in the country since its independence in 1948. This resistance has a wide range of actors, including Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), National Unity Government (NUG)-endorsed resistance fighters, Local People's Defence Forces (PDFs), members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), anonymous donors, grassroots community organizers, and ordinary citizens who wish for the war to be over. While united by common opposition to the Tatmadaw, this coalition of actors remains highly fragmented, unable to coalesce around a unified front.

The coup of 2021 made cleavages wider and made them more visible in day-to-day social media, especially with amplification through communication and social media, which is now a part of modern society. According to Richard Horsey, a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group, Myanmar has consistently been in a state of fragmentation. Protracted wars have also widened divisions, strengthening local survivalist mind-sets at the expense of national cohesion. Balkanization is a lingering specter, with some ethnic leaders pushing separatism that could undermine the unity of Myanmar and lead to foreign influence. Myanmar's fragmentation into quasi-independent states are vulnerable to external influence, as exemplified by the Wa State's dependency on China. However,

Horsey's claim that Myanmar is unlikely to deteriorate into the Libya- or Somalia-like chaos of statelessness suggests extended civil war and further systemic fragmentation rather than outright and total state failure. [5]

Figure 7.1. How grassroots people in Myanmar suffer because of war



Myanmar's resistance after 2021 military coup, the largest such movement since the country's independence, reflects this fractured landscape. This includes Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), forces backed by the National Unity Government (NUG), Local People's Defence Forces (PDFs), and grassroots movements against the military. Although they are facing the common enemy, the Tatmadaw, these groups are decentralized and have no coherent strategy. The NUG struggles to assert leadership, and many PDFs operate autonomously, sometimes engaging in activities that erode public support. This internal fragmentation distorts the operational effectiveness of the resistance against the Tatmadaw, which limits its ability to present a viable alternative to the military rule. [6] Absence of coordination and shared vision risks a prolonged and bloody conflict in Myanmar, where division—both structural and within the resistance—reinforces the Tatmadaw's grip on power; the price ultimately weighs on the people of Myanmar and their endless suffering.

5. Horsey, Richard. "China's Deadly Divide-and-Rule Tactics in Myanmar Risk Shock Waves Across Region." *The Guardian*, 25 Aug. 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/aug/25/chinas-deadly-divide-and-rule-tactics-in-myanmar-risk-shock-waves-across-region.
6. Beech, Hannah. "How Myanmar's Civil War Could Actually End." *Time*, 15 Nov. 2024, https://time.com/7160736/myanmar-coup-civil-war-conflict-timeline-endgame-explainer/.

7.1.8 Why can't Myanmar unite if not because of Burmanization?

Yes, Burmanization exists but mainly in the political layer. In a functionalist sense, Burmanization referred to the ideological and institutional processes by means of which the Bamar ethnic group has historically imposed cultural, political, and administrative hegemony over Myanmar's plural society[2]. It is not merely an informal social bias but a project of state-induced mono-ethnic nation-building that elevates Bamar-Buddhist identity, the Burmese language, and central authority. Through state schooling, bureaucratic appointments, military ranks, and religious regulation, Burmanization systematically excludes minorities from full political and symbolic citizenship[3]. It works less as an ideology of national integration, then, and more as an instrument of epistemic-territorial domination.

However, as much as Burmanization has become an intellectual buzzword in the academic and commentary worlds, its overuse often obscures the real political issues and its underlying causes in Myanmar. Instead of grasping thorough comprehension of Myanmar's entire situation, it can bring out the danger in flattening the layered histories of ethnic-state entanglements into a singular narrative and ignoring the underlying political economic issues, institutional pathology, and strategic agency of the ethnic forces. This paper contends that such usage, though rhetorically potent, risks reifying the very binaries it seeks to critique and must be analytically disaggregated to expose the underlying architecture of Myanmar's fragmentation.

Thus, Burmanization is not a cultural monolith—it is a stratified political regime. Its most pernicious form lies not in social life, but in who gets to govern, command, and define the future of the state. The ethnic groups are allowed to take part almost always, but sharing real power is obstructed systematically. Even under nominally democratic forces, like the National League for Democracy, key ministries and security portfolios were almost exclusively held by Bamar officials. Electoral politics has provided symbolic access—ethnic parties tried to participate and won significance in their regions—but never unfettered structural power even under NLD. Political Burmanization should therefore be seen as not only a symptom of ethnic imbalance but also as a means of strengthening a vertical structure of state legitimacy based on mono-ethnic dominance.

This exclusivity becomes absolute within the military apparatus. In the armed forces, Burmanization manifests not as policy but as ontology: to command is to be Bamar or to have sufficiently effaced one's difference. The refusal to recognize ethnic languages, traditions, or leadership in the army, combined with informal but invincible cultural taboos against invoking ethnic identity, puts the military as the terminal frontier of Burmanization—where power is not only exercised, but also stripped to purity. In the end,

the issue in the Mae Sot conversation is not about replication or whether Burmanization exists, but rather where we locate it and what it leads to. The state tolerates diversity in appearance, on paper, but consolidates authority through enforced homogeneity. Burmanization, then, is not merely the extension of Bamar identity but the projection of a political order in which plurality is permitted only at the margins and denied where it matters most.

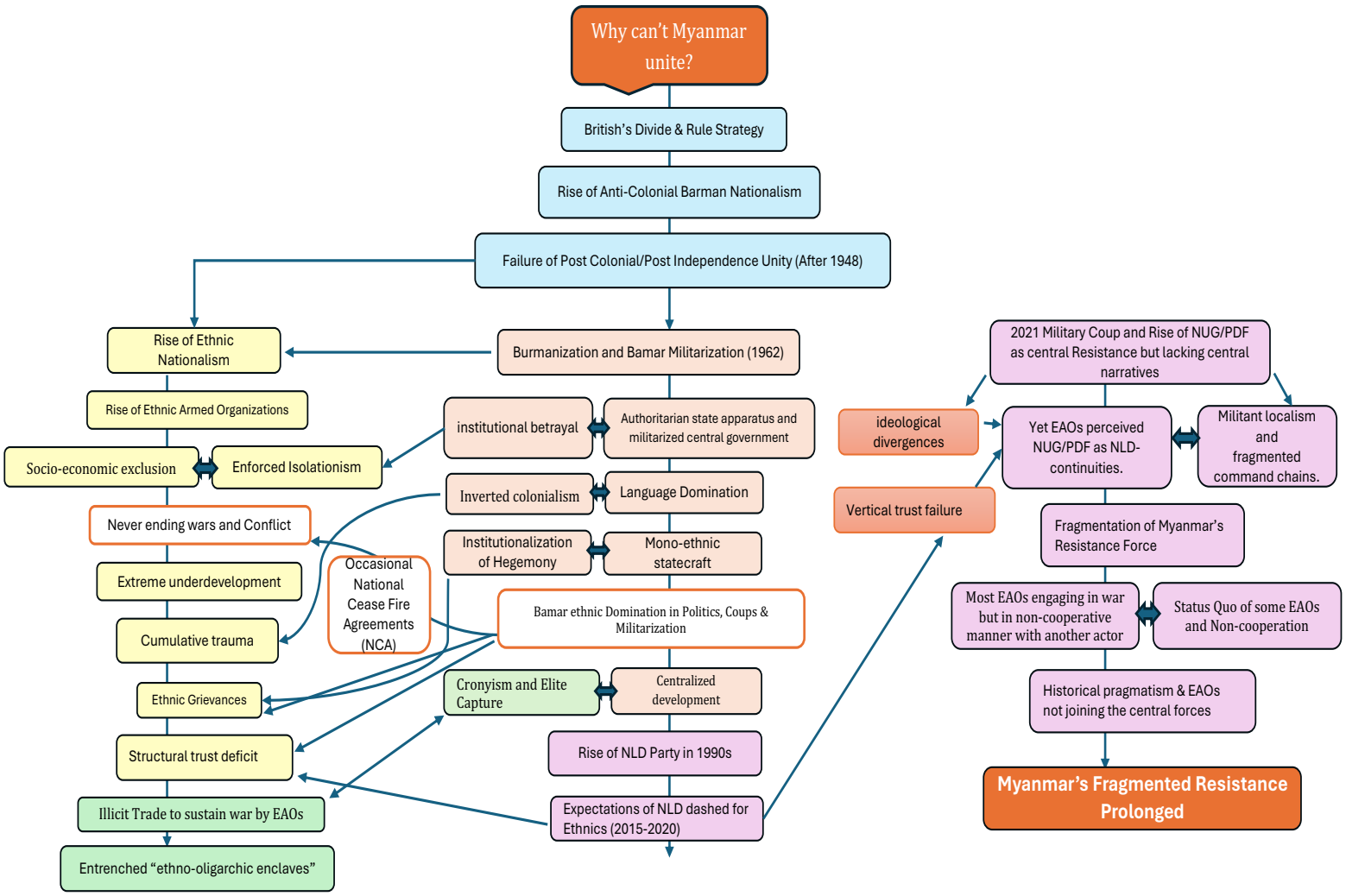
Yet, Burmanization alone cannot explain Myanmar's resistance fragmentation. Based on my fieldwork and discourse analysis, I argue that Myanmar's contemporary disunity cascades from a confluence of interlocking factors. These include: the structural oligarchy of the Tatmadaw and its pathological allure of ethnic division; historical path dependencies and the failed promises of federalist projects; deep distrust sown by post-Panglong betrayals and the NLD era's disappointments; ethnic struggle over borderlands resources and their conflict economies; elite capture and patronage networks; and widespread political trauma and anticipated future marginalization. This thesis also argues that in its paradoxical sense, while the state projects a homogenized national identity, Myanmar's sociocultural reality remains plural. Yangon's multi-faith urban landscape, the ethnic diversity of cultural production, and cross-ethnic entrepreneurialism reveal a deeper disjuncture between state ideology and lived heterogeneity.

As shown in diagram 2, this paper contends that Myanmar's democratic fragmentation is not reducible to Burmanization alone but emerges from the entangled architecture of ethnic exclusion, economic separatism, and institutional mistrust. The political economy of resistance—rooted in resource competition, territorial governance, and strategic autonomy—has reinforced disunity not as a failure of ideology but as a rational calculus of survival under conditions of systemic betrayal. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), far from being ideological outliers, have entrenched themselves in para-sovereign structures that substitute for a central state they deem illegitimate. Meanwhile, the National Unity Government's symbolic inclusivity masks a deeper centralist inertia—replicating patterns of majoritarian control that alienate ethnic actors. Trust remains the scarcest resource in this resistance ecology, eroded by repeated institutional failures, symbolic marginalization, and intergroup rivalry. Fragmentation, in this sense, is not merely a political condition but a historical logic.

And here is the paradox: while fragmentation has insulated individual actors, it has also prevented the possibility of transformative cohesion. If Myanmar's resistance forces could overcome their fragmented architectures and coalesce around a common institutional compact that is based on the principles of equity, pluralism, and power sharing, they could pose an existential threat to the military regime. Indeed, the Tatmadaw's resilience may rest less on its own coherence than on the opposition's disunity. A unified front, with all

EAO forces and all central Bamar forces, fortified by both territorial reach and moral legitimacy, could realistically undermine the military's operational capacity in months, if not weeks.

Diagram 7.2. Why can't Myanmar unite?



Thus, the imperative of federal democracy is not simply normative—it is strategic. If federalism is to be a vehicle of change, then it must attend not only to getting rid of to the symbolic legacy of Burmanization but also to the very core of the material and psychological architectures of mistrust among actors. This requires enforceable intergovernmental fiscal arrangements, guarantees for autonomy, and trust-building based upon historical justice. Just as important are the preparations for a post-junta transition: resistance forces must now start laying institutional groundwork for the post-military era—well before the junta falls, lest a vacuum of power reproduce the very

authoritarianism they seek to overcome. Only by dismantling both the extractive foundations of authoritarianism and the competitive logics of resistance can Myanmar move from splintered insurgency to plurinational cohesion. This involves challenging the economic underpinnings of autonomy—not only by transferring power, but also by enshrining a fair sharing of resources, auditing wealth derived from war, and introducing civilian oversight in ethnic areas. Otherwise, federalism could end up being more symbolic accommodation without structural redistribution. Unity must become more than a slogan—it must be the institutional horizon upon which a viable, federated Myanmar is imagined and built.

7.1.9 Federal Democratic Myanmar: Crafting a Vision Amid Fragmentation

Now the vision of a federal, democratic Myanmar has become not a dreamy abstraction but a practical, popular alternative to decades of repression, violence, and centralized authoritarian rule. Based on interviews among ethnic constituencies, the report suggests there is broad agreement that only a certain type of federalism—one founded on autonomy, equality, and power-sharing—represents a realistic means of addressing past wrongs and halting further disintegration. This vision has transformed the revolution's aim from simple democracy revival to constitutional re-foundation. But the cross-cutting agreement on federalism masks the latter's theoretical and operational complexity. The country's varied terrain, long-standing suspicion, and uneven capabilities among the ethnic areas render a "one-size-fits-all" federal design unfeasible in Myanmar. What's required is not federalism as a borrowed template but as a negotiated design adapted to Myanmar's splintered political landscape.

Of course, the challenge lies in bridging the perception divide between Bamar-majoritarian actors and historically marginalized ethnic communities. Rhetorically committed to federalism, the NUG is nonetheless seen by many EAOs as a legacy extension of the NLD's exclusionary politics If the federal project fails to credibly include EAOs in agenda-setting and power-sharing, it will merely perpetuate old hierarchies under a new name. This must be more than just words on paper; structural protections instead: constitutional acknowledgment of ethnic rights and asymmetrical autonomy for historically marginalized regions and transitional justice for the wartime atrocities. Unless it educes together the federal vision and it is institutionally enshrined, Myanmar may end up as a patchwork of local freedoms without national unity.

Furthermore, the implementation of federalism must reckon with deeply rooted state weakness, resource asymmetry, and militarism. Even if the Tatmadaw did not exist in theory, weak institutions and endemic corruption would pose formidable barriers to

complex federal arrangements. Extractive-rich states may also want to maintain sole authority over their extractive assets, and underdeveloped areas could be kept excluded without fair benefit-sharing arrangements. Lessons from federations such as India, Canada, and Ethiopia suggest that Myanmar will need to explore models for fiscal equalization, leadership rotation in federal institutions, and strong mechanisms for intergovernmental dispute resolution. But most importantly, no federal transition is conceivable without a fundamental transformation of the Tatmadaw—from an ethnicized coercive mechanism to a multiethnic institution under civilian control.

Finally, regional geopolitics adds an extra layer of complexity to Myanmar's federal dreams. Neighboring states—China, India, Myanmar, Thailand and Bangladesh—have chosen transactional diplomacy over principled engagement and, since the 1988 protests, have focused on border security. Without correlation of activities regionally, resistance actors are left isolated, border communities are destabilized, and the displaced are stranded. And in the meantime, certain ethnic regions—like Wa—have formed quasi-state structures supported by outside powers, sustaining divided sovereignties immune to national reform. In this context, federalism is not only about internalism, social partnership, and good administration, but it is also about facing the asymmetries of geopolitical space. The way forward involves a combination of national consensus and international configuration, in which a unified federal project—structured around accountability—has to be coupled with international support—harmonized among regional actors. Only under this twin specter—domestic reconciliation and international support—can Myanmar cross the stage from military fragmentation to federal democratic unity.

A likely Federal model—The Confederate Democratic Union of Burma (CDUB) model

This proposed model—as an adaptation of hybrid federalism—actually presents itself as a pragmatic, adaptable model, particularly relevant in contexts marked by ethnic and regional diversity, such as Myanmar. Drawing on examples from Spain and Malaysia, hybrid federal structures demonstrate how differentiated autonomy, and central coordination can coexist productively. This model's flexibility allows for tailored governance that addresses the unique needs of diverse populations.

Among the various models observed in the last chapter, this thesis suggests an example—the Confederate Democratic Union of Burma (CDUB)—that represents a sophisticated and multifaceted federal design aimed at reconciling Myanmar's fractured polity as shown in diagram 3. While this thesis refrains from prescribing or endorsing any specific model, a discussion of the CDUB offers insight into how diverse elements can be integrated to address Myanmar's federal dilemmas. CDUB combines features from confederal, asymmetric, and dual federalism systems, presenting a unique structure that

accommodates deep ethnic diversity, regional autonomy, and centralized economic governance. Its emphasis lies in local self-governance, rotational leadership, inclusive representation, and robust economic coordination.

Key Features of CDUB

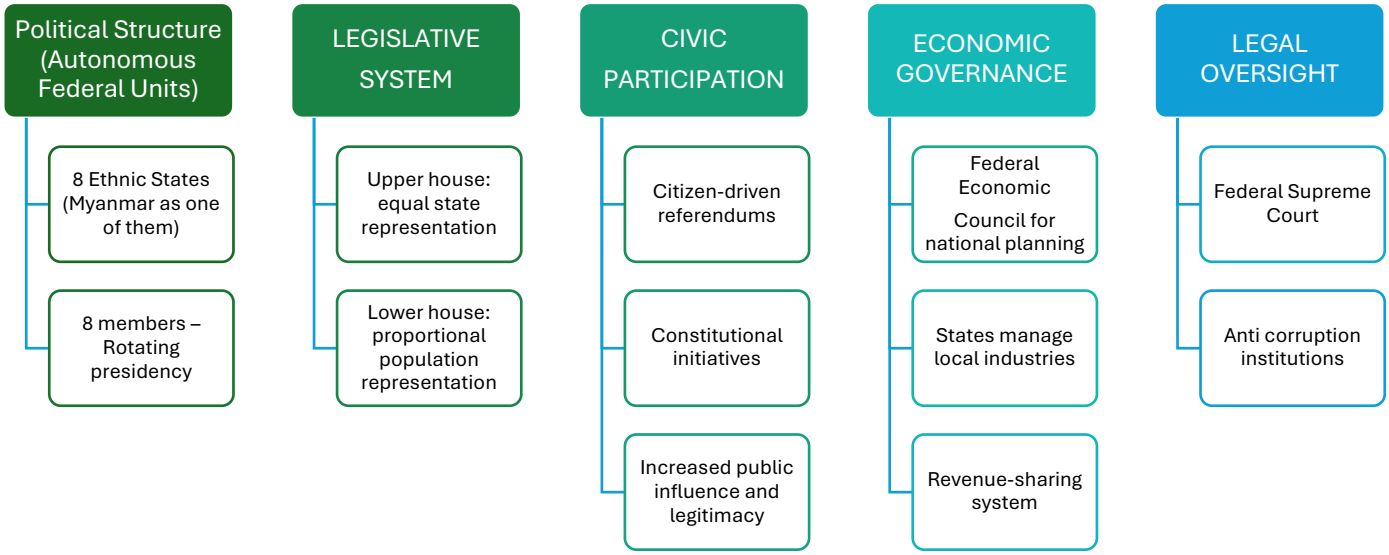
- **Autonomous Federal Units**: The model proposes eight ethnic states with equal constitutional standing. It will grant all the regions power over education, policing, language, and cultural affairs. This will resolve most of the ethnic grievances and Myanmar's demand for ethnic self-determination.
- **Collegial Federal Executive**: It also suggests a rotating presidency among eight federal council members, represented by eight states, and it will symbolize equality and avoid concentration of power. And this model is inspired by the Swiss Federal Council model.
- **Bicameral Parliament**: In the upper house, an equal amount of representation of states should be presented, and proportional representation in the lower house should be presented, and it aims to ensure fairness between majority and minority populations.
- **Direct Democracy**: It will mainly adopt the mechanisms like referendums and constitutional initiatives that will definitely empower citizens to directly influence governance, enhancing legitimacy.
- **Economic Centralization with Local Execution**: We need central economic planning while balancing with different ethnic states' economic industries. A Federal Economic Council will coordinate national infrastructure and trade for the entire country, while ethnic states will manage their own local industries and share revenues, and it will balance autonomy and unity.
- **Independent Judiciary and Oversight**: A Federal Supreme Court should be independent like in most federal states and Myanmar truly needs anti-corruption bodies that will serve as checks on abuse of power, ensuring rule of law. And press freedom should serve as a balance to the corruption.

Appeal to Myanmar's Ethnic Society

This model has the potential to fix Myanmar's long-standing problems and long-ingrained ethnic division and grievances of most EAOs—as we have witnessed in the above analysis in chapters 4, 5, and 6. EAOs and civil society groups want to have proper autonomy over their own culture, recognize local languages, and manage natural resources and industries in their regions. It will then reestablish trust among one another and probably come together when there is a balance between self-rule and shared governance. The model also appeals to people's hopes for dignity, prosperity, and justice by bringing together

development and governance that includes everyone. Its rules for rotating the presidency and representing different ethnic groups keep one group from having too much power. Its direct democracy tools will definitely make people more involved and responsible.

Diagram 3. An example - the Confederate Democratic Union of Burma (CDUB) model



Still, the model's complexity could be hard to realize. It might be hard to put such a framework in place in Myanmar because its institutions are weak, the military's hegemony is persistent, and ethnic groups don't trust each other. Moreover, there are also the needs for civic education, building trust, transitional justice, and a strong political will to achieve unity. Therefore, the CDUB model mentioned above may not be the ideal, but it does have some merits that are likely to appeal to Myanmar's ethnic groups. These include fair sharing of resources, rotating leadership, representation that includes everyone, direct democracy, and cultural autonomy. It is appealing because it combines elements that balances regional independence with central coordination. But before any steps are taken toward such a model, trust must be built, transitional justice must be done, and civic education must be widespread.

Conclusion: A Critical Juncture for Myanmar's Future

As has been seen in this thesis, Myanmar's main ethnic division lies in the root cause of ethnic grievances and Myanmar's central government's decades of marginalization policies

over ethnic politics and economic, social, cultural, and legal dimensions. These exclusions are compounded by entrenched military domination, exploitation of natural resources, and deeply entrenched systemic discrimination. And the fallout from such exclusion has been both catastrophic and unforgivable: protracted conflict, widespread poverty, population displacement on a staggering scale, and deep social cleavages.

Myanmar will definitely need a thorough transformative reform to actually reach sustainable peace and inclusivity. It will also need to address the minorities' economic inequality, equitable resource-sharing, and strategic investments in infrastructure, healthcare, and education. To foster a united nation, we should provide cultural and religious protection to all communities, including language rights and freedom of religion. The tradition of impunity of the Tatmadaw must be addressed by enforcing the rule of law and ensuring minority representation through legal and structural reforms. An eight-state, federal model could break the Bamar-majoritarian imbalance and allow for more equitable governance. International coordination is vital to support grassroots solutions—and to prevent Myanmar from further spiraling further into conflict and economic instability.

However, federalism and electoral reform alone will not end the cycle of ethno-national conflict in Myanmar. It has to address the main issue of identity, inclusion, and transitional justice. If, for example, one looks at the plight of the Rohingya, one can definitely see the societal fragmentation caused by the failure to address national identity and citizenship inclusively. Contrary to an easy way out, Myanmar truly needs a comprehensive framework for state-(re)building that will thoroughly consider federalism, conflict resolution, and identity politics because they are necessary for inclusive governance, equitable resource redistribution, and transitional justice mechanisms. This research highlights the transformative potential of bottom-up governance, particularly in the wake of Myanmar's 2021 anti-military movement. By centering marginalized voices and drawing from comparative federal models, this framework proposes actionable steps for a democratic Myanmar, with broader global lessons for combating democratic erosion and ethnic conflicts.

Part 2

7.2 Toward a New Theoretical Framework: Rethinking Political Institutions

Introduction

The political trajectory of Myanmar poses a considerable challenge to many of the dominant theories in political science. From the country's independence in 1948 to its current challenges of democratic transition and failure, through military coup(s) and military authoritarianism, Myanmar has defied expectations of linear assumptions of political liberalization, state-building, democratization, or economic growth.

While theoretical frameworks—such as contentious political theory, modernization theory, state-building theory, and theories of authoritarian resilience—shed important light on certain aspects of institutional development and regime dynamics, they all have failed to comprehensibly explain the complex combination of historical legacies, ethnic cleavages, and institutional weakness of politics in Myanmar. The country's colonial-era legacy, a fractured state apparatus, and simmering ethnic tensions are some of the deep schisms that have endured and compounded over time. Instead, post-independence, through the central government's fear of disintegration, nationalism was further pushed instead of striving for institutional cohesion or inclusivity, and military (Tatmadaw) dominance occurred. All of which underlines the weaknesses of state-building theories, which assume, rather than explain, that stability and legitimacy will emerge mechanistically from the application of centralized authority and the construction of institutions.

By providing insights into the historical legacies that fuel ethnic fragmentation and institutional fragility, this part of the study bridges an important gap in research on political transformations in fractured postcolonial states. It critiques existing theories for inadequate fit with Myanmar's complex political landscape and argues for a more comprehensive framework. Drawing from contentious politics theory, historical institutionalism, state-building theory, and identity politics—while accounting for grass-roots dynamics—this work aims to contextualize the importance of ethnic divisions in Myanmar's recurrent cycles of authoritarianism and weak state-building.

7.2.1 Theoretical Gaps in Explaining Myanmar's Political Development

What distinguishes Myanmar's politics from others is the concurrent fragility and resilience of its authoritarianism. Unlike in Malaysia or Singapore, ruling parties and militaries are cohesive; Myanmar's institutions have neither capacity nor stability. The military's monopoly over power, enshrined in the 2008 Constitution, has stymied the

formation of strong civilian institutions or broad-based political coalitions. The state's failure to assert infrastructural power or claim a monopoly on legitimate force, in turn, has reinforced cycles of authoritarianism and institutional fragility.

As shown in Table 2, Myanmar's political trajectory contradicts many prevailing theories in political science. Many of the conventional frameworks on democratization, conflict, and uprising seem not to have the proper explanational power on the Myanmar conflict, which has the elements of historical legacies, ethnic divisions, and institutional fragility in Myanmar. Although these theories and their analysis shed light on certain parts of institutional outcomes in Myanmar, they definitely cannot explain the country's enduring authoritarianism and the country's failure of state-building: therefore, there is the need for a new theoretical lens.

Table 7.1. Myanmar as a Challenge to Theoretical Expectations

Theoretical Expectations	Failure in Analyzing Myanmar's Politics	Timeline
Development encourages democracy (Boix 2003)[7]	Despite Myanmar experiencing limited economic development during its quasi-democratic transition, it failed to secure democratic consolidation, as evidenced by the 2021 military coup.	2011–2020
British colonialism fosters democracy (Weiner 1987)[8]	Myanmar, under British colonial rule for more than a century, did not develop a foundation for genuine democracy. Instead, colonial policies entrenched ethnic divisions and weakened prospects for democratic governance.	1824–1948
Military regimes should not long endure (Geddes 1999)[9]	Contrary to this theory, Myanmar has been under military rule since 1962, demonstrating the regime's resilience despite periodic transitions to quasi-democracy.	1962–2025 and ongoing
Economic crises help destroy dictatorships (Gasiorowski 1999)[10]	Myanmar has experienced repeated economic crises, including those following the 2021 coup, yet the military regime remains entrenched, defying predictions that economic instability would dismantle authoritarian rule.	1960s–2025
External threats help build the state (Tilly 1992)[11]	Myanmar's state-building has remained weak despite external threats, such as border conflicts and international sanctions, failing to unify the country or strengthen state institutions.	1948–2025
Nation-building aids state-building (Marx 2003)[12]	Despite achieving nationhood post-independence, Myanmar has struggled to build effective state Institutions due to persistent ethnic conflicts, weak governance, and military dominance.	1948–2025

The classical Marxist theory of social movements (Marx & Engels, 1848)[13]	One of the most glaring limitations of applying Marxist theory to Myanmar is its inability to account for the centrality of ethnic identity in shaping political struggles. Marx's analysis prioritizes class divisions as the fundamental axis of conflict, relegating other forms of social differentiation, such as ethnicity and religion, to secondary importance. In Myanmar, however, ethnic divisions have been a primary driver of resistance movements and state fragmentation. The country is home to over 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, many of whom have been engaged in armed conflict with the central government since independence in 1948.	1948–2025
Nationalist revolutions build strong parties (Huntington 1968)[14]	Myanmar's political landscape has been dominated by one strong party, the NLD, formed out of nationalist resistance, but its strength was undermined by military interference and constitutional constraints.	1948–2025
Michael Mann's 'infrastructural power' and Max Weber's monopoly on legitimate force (Mann 1993[15], Weber 1978[16])	Myanmar's fragmented sovereignty and institutional failures have limited its ability to exercise infrastructural power or establish a monopoly on legitimate force, undermining Weberian definitions of statehood.	1948–2025
Democratization follows a linear progression (Huntington 1991)[17]	Myanmar's 2008 military-drafted Constitution entrenched military dominance while allowing superficial democratic mechanisms, creating a system of controlled democracy that collapsed with the 2021 coup.	1948–2025
Democratic backsliding theories (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018[18]; Bermeo 2016)[19]	Myanmar's abrupt democratic collapse in the form of the 2021 coup defied backsliding theories, which typically focus on gradual erosion of democratic norms and institutions.	2021 Military Coup
Contentious Politics Theory **(**Tilly 2008[20]; Tarrow 1998)[21]	Contentious politics theory's episodic framing fails to capture Myanmar's long-term struggles for democracy, which persist across decades and are rooted in historical, cultural, and structural factors rather than transient political opportunities.	Decades-long resistance
Resource Mobilization Theory (McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald 1977)[22]	This theory posits that social movements succeed through strategic resource acquisition and deployment. However, Myanmar's economic collapse challenges this assumption. Firsthand accounts describe how survival priorities override	2021 Military Coup

	mobilization efforts, rendering this theory inadequate.	
Political Process Theory (McAdam, Doug 1982)[23]	Political process theory emphasizes the role of opportunities—elite divisions, alliances, or weakened repression—in enabling collective action. In Myanmar, repression transforms opportunities into existential threats, as evidenced by telecom shutdowns hindering coordination (NGO worker, personal account).	2021 Military Coup
The End of History and the Last Man (Fukuyama 1992)[24] - Liberal democracy is the final form of government, and historical struggles will eventually lead to its universal adoption.	Fukuyama's theory assumes that democratization is an inevitable endpoint, yet Myanmar's democratic transition collapsed with the 2021 coup. The military's entrenched power, ethnic conflicts, and weak institutions show that Myanmar's trajectory defies a linear path to liberal democracy.	2011-2025
Democracy emerges through pluralism and contestation (Dahl 1971, 1989)[25]	Dahl's concept of **polyarchy** suggests that democracy thrives when there is electoral competition and civil liberties. However, Myanmar's democratic transition (2011–2021) remained constrained by military dominance, suppressing real contestation. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution ensured that the armed forces retained power, undermining pluralism.	2011–2025

7. Boix, Carles. *Democracy and Redistribution*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 87.
8. Weiner, Myron. *The Child and the State in India: Child Labor and Education Policy in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 45.
9. Geddes, Barbara. "What Do We Know About Democratization After Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 2, 1999, pp. 115–144.
10. Gasiorowski, Mark J. "Economic Crisis and Political Regime Change." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1999, pp. 103–130.
11. Tilly, Charles. *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992*. Blackwell Publishing, 1992, p. 22.
12. Marx, Anthony. *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 49.
13. Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Translated by Samuel Moore, Penguin Classics, 2002, pp. 3–48.
14. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p. 71.
15. Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power: Volume 1, A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*. Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 79.
16. Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. University of California Press, 1978, p. 56.
17. Huntington, Samuel P. *Political Order in Changing Societies*. Yale University Press, 1968, p. 184.
18. Levitsky, Steven, and Daniel Ziblatt. *How Democracies Die*. Crown Publishing, 2018, p. 35.
19. Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5–19.
20. Tilly, Charles. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 77.
21. Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 31.
22. McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 82, no. 6, 1977, pp. 1212–1241.
23. McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 121-129.
24. Fukuyama, Francis. The End of History and the Last Man. Free Press, 1992, pp. 13-25.
25. Dahl, Robert A. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press, 1971, pp. 11-34.

7.2.2 Weberian Approaches and Their Inapplicability to Myanmar's Postcolonial Reality

Postcolonial Myanmar epitomizes a political condition antithetical to Madison's vision of effective governance. Successive governments have failed to control society or restrain themselves through institutional checks and balances. Instead, Myanmar's trajectory reveals the profound failure of the postcolonial state to mechanize stable governance. This contrasts sharply with the "developmental states" of East Asia, which possess powerful bureaucratic capacity and institutional coherence. By contrast, Myanmar continues to be a "predatory state," with very weak institutions, high levels of corruption, and failure to design and implement development strategies[26]. Central to this dysfunction is Myanmar's deficit of what Michael Mann terms "infrastructural power"—the capacity to enforce decisions effectively throughout its territory. This deficit highlights its failure to fulfill the foundational requirement of statehood as articulated by Max Weber in 'The Monopoly on the Legitimate Use of Physical Force'[27]. Myanmar's fragmented sovereignty and institutional failures expose significant limitations in Weberian approaches to understanding the state.

Weberian theories emphasize the importance of centralized institutions insulated from societal pressures. Drawing from Weber's conception of the state, scholars argue that development requires autonomous, capable bureaucracies. This perspective underpins the "developmental state" model, which is said to have fueled the rapid economic growth of East Asia post-World War II. Yet, Myanmar's fragmented sovereignty, contested legitimacy, and pervasive institutional erosion defied these assumptions. Its political landscape lacks the rational, centralized authority necessary for enforcing order and directing development.

Myanmar's failure to achieve a monopoly on coercion delegitimizes its claim to authority. The Tatmadaw (Myanmar military) is perceived more as a repressive, extractive force that does not serve a governing function. The military lacks moral and political legitimacy—pro-democracy participants express intense hatred towards them. EAOs such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Army, meanwhile, act as parallel governments, providing education, security, and other services in their territories. These de facto authorities pose a challenge to Weber's model of centralized state authority, indicating a pluralization of power. Myanmar's colonial history exacerbates this fragmentation. The imposition of artificial boundaries and the disruption of indigenous governance structures created a fractured political landscape. Weberian frameworks inadequately address these historical contingencies, which continue to fuel ethnic conflict and undermine state-building efforts.

26. Mann 1993. Ibid. 102.
27. Weber 1978. Ibid. 99.

They also fail to account for the sociopolitical origins of state capacity. Implicit in such a view is an assumption that institutions can be more or less replicated and modelled through reform, unduly obscuring the contentious politics of state-society relations often entailed by these institutions in their making. Second, identity politics such as the position of ethnic minorities and civil society (and transnational networks) in Myanmar hinder state building, making it difficult to reach institutional coherence. The Weberian notion of a state that is separate, secular, and independent from society has been described as fundamentally flawed. [28] In practice, states are deeply embedded in social contexts. Myanmar's elites maintain ties with military, business, and ethnic networks, blurring state-society boundaries.

The "developmental state" model, designed to explain Northeast Asia's success, is ill-suited for Southeast Asia. While Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan achieved high levels of state autonomy and capacity, Southeast Asian states, including Myanmar, remain beholden to special interest groups. Even Singapore, often celebrated as a developmental state, deviates from the ideal type. Myanmar's divergence from this paradigm demands an alternative framework that accounts for its unique historical and sociopolitical conditions.

7.2.3 Theoretical Failures: Democratization and Democratic Backsliding Models in Myanmar

Democratization has advanced more significantly than state-building in many postcolonial contexts, particularly after the Cold War. However, authoritarianism remains a persistent global phenomenon, as the "third wave" of democratization has proved uneven. Democratization had some notable successes: Latin America and Eastern Europe[29]; at the same time, it barely registered in places like Central Asia, North Africa,[30] and Myanmar. The political and economic crises, poverty, violence, corruption and inequalities have not vanished with the democratic transitions. Democratization has improved accountability somewhat by limiting the ability of the state to act as it pleases, but it clearly is no cure-all. Myanmar's failure to consolidate democratic institutions, despite neighboring states adopting hybrid regimes blending authoritarianism with democratic forms, exposes the limitations of democratization and democratic backsliding models.

The Failure of Democratization Models in Myanmar

Democratization models, in particular those inspired by the third wave of democratization[31], presume a linear trajectory from authoritarianism to democracy, led by institutional reform, economic growth, and elite consensus with snowballing impact. These

28. Taylor, Robert H. *The State in Myanmar*. University of Hawaii Press, 2009, p. 193.
29. Huntington, Samuel P. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p. 71.
30. Axyonova, Vera. The European Union's Democratization Policy for Central Asia: Failed in Success or Succeeded in Failure? ibidem Press, 2014, pp. 1–20.
31. Huntington, Samuel P. The Third Wave. Ibid.

models assume that establishing free elections, independent judiciaries, and civil society would likely create conditions for democratic consolidation. But Myanmar's experience shows the inadequacies of this approach. The country's transition from military dictatorship to a quasi-democratic system between 2010 and 2021, hailed as a success by some observers, was fundamentally flawed and fragile. The 2021 coup in February revealed this fragility and the inability of democratization theories to predict or prevent such reversals.

A key shortcoming of democratization models is their overreliance on institutional design. Such theories tend to assume that the establishment of democratic institutions will undermine authoritarian power, thereby paving the way for democracy. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution of Myanmar shows how this assumption has failed. Although it put in place a system for elections, it also consolidated militaristic power, ensuring that the military would dominate key ministries and hold 25 percent of parliamentary seats[32]. This framework enabled a facade of democracy, dubbed the "Burmese Way to Democracy," while keeping the junta's grip on power.

The democratization models have definitely underestimated how these structural constraints could strangle any possibility of real democratic consolidation. When civilian electoral victories defied futile attempts to defeat the military's hegemony in 2015 and 2020, the junta acted quickly and exploited these constitutional mechanisms to stage a coup and reclaim absolute power. Moreover, an important aspect ignored by democratization theories is the deep-rooted historical and identity differences that fuel political conflict. Democratization in Myanmar collided with entrenched ethnic and religious fault lines.

Years of EAOs fighting to attain autonomy as a response to decades of being subjected to oppressive policies continued to this day and experiencing cultural marginalization[33]. Democratization efforts in Myanmar, even under the NLD, failed to fully unearth and address these historical grievances (or at least open the conversation) without providing any outlet for proper accountability, sidelining ethnic participation. Such exclusion facilitated the reproduction of inequality and undermined democratic legitimacy, became the root cause of further crisis, and was a glaring blind spot in most standard models of democratization. Democratization theories also overrate the stabilizing effects of elite bargains. That is, the authoritarian leaders can reach a negotiated arrangement that would lead to democratization; according to Rustow [34], agreements between authoritarian leaders and democratic elites provide a pathway to democratization. Myanmar's 2010 transition was framed as such a political bargain, with the military agreeing to share power in

32. Jones, Richard. *Ethnic Armed Resistance in Myanmar*. Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 45-48.
33. Smith, Martin. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*. Zed Books, 1999, pp. 122-128.
34. Rustow, Dankwart A. "Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1970, pp. 337–363.

exchange for constitutional safeguards. However, this arrangement was deeply asymmetrical. The military saw the transition as a way to preserve its power while gaining international legitimacy and economic benefits. Electoral victories by the National League for Democracy (NLD) disrupted this delicate balance, leading the military to try to reestablish its primacy. By doing so, the NLD disrupted that equilibrium and forced the extent of the balance between authoritarian rule and quasi-democracy into its extremes. These failures are an object lesson about the pitfalls of elite-centric analyses, which neglect power asymmetries and the resurgence of authoritarianism, as in Myanmar.

Democratic Backsliding Models and Myanmar's Coup

Evidence supporting democratic backsliding theories, which are focused on the decay of democratic norms and institutions, became visible in recent years [35]. Most often, these theories involve slow-motion declines that result from the usurpation of executive power or judicial overreach. But the democratic backsliding in Myanmar was not typical and included a sudden military coup that these models did not predict. Backsliding theories often mischaracterize democratic erosion as a gradual process of civilian leaders deinstitutionalizing the state. The military in Myanmar attempted a forcible regression by way of a coup d'état that took place with the sudden seizure of power and suspension of the constitution. This process lays bare a critical flaw in backsliding models: their neglect of the role of entrenched, authoritarian institutions that can destroy democracy in one decisive blow. The coup of 2021 highlights how theories of backsliding must account for the special logic of hybrid regimes, where authoritarian institutions coexist with nominally democratic structures.

Furthermore, hybrid regimes are characterized by the importance of military power, which backsliding theories often fail to account for. Although those models center on civilian behaviors, they overlook the military's potential to disrupt democratic processes. Institutional domination in Myanmar gave the military the freedom to sabotage democratic processes whenever it pleased. This gap highlights the limitations of backsliding models in situations with deeply embedded authoritarian institutions. By moving beyond rigid paradigms, scholars can better address the complexities of political transitions in deeply divided societies like Myanmar.

7.2.4 Rethinking Contentious Politics: Theoretical Gaps and the Case of Myanmar

Contentious politics[36]—broadly understood as nonroutine political events with considerable popular mobilization—ranges from labor strikes, ethnic armed resistance, rural rebellion, student protests, urban terrorism, and street barricades to social revolution

35. Bermeo, Nancy. "On Democratic Backsliding." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2016, pp. 5–19.
36. Tilly, Charles. *Contentious Performances*. Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 34.

and separatist insurgency. This concept-based plasticity has been a strength, providing a sufficiently nuanced framework to accommodate a wide range of diverse movements. However, it also lays bare the analytic weaknesses when applying contentious politics theory to prolonged, structurally embedded conflicts. The case of Myanmar, in particular, stands as perhaps the most compelling example of how contentious political theory has had failed to acknowledge the magnitude of the country's unique political failures, much less unravel its complicated institutional dynamics, past and present. Despite a series of political and social movements (1962, 1988, 2007, 2021), these efforts have done little to introduce meaningful reform or defuse the underlying structural deficiencies born out of colonial legacies and deeply entrenched ethnic divisions.

The Limits of Contentious Politics in Myanmar

Contentious politics theory has long framed mobilization as a reaction to changing political opportunities and threats[37]. But in Myanmar, the durability of ethnic grievances, authoritarian repression, and institutional fragility contradicts the framework's episodic and reactive assumptions. The theory's focus on the transient realm of contentious politics—of brief uprisings or protests—overlooks Myanmar's protracted, intergenerational struggle with pathological authoritarianism and ethnic exclusion.

Protection Pacts and the Failure of Collective Action

A constructivist account of Myanmar's persistent authoritarianism must contend with the establishment of such 'protection pacts,' in which elites come together to protect their interests from perceived mass mobilization. Those pacts have also galvanized elite consensus around a more robust state and tighter authoritarian controls at the expense of pluralistic arrangements. While protection pacts provide authoritarian regimes with stability, their success depends on robust institutional mechanisms to extract resources and enforce loyalty[36]. In Myanmar, the military junta's ability to forge such coalitions has been undermined by fragmented institutions, weak infrastructural power, and inconsistent elite cooperation.

Unlike in Singapore or Malaysia, where cohesive ruling parties facilitated elite coordination, Myanmar's fragmented sovereignty and ethnic divisions have prevented the emergence of unified state institutions. Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), including the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Army, persist in contestation over the state's monopoly of coercion, indicating the limitations of protection pacts amid a prolonged ethnic conflict.

37. Slater, Dan. *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia*. Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 119.

The Episodic Lens of Contentious Politics

The contentious politics framework conceptualizes social movements as "episodes of contention" triggered by changes in political opportunities or threats. As Tarrow (1998) explains, opportunities arise when political environments become favorable to mobilization—through elite division, institutional access, or weakened state repression—while threats emerge from escalating repression or adverse political conditions [38].

So, social movements are dynamic, but they are reactive, responding to changes in the political environment. This framework has proved appealing in its ability to make sense, for example, of the sudden and dramatic emergence of protests during the Arab Spring against regimes that created conditions such as longstanding grievances and levels of mass mobilization. There is, however, an inherent problem when applying episodic models of contention to places like Myanmar, where the contests for freedom, democracy, and ethnic self-determination evolve over decades irrespective of changing political conditions. This theory risks promoting a reductive interpretation of Myanmar's resistance movements as mere responses to (ever-shifting, ill-defined) short-lived openings rather than expressions of long-standing social struggles informed by historical, cultural, and structural relations.

The episodic framing that characterizes contentious politics theory does not do justice to the continuity and complexity of Myanmar's resistance movements. (The anti-colonial struggles of the early 20th century, decades-long ethnic struggles, the 1988 pro-democracy uprisings, the Saffron Revolution in 2007, and the Civil Disobedience Movement [CDM] in 2021 are not just standalone episodes but connected.) These movements mobilize cultural symbols, historical injustices and generational memories of resistance that the theory minimizes due to its focus on momentary political opportunities. For instance, the interviews with CDM participants evince profound moral conviction to conscientiously fighting despotism grounded on Buddhist justice principles and karma. This moral framework sustains mobilization even in the absence of immediate political opportunities, challenging the theory's structural determinism.

Structure, Agency, and the Role of Identity in Resistance

Another limitation of contentious politics theory lies in its structural emphasis, which often ignores the significance of agency, culture, and identity in sustaining social movements. In Myanmar, Buddhism has been the moral and symbolic base of resistance. Throughout Myanmar's history, Buddhism has provided a moral and symbolic base of resistance in the country. For example, consider the role of Buddhist monks in leading the Saffron Revolution protests in 2007, wherein Buddhist monks led the protests, illustrating how religious

38. Tarrow, Sidney. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 31.

principles can both legitimize and challenge state force. Likewise, in response to the coup of 2021, Buddhist teachings of karma and moral duty have imbued CDM with a sense of spiritual purpose beyond immediate material grievances. The theory's reliance on structural factors—such as political opportunities and threats—overlooks how cultural and emotional dynamics shape collective action and how technology shapes the society's information distribution into symmetric patterns, which are critical in underground movements, as we have seen in Chapter 5.

Ethnic Identity and the Persistence of Struggle

This already complex scenario is further complicated by Myanmar's ethnic diversity. The preceding decades also witnessed parallel ethnic resistance movements, such as those led by the Shan and Karen nationalities, which not only responded politically to opportunities but also represented an intrinsic initiative for autonomy and recognition. These movements show how identity and historical continuity feed resistance beyond where grievances lead, as assumed by the theory, and they highlight the role of identity and historical continuity in sustaining opposition. Interviews with leaders of the ethnic resistance movements show that their dedication to the fight stems not only from longstanding grievances but also from a profound sense of historical obligation and collective identity. This situation highlights the need for an analytical framework that integrates the cultural and emotional dimensions of resistance.

A Grassroots Challenge to Episodic Analysis

After the military coup in February 2021, CDM evolved into a nationwide campaign of nonviolent resistance, and teachers, doctors, civil servants, and other professionals even left their posts to protest against the junta's rule, as shown in chapter 6. The CDM shows that mobilization is driven less by structural or political opportunities than by low-level solidarity. Those in the CDM do not describe their effort as a calculated reaction to changing conditions so much as a moral duty to oppose tyranny. This grassroots mobilization challenges the top-down models of leadership and resource mobilization that are the hallmark of contentious politics frameworks. Instead, it focuses on the power of horizontal networks and shared values to sustain movements.

7.2.5 Nonlinearity Argument and the Limits of Structural Analysis

Structural frameworks that seek to create a sense of order and coherence generally oversimplify realities of Myanmar's nonlinear and multidimensional political dynamics. And while each of these theories provides analytical clarity, most of them fall short of accounting for the complex interconnections at the nexus of grassroots agency and generational change, economic realities, and changing political goals. Myanmar's conflicts

offer not one linear story, but a dynamic and shifting constellation of actors, agendas, and historical contingencies.

Nonlinearity in Conflict Timelines

Political theories often assume that conflict takes predictable trajectories based on initial conditions[38], but Myanmar shows how timelines and objectives evolve in unpredictable ways. This is true of Myanmar's long-running enabling wars, where small, seemingly innocuous events—such as the burning of villages, landmine injuries, or elite corruption—create cascading effects that perpetuate instability.[39]These interconnected events create friction that entraps the state of Myanmar in spirals of violence that theoretical expectations of resolution or equilibrium cannot resolve. The changing goals of Myanmar's military, or Tatmadaw, demonstrate the nonlinear nature of conflict. The Tatmadaw adopted a strategy that was initially aimed at uniting the nation but later gravitated toward self-perpetuation through violence that worsens humanitarian catastrophes and deepens resistance. According to reports by the United Nations, devastating military campaigns led by beheadings, rapes, and other torture methods are the root causes that further fragment society. Together, these sets of actions generate new grievances and rearticulate resistance-group preferences in a way that showcases the changing dynamics of conflicts[40].

Friction, Chance, and Evolving Agency

Clausewitz's concept of friction[41]—in which chance and random acts help shape the course of war—offers critical insight into Myanmar's endurance as a theater of persistent fighting. From warlords profiting from resource exploitation to armed groups adjusting their tactics, the way conflicts evolve from a logical trajectory is explored through the actions of different actors. The recent seizure of Maungdaw by the Arakan Army as well as the realignment of others further underscore how territorial control and political motives fluctuate in response to internal and external pressures, especially during war. [42] These dynamics reveal the limitations of linear theories of their causality and equilibrium. Resource Mobilization Theory, which argues that mobilization in movements succeeds through intentional access to resources but fails to explain Myanmar where economic breakdown undercuts traditional paths of mobilizing. The desire for political change is stifled by the pressure of survival that confronts actors with high costs of living (as we have

38. Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, 1984, pp. 119
39. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar since 1 February 2022*. United Nations, 2023. https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5221-situation-human-rights-myanmar-1-february-2022-report-united.
40.. United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.
41. Clausewitz, Carl von .Ibid. 121.
42. "The AA Takes Complete Control of Myanmar-Bangladesh Border After Seizing Maungdaw." *The Irrawaddy*, 25 October 2022, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/aa-takes-complete-control-of-myanmar-bangladesh-border-after-seizing-maungdaw.html. Accessed 23 Jan. 2025.

seen in chapter 5) and limited access to bare necessities at the grassroots level. A business owner in Mandalay encapsulated this challenge: “We’ve shut down. How could we not? The price of inputs, fuel, and imports has skyrocketed; forget about the revolution–we have to get up at midnight and pump up the drinking water when our electricity comes only for three hours per day.” (Interview #36)[43]

Divergent Political Realities

In short, as Clausewitz put it, " the political object cannot...provide the standard of measurement, " [44] is a reflection that structural approaches are insufficient in Myanmar. Political objectives in the nation are not static but much like living objects that change along cultural, social, and economic contexts. This demonstrates a form of nonlinearity, for example in Myanmar crisis, with respect to international influence, especially that of China’s power over Myanmar EAOs. External influence often shifts internal alliances, as seen in the ceasefire negotiations of the Ta’ang National Liberation Army under Chinese pressure.[45] These dynamics challenge theories like Political Process Theory[46], which assumes that political opportunities and alliances drive collective action. In Myanmar, such opportunities are systematically dismantled through military crackdowns and communication blackouts, as described by an NGO worker: “The military raids an area; they order telecom companies to shut off all services… No internet means no way to check if roads are safe, no access to medical help, and no coordination for food distribution.” (Interview #43)[47]

Limits of Structural Analysis

The reliance on structural frameworks reflects an epistemological bias toward linear causality and static variables. However, Myanmar’s conflict reveals the inadequacies of these approaches in explaining emergent and contradictory behaviors. Objectives of the military have changed over time and become inconsistent regarding their initial motivations for going to war, whereas resistance group alliances navigate through the resistance narratives subject to both local and international pressures. While such patterns also challenge theories like Contentious Politics Theory, which tend to view resistance as episodic and reactive rather than continuously evolving over years, neglecting the long-term continuity and complexity of a social phenomenon unique to Myanmar.

43. A Businessman, Yangon #36
44. Clausewitz. Ibid. 92
45. "Ta'ang Rebels Start Talks With Myanmar Junta in China." *The Irrawaddy*, 25 Feb. 2025, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/war-against-the-junta/taang-rebels-start-talks-with-myanmar-junta-in-china.html.
46. McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*. University of Chicago Press, 1982, pp. 121-129.
47. NGO worker at the Borderline , Yangon # 43.

Toward a Nonlinear Theory of Conflict

A paradigm shift is necessary to understand Myanmar's conflict and similar nonlinear phenomena. Clausewitz argued that theories often seek "simplicity achieved by idealized isolation of systems and variables," favoring deterministic laws and linear causality[48]. While analytically appealing, these tools fail to capture the chaotic realities of civil war. such as in Myanmar. A nonlinear approach must embrace complexity, recognizing that conflict is shaped by dynamic interactions among historical, cultural, political opportunity, and grassroots factors.

7.2.6 Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice

As analyzed above in this chapter, the protracted conflict in Myanmar highlights significant gaps in the theoretical and practical frameworks. The traditional models tend to focus on external interventions and macro-level analyses, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the dynamic, context-dependent realities of conflict systems. The case of Myanmar has provided a stark example: top-down, global theories have failed to engage with the historically and culturally entrenched division and emotional aspects that drive resistance. This thesis argues that effective conflict transformation and analysis of social movements must be grounded in a grassroots perspective as well as appreciate the non-linear nature of transformation and bridge between macro- and micro-levels. These aspects are crucial in grounding theoretical models in lived experiences and needs of those most affected by a conflict. Moreover, ending conflicts or transformation of conflict must focus on using local resources and a systemic approach that meets the needs of everyone involved in the larger political process, rather than just dealing with the crisis itself.

Moving Beyond Top-Down and Macro Approaches, Integrating Micro, and Historical Institutional Perspectives

Most macro-level theories of social movements emphasize structural conditions—such as economic deprivation or political repression—leaving little room for the nuanced local and grassroots dynamics comprised by many movements in practice. This type of macro view may be helpful in recognizing the structural dynamics that shape larger trends, but it is also at risk of not seeing the fluid and context-specific realities in which individual grassroots actors maneuver. For example, in Myanmar, most structural analysis considers that the ethnic division is because of their struggle for autonomy. While this perspective captures some of the structural grievances, it is not reflecting the entire picture because it fails to address some actors's nature, adaptation, and changing ideology, and it also fails to account for the shifting motivations among local actors; for example, some ethnic leaders may be

48. Clausewitz. Ibid. 95.

drawn to illegal trade or making deals with the military for financial reasons[49].

This kind of macro analysis is essential but insufficient on its own; it must be combined with micro analysis in order to bring together the structural dynamics and the ground-level political realities. On the other hand, the micro-level perspective provides a rich context for appreciating the experience and behaviors of individuals and communities in response to their reality. The grass-roots perspectives illustrate changing local priorities by highlighting that everyday concerns such as education, employment, and security are often more pressing than ideological aspirations like justice and democracy[49]. For instance, many of the participants in Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) were first encouraged and then demoralized, as we have seen in chapter 5.

However, prolonged conflict and economic hardship have led to shifts in public sentiment, including frustration with both military and opposition leadership (Interview# 22)[50]. Micro-level analysis highlights the fluidity of these perceptions, ensuring that theoretical models account for dynamic changes in grassroots actors over time. Incorporating a historical institutionalism element deepens the temporal perspective, accounting for more than just episodic snapshots and addressing the question of how critical junctures disrupt existing institutional path dependencies. Myanmar has had such moments in its political history, such as independence in 1948, 1962 military coup, the 1988 uprisings and the 2021 military coup. Historical institutionalism shows how decisions made during these critical junctures created self-reinforcing cycles of conflicts and authoritarian nightmares. Such an approach places the contemporary dynamics in a broader historical continuity, hence broadening our understanding of what the drivers are behind Myanmar´s problems and changes.

All three of these viewpoints help provide a full picture of the complexity of the conflict dynamics in Myanmar. Macro analysis allows us to identify the systemic forces, micro lenses help to depict the daily realities of the local agents, and historical institutionalism puts these dynamics into a temporal perspective. Both of these dimensions are mutually constitutive, inasmuch as systemic patterns shape grassroots analysis from below and historical knowledge informs more refined understanding of both. This integrated approach helps to situate theoretical models in empirical realities, the interplay between the fluid dynamics and real-life sustainability and adaptability; therefore, it is a better fit for the fluid/non-linear dynamics of protracted conflicts in Myanmar.

Moreover, this synthesis advances not only the study of Myanmar itself but also offers a

49. Kramer, Tom. "Ethnic Conflict and Lands Rights in Myanmar." *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2015, pp. 355–374.
50. CDM Teacher, Yangon, Interview# 22.

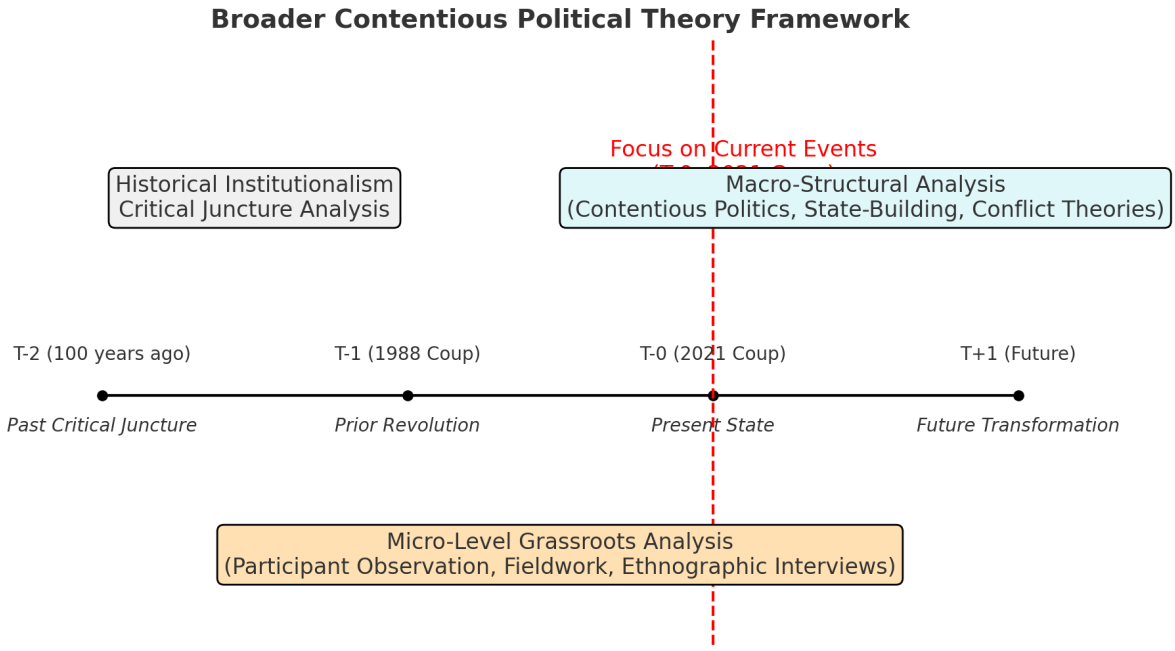
broader implication for the analysis of protracted conflicts in similarly fragmented multi-ethnic states. Ultimately, it is a call for integrating sweeping structural perspectives, grounded local insight, and historical depth into a generative framework that creates actionable frameworks that bridge the gap between theory and practice.

A new theoretical framework: 'Broader Contentious Political Theory'

This paper names the new framework '***Broader Contentious Political Theory.'*** As mentioned earlier, this framework combines historical institutionalist, macro-structural, and micro-level grassroots perspectives in one analytic lens that would help us understand and interrogate the enduring cycles of authoritarianism, institutional fragility, and ethnic division that characterize Myanmar's history. Although insightful on their own, existing political theories miss the intermechanism of these forces, especially in Myanmar's unique context. As such, this theory provides a more complex and holistic lens from which to examine these dynamics. However, it remains a work in progress, requiring refinement, and should be empirically validated with broader research designs, interdisciplinary use, and comparative studies.

The core of this framework also combines with the concept of critical junctures that draws upon historical institutionalism (see Graph 1) that has fundamentally reshaped Myanmar's political and institutional trajectory. These critical junctures—independence in 1948, the 1962 military coup, the 1988 uprisings and military coup, and the 2021 military coup and resistance—serve as turning points, disrupting the status quo and setting the stage for new

Graph 7.1. Broader Contentious Political Theory Framework



institutional configurations and political opportunity. By concentrating on these moments of change, the framework offers temporal guidance to the evolution of Myanmar's social movements. It also highlights the long-lasting impacts of political decisions made during these periods, which resonate in shaping the country's political trajectory today. Yet, the application of critical juncture analysis to Myanmar remains underdeveloped, particularly when it comes to predicting future outcomes (T+1). The integration of macro-structural analysis into the Broader Contentious Political Theory adds a crucial layer of understanding to the broader political and social systems at play in Myanmar. This perspective synthesizes multiple aspects.

For example, the study of contentious politics has uncovered recurring structures of mobilization, repression, and resistance that dominate Myanmar's historical landscape—from labor strikes to rural revolts and student protests to ethnic insurgencies. All of these are examples of the promise of mass mobilization and the potential to wield power and agency together; however, such mass mobilizations have their limitations for accomplishing consistent institutional change. Similarly, state building theories show that the post-colonialism effect on Myanmar is not only in terms of its fragmented administrative systems that have not been able to form a common state structure because of competing groups and ethnic divisions. These macro-structural perspectives are invaluable for insight, providing critical insight into large-scale changes, but seldom reach the scales of an analysis that can capture the lived realities of individuals and communities who experience these dynamics firsthand.

In order to address this limitation, the framework unfolds a bottom-up micro-level analysis through ethnographic interviews, participant observations, and intensive fieldwork. This aspect of the theory is fundamental to understanding how these larger structural and historical forces are produced at the grassroots level and how power, identity, agency, and resistance play out in everyday life.

As a result of the systematic collection of qualitative data, it therefore provides a nuanced portrait of Myanmar society, giving us some indication as to how local actors are pushing back against what remains an authoritarian form of governance. Grassroots accounts could, for instance, shed light on how the interplay of culture, religion, and identity influences political behavior in local contexts as well as the mechanisms by which communities deal with conflict and marginalization. Nonetheless, these methods need to be refined and expanded to other regions of Myanmar with a wider range of population. Triangulating disparate data from a range of sources, using new methodologies such as participatory action research or digital ethnography, might add considerable depth and richness to this analysis. Therefore, future research should explore how these inflection points affect not

only short-term political developments but also institutional resilience or fragility in the longer term.

This model's main contribution would be to enhance the explanatory power of existing models with empirical studies of the agency and various structural constraints in these conjunctures, as well as their sociopolitical aftermath. Ultimately, this framework not only aims to shed light on Myanmar via the lens of past and present, as we have done with this thesis, but also calls for more engagement in weighing up a nuanced understanding of contentious politics in fragmented conflict states around the world. There is also the potential that, if addressed effectively, the 'Broader Contentious Political Theory,' as presented within this research, I believe, could address some pressing challenges in both academic scholarship and practical policymaking.

Conclusion

The chapter has interrogated the extent to which prevailing political theories are seriously out of sync with the institutional and resistance realities in Myanmar. Through a nuanced dialogue with contentious politics theory, with models of democratization and state building, and with Weber's paradigms, the study demonstrates that Myanmar's long-term political crisis continuously violates linear and universalist expectations about the transition of regimes, the building of institutions, and the process of political mobilization. Through empirical evidence from decades of political chaos—including legacies of colonization, inter-ethnic armed resistance, and elite schism, not to mention the 2021 coup—the chapter shows that it is impossible to make sense of the trajectory of Myanmar using episodic or structure-heavy models alone. Rather, the chapter seeks to think of Myanmar's political past as a constellation of overlying crisis—shaped by non-linear changes, cultural recollection, grassroots moral agency, and institutional fragility.

As a conceptual intervention, this chapter proposes a new framework, the "Broader Contentious Political Theory," which offers a better optic to understand Myanmar's contested political landscape. This framework combines macrostructural analysis with historical institutionalism and micro-ethnographic accounts—to offer a multifaceted dimension of protracted resistance, authoritarian persistence, and failed democratization. It captures the prolonged nature of Myanmar's troubled political history and ongoing grassroots struggles. In integrating critical junctures, moral repertoires, and spatial asymmetries of power in the same analytical model, this approach disrupts and enriches the canon of political science. In doing so, this contribution tends not only to re-theorize resistance in Myanmar but also to offer a transferable model by which one can analyze the behavior of other multi-ethnic, postcolonial, so-called failed states where traditional theories might fall short.

Conclusion: Myanmar–'Two Roads Diverged in a Wood': Federal Unity or Fragmentation

I conducted this research as a scholar and at the same time as a citizen of Myanmar who had been conditioned by the messy dispositions of post-coup Myanmar. It had been a profoundly sobering and heartrending journey with such field trips into a reality on the ground due to state failure, militarized separation, many people unbearably suffering, and contested sovereignty. Local-level fieldwork in Mae Sot, a town on the Thai Myanmar border, provided me access to interviews with Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) leaders, activists, and displaced communities. Listening to those voices from the ground, although overwhelming, defined my realities and taught me about resistance, federalism, and the fragile promise of peace.

Drawing upon contentious politics and civil conflict theory, this study identified the structural and strategic underpinnings of Myanmar's ongoing crisis. Using data from content analysis of ethnographic content analysis and qualitative interviews, the study tracked the conflicting logics of resistance and repression that now characterize the country's contesting political order. One of the major observations is that the resistance, now broad-based, is internally divided. The lack of a single federal military cordon, combined with continuing suspicions between anti-junta forces, reflects a history of elite fragmentation and insecurity over territory. In that sense, Myanmar's defiance is limited not only by repression from outside, but also by incoherence from within.

And the humanitarian consequences of this prolonged conflict are serious and largely ignored. Its findings point to a great deal of civilian displacement, infrastructural decay, and targeted deprivation. Field reports from Mae Sot and other nearby locations support this analysis; civilians are not simply caught in the crossfire but are deliberately rendered vulnerable in ways that undermine both survival and resistance–so that they will not support. The failure of regional actors and international institutions to coordinate an effective humanitarian or diplomatic response further compounds this crisis.

The thesis also offers mitigation, an alternative historical scenario and addresses structural reforms essential for any sustainable federal transition. These specifically involve a constitutional commitment to religious freedom, an inclusive linguistic framework, the development of a territorially restructured eight-state federal model, and the creation of a comprehensive federal military force under civilian oversight. These are not framed as abstract virtues but as the minimal conditions for stabilizing Myanmar's statehood and legitimacy. Yet they are difficult to enforce due to the weakness of institutions, a lack of trust, and a lack of credible commitment from major players.

Some Pathways to Resolution

Both short- and long-term solutions that focus exclusively on ending the war could potentially fuel the continuation of cycles of military penetration and recurring civil unrest. Stability for the future of Myanmar demands addressing the underlying causes of conflict, including holistic federal reforms.
The study recommends some long-term pillars for reconciliation:

- **English Language as a Tool for National Reconciliation and Global Integration**: using English as a unifying national language alongside regional languages can bridge ethnic divides and position Myanmar within the global system.

- **Absolute Religious Freedom**: enshrining religious freedom into the bedrock of federal democracy can assuage the historical grievances due to the state being aligned with the Buddhist religion and suppressing minority faiths.

- **Myanmar eight-state federal model - Reimagined Territorial Organization**: An eight-state federal model that ensures equal representation and resource-sharing among ethnic groups can provide a framework for inclusive governance.

- **Unified Federal Army**: The formation of an ethnic-led federal army, with robust oversight mechanisms and ethical frameworks, is essential for dismantling the Tatmadaw's centralized military structure and ensuring national security under civilian control.

The analysis also acknowledges the failure of current opposition structures. Many EAOs still see the NUG through the lens of historical Bamar-dominated governance and the continuation of the NLD and as a result are skeptical of its overtures. Without a rupture in the political culture—toward accountability, decentralization, and co-ownership—federal models, even if made with the best intentions, could replicate the existing hierarchies they intend to break apart. Enshrining federal principles in its governance would allow Myanmar to escape its cycle of violence and mutual recrimination. That would be the end of the hegemony, or 'Barmanization,—and would give every ethnic group the chance to meaningfully participate in the future of the nation. These reforms are vital to ensure that federalism is not merely a mechanism for administrative decentralization but a means of

genuine inclusivity and justice, whether through the federal framework proposed in chapter 7 of this thesis or another form yet to be conceived.

Myanmar now stands at a crossroads, reminiscent of Robert Frost's diverging paths: down one leads continued authoritarian consolidation and enduring state failure; down the other, a federal arrangement that shares power, resources, and recognition more equitably. The discovery in this thesis is that as slim as the chances of Myanmar walking on the federal road appear to be, it is the only future road for unity with lasting peace, so long as there is coordinated action, all-inclusive negotiation, and sustained political imagination.

Ultimately, the overall success of Myanmar's transformation will depend on how well the country embraces and implements these eight foundational reforms as a roadmap toward reconciliation and unity. Without these fundamental changes, though they may be really daunting to implement, any federal model adopted will falter under the weight of systemic inequalities and mistrust. However, if the nation dares to walk that path, Myanmar may yet find itself transformed with inclusivity, justice, equity, peace, and stability into a model of federal democracy.

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