

# Coup, Conflict, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Burmese Peoples Moving in Times of Isolation

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Received: 12 September 2022 / Accepted: 2 April 2023 / Published: 28 June 2023

► Jaehn, M. (2023). Coup, conflict, and the COVID-19 pandemic: Burmese peoples moving in times of isolation. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 16(1), 63-78.

This paper focuses on the political crises shaping Burmese' peoples' im-mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. As governments around the world urged people to stay at home to be protected from infection and transmission, throughout 2021 many Burmese people protested the military coup of 1 February and fled Myanmar for safety. I problematize these movements of the Burmese peoples through the complex interplay between the triple C of (ethnic) conflict, COVID-19, and coup. I contend that, in Myanmar, adhering to COVID-19 measures emphasizing (self-)isolation and immobility was impossible as they served the military to suppress peoples' critique and protests regarding the government's coup and its mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, Burmese peoples' physical movements and political mobilisation were necessitated to fight against an ensuing political disempowerment of the people. In other words, the unfolding of the COVID-19 pandemic in correlation with long-standing 'ethnic' conflicts and a military coup required the Burmese peoples to carefully contest an internationally propagated so-called 'new norm' of self-isolation at home and other social distancing measures, which bore the risk of suppression and of renewing political isolation experienced since the country's first military government.

**Keywords:** Conflict; COVID-19; Military Coup; Movement; Political Protest



## INTRODUCTION

A core question that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic is who adheres to social distancing measures and who does not. This has been associated with the question of who believes in the novel coronavirus being a threat to society (Pedersen & Favero, 2020). While non-compliers of social, or physical distancing measures are usually believed to be those who deny COVID-19 being an issue to the public health sector and humans, in Myanmar noncompliance with social

1 'Burmese' is used to encompass all peoples living in Myanmar - whether Bamar or not, citizens or stateless. This article, however, uses Myanmar to name the country as it is the country's internationally recognized name.

distancing measures has been at the heart of protesting a regime that has weaponized the COVID-19 crisis for its own benefit, and which has shown a history of using disasters and crises to punish its dissidents (Passeri, 2022). As such, in Myanmar the question is less who believes in the COVID-19 virus being a threat, but more a question of who can afford to, and who is able to, adhere to government-imposed restrictions. Considering this context, I will look at how the latest social distancing measures and their violation – from the Burmese peoples and the state – have been used to push against and for political isolation. I argue that it is the conjuncture of the 3Cs – ‘ethnic’ conflict, COVID-19, and coup (Simpson, 2021; Transnational Institute, 2021), and its handling by the government that has shaped the public’s initial violations against measures of self-isolation and which has led to accelerated mobilities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The military coup of 1 February 2021 has not only revived and intensified conflict between the military and the Burmese peoples, but also reinforced the COVID-19 crisis. In effect, the coup constituted a more immediate crisis to be solved than the COVID-19 pandemic. Violating certain COVID-19 measures, therefore, constituted a “responsible disobedience” (Drechsler, 2021, p. 577). Key to these dynamics has been the fear of losing a hard(ly) won political empowerment over the last decade. The last decade has brought reforms under the presidency of Thein Sein and saw a seeming transition in the political regime towards democracy under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi. These political changes set forth an economic opening of the country (Fumagalli, 2022; Jones, 2014). But with the 2021 coup, the Bamar majority, who had benefited most from this transition, feared falling back into political disempowerment and experiencing a new wave of political and economic isolation, while for ethnic minorities the crises created a situation in which it might be possible to negotiate a new social contract towards federalism (South, 2021) - despite its sufferings. In effect, the coup mobilized a diversity of Burmese peoples to organize and march in initially carnivalesque and peaceful protests, establish a widespread civil disobedience movement (CDM), and reinforce armed resistance to the military’s violence. These movements appeared in solidarity with each other while not entirely dispensing with ethnic and class tensions and cleavages.

This article is based on a comprehensive literature review based on Burma Studies experts’ reactions and writing on the coup, pandemic, and its consequences. I used keywords such as *coup*, *civil disobedience movement* and *COVID-19 in Myanmar* on Google Scholar and university databases as well as the Burma Studies Facebook group page to find recent and relevant articles on the issue. I further followed SEA-Junction’s #WhatsHappeninginMyanmar series. This series was a weekly and then monthly Zoom meeting session, updating listeners on the coup and its resistance situation in Myanmar by invited experts. When taking information from these sessions, I cite the invited speakers and experts’ names.<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the constraints that such research carries with it, and I acknowledge that the micropolitics and details of events on the ground can as such only be included in this analysis to a limited extent.

In my analysis, I will proceed as follows: First, I will discuss the issue of so-called ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. Second, I will give a brief analysis of the handling of the COVID-19 crisis before the coup. I then turn towards the coup and its aftermath.

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2 The sessions are publicly available on SEA-Junction’s YouTube channel. <https://www.youtube.com/@seajunction4587>

It is the coup's aftermath with its protests, CDM, and flight towards ethnic minority areas and across borders that receive most of my attention. In my analysis, I will elaborate the dynamics between the weaponization of COVID-19 by the military and the peoples' (non-)adherence to its measures and regulations. I conclude that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Burmese peoples have (been) moved to find solidarity and contest their disempowerment and the country's return to political isolation. While mobilising against the military coup, the peoples have deliberately violated some COVID-19 regulations. Yet, they did not take the crisis lightly. In contrast, they acted against the measures to protect themselves from the military and the COVID-19 health crisis, which had aggravated due to the military's response.

### 'ETHNIC' CONFLICT

Myanmar is a country that has long been in a state of conflict – not with its neighbouring countries, but with its own peoples. Since the country's independence in 1948, Myanmar has been riddled with inter-ethnic cleavages, especially between the Bamar majority, the military government in the centre and ethnic minorities at the country's borderlands who demanded more autonomy, federalism, and if necessary, secession (South, 2021). The Panglong Conference of 1947 gave way to hopes for a federal solution, but with the implementation of the 1947 Constitution of the Union of Burma, these hopes were soon buried. As South (2021) argues, the constitution did not provide federalist structures but basically declared the centralization of Myanmar and initiated the political marginalization and isolation of ethnic minorities. The marginalization of ethnic minorities was fast-forwarded through processes of “Bamari-zation” driven by the Bamar majority military government (Taylor, 2005, p. 280), which aimed at the establishment of an ethnocratic state (Smith, 2007). Even though over the decades the concept of *taingyintha* ('national races') gained importance in defining citizenship, which seemed to allow for ethnic diversity encompassed in 135 ethnic identities considered to belong to the Myanmar nation, the military government continued to emphasize and prioritize Buddhist Bamar identity as the benchmark of belonging to Myanmar (Cheesman, 2017).

But ethnic minorities did not accept their marginalization based on their peripheral location at Myanmar's borders. In contrast, the forceful unionisation of Myanmar has led to a long-term state of armed conflict inside the country, leading to insurgency and counterinsurgencies, to forced internal displacement and flight across borders (South, 2021; Tangseefa, 2006). It is also from these borderlands that political mobilisation against the central government of Myanmar has strived through the establishment of ethnic organizations and ethnic armed groups (Loong, 2023; South, 2021) which have also worked towards a better provision of social services, such as healthcare and education, to civilians of the same minorities (like the Shan, Karen, and Mon). These often have only limited access to such services provided by the central government (Davis & Jolliffe, 2016; Jolliffe & Speers Mears, 2014). Official refugee camps that have existed for decades along the Thailand-Myanmar and Bangladesh-Myanmar border, with hundreds of thousands displaced people, remain a constant reminder of their ongoing fight against a repressive and exclusionary regime.

The repressive military regime of General Ne Win, which started in 1962, and the conflict it triggered also led to Myanmar's political isolation globally. The US and European nations demanded boycotts of military-owned products and companies and executed arms embargoes (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Sarno, 2006). However, as Ardeth Maung Thawngmung and Sarno (2006) further elaborate, Myanmar's Asian neighbours preferred to engage with the military government for strategic and economic reasons. Moreover, European countries had not entirely stopped providing humanitarian aid, investing in, and trading with Myanmar produced goods. As such, boycotts were neither coherently nor uniformly executed and the military government could survive and strengthen its role as the country's dominant power and authority. Yet, the rhetoric and partial practices of boycott of the authoritarian military government led to a semi-isolated status of Myanmar. This only began to change with the perception of the country's slow transitioning towards democracy with the presidency of Thein Sein in 2011 – a transitioning that was initiated and led by the military itself. His government's reforms led to some liberalisation and the economy was revived. Foreign donors, organizations, and countries brought new development projects to the country (Fumagalli, 2022; Jones, 2014). However, throughout, it was still the military generals who mostly profited from the country's perceived democratic transition without needing to make any concessions to their power inside the country (Jordt et al., 2023). With the 2008 constitution, the military has made sure to hold on to power by holding a quarter of seats in all legislatures, a veto power on constitutional changes, and no less a prerogative to take control in emergency situations (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Khun Noah, 2021).

Further, despite a proclaimed democratic transition in the 2010s, there was little change to the situation of ethnic minorities at Myanmar's borderlands. They remained marginalized, discriminated against, and in conflict with the civilian-military government. Rather than working towards a reconciliation with ethnic minorities, the National League for Democracy (NLD) government widely tolerated the military's violence, especially, but not exclusively, in its western borderlands against the Rohingya. The Rohingya are an ethnic minority that is not recognized as *taingyintha* and that has been demonized as 'illegal immigrants' and 'Bengalis' (Cheesman, 2017). Their violent persecution by the Myanmar military in 2017 led to hundreds of thousands fleeing across the border to Bangladesh, setting forth a fact-finding mission on allegations of genocide by the military on the Rohingya people ("Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar", 2019; O'Brien & Hoffstaedter, 2020). Aung San Suu Kyi, who is a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and has been living under house arrest for many years before becoming the state counsellor after elections in 2015 (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Saw Eh Htoo, 2022), even went to The Hague unapologetically to defend the military's persecution of the Rohingya in front of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), claiming the military did not commit genocide ("Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar", 2019). In effect, hopes for democracy, freedom, and an opening of Myanmar under the newly elected NLD government did not lead to a transitioning towards peace and political emancipation for many ethnic minorities in Myanmar's borderlands (of which the Rohingya are but one example). In contrast, conflict continued as Myanmar's democratization process focused on Myanmar's centre and a reconciliation between the NLD and the military, dismissing

ethnic minorities' concerns and the legitimacy of its representative organizations and groups (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Saw Eh Htoo, 2022; South, 2021).

As such, the Bamar majority – safely located in the centre and being the dominating ethnicity – believed in the transition as much as Western states and donors who stopped sanctions against Myanmar and returned to investing in the country (Fumagalli, 2022). The Bamar people believed that with the elected NLD government in place, they could overcome the political and economic isolation and become politically empowered. But this illusion of transition only lasted a decade. In the end it became visible that “Myanmar’s transition in 2010 [was] less as a transition to democracy than to a diarchy with competing forms of government” (Jordt et al., 2023, p. 3). Instead of giving more power to the people, it “prolonged a principle of sovereignty that depended on the personal power of military strongmen” (Jordt et al., 2023, p. 3). As such, Myanmar’s transition led towards the establishment of an ineffective two-headed government that did not work for its many peoples but for a selected few – mostly for military officials and to some degree for the Bamar people. While the government portrayed an image of a united and democratized country to its own peoples and the outside world, ethnic minorities continued to suffer under the diarchy that seemed to support majoritarian rule by Bamar interests. While ethnic minority parties formed more than half of the parties registered in elections, they only won a minority of seats in parliament and lacked political representation (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Khun Noah, 2021). As a result, ethnic minorities’ interests remained underrepresented and cleavages with the government and military persisted. They remained the losers in a proclaimed political transition of the country.

### COVID-19 BEFORE THE COUP

In their article, Myo Minn Oo et al. (2020, p. 1) claim that the Myanmar government’s response to COVID-19 was “timely and bold”. In contrast, Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020) argue that the Myanmar government was silent on the possibility of COVID-19 in Myanmar for the first three months after the initial outbreak in neighbouring China. The authors support their argument by showing that re-elected State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi still proclaimed on 16 March that in Myanmar nobody is infected with COVID-19. Only at the end of March, the first COVID-19 case was admitted by the government. The government’s subsequent response to an ensuing spread of the virus was supported by China delivering masks, test-kits, personal protective equipment, and support for building a testing laboratory (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). Overall, the government hoped to control the spread of the virus with the help of a joint civilian-military, the *Emergency Response Committee*. It proposed a range of containment measures, but remained hesitant on issuing stricter lockdowns and neglected ethnic minority regions in its response (Kyaw San Wai, 2020; Myo Minn Oo et al., 2020; Passeri, 2022).

The government’s joint initial denial of the virus’ possible presence in Myanmar does not mean that it did not take the threat of the COVID-19 virus on Myanmar and its fragile public health system seriously. The government immediately initiated measures that pertained to restricting the gathering of large crowds, as public meetings were postponed and New Year celebrations (which fell on 13-16 April according to

the Buddhist calendar) cancelled. Yet, the public was supposed to be kept in the dark about an ensuing crisis, enforcing a veil of silence on it. First, the government drafted and abolished a Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases bill, containing a section that prohibited authorized departments and individuals to break news on the spread of infectious diseases if these could cause the public to panic (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020). As Grundy-Warr and Lin (2020) argue, the new bill intended to delay appropriate and necessary information during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the government closed more than 200 websites from independent media houses and ethnic minority organizations, caused internet blackouts, increased military presence in ethnic minority zones, and enforced lockdowns (Passeri, 2022; Transnational Institute, 2021). In consequence, the public was strategically isolated and disempowered through increased military presence, restricted movement, and disinformation campaigns led by the government. In the end, the global call and joint action for public health measures that restrict movements and interaction of people to contain the spread of the COVID-19 virus served as a welcome opportunity for the military to strengthen its repressive actions towards its political opponents already before the coup.

### THE COUP AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

The days following the coup, a video went viral: a woman does her aerobic routine in Naypyidaw while a military convoy rushes past behind her. The woman apparently does not take notice of the commotion and its meaning but keeps on exercising energetically while wearing a surgical mask. Being a fitness instructor, Khing Hnin Wa had recorded the video and uploaded it to her Facebook page the same day (“Myanmar fitness instructor accidentally”, 2021). The video captures one of the military raids in the capital of Naypyidaw and Yangon, Myanmar’s biggest city, arresting members of the newly elected government and political opponents.

Despite the military’s open dissatisfaction about the national election of November 2020, in which Aung San Suu Kyi’s party won with a land-slide victory, the military coup of 1 February 2021 came somewhat as a surprise to the Burmese people. Yet, the military had chosen the date of the coup strategically. 1 February 2021 was the day the new parliament should have been sworn in (Simpson, 2021). This made it easy for the military to arrest more than 100 political leaders, install a ‘caretaker government’, and declare a one-year state of emergency in a sleight of hand. The military justified its actions by claiming election fraud in November 2020 and an insufficient response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the NLD government (Passeri, 2022). However, the public did not perceive any of the justifications by the military as legitimate. Almost immediately after the coup, non-violent protests erupted across the country. The people mobilized against their political disempowerment and the return of a military junta. While government opposition was previously led by ethnic minorities, this time it was first the Bamar people who went to the streets in protest against the illegitimate coup and for their right to a democratically elected government. The initial protests were spearheaded by the Generation Z (generation born between 1997-2012) who knew how to instrumentalize social media to spread news on the recent developments in Myanmar, trying to mobilize more people and catching the

attention of the international community (Jordt et al., 2023). Several hashtags were invented to share information on protests and the coup worldwide; especially, the hashtag #whatshappeninginmyanmar continues to be used to spread news on developments in Myanmar in Burmese and English. Using the hashtags helps to inform about the ongoing atrocities, mobilize protest, and draw attention to the movement even beyond Myanmar.

Further, only two days after the coup a civil disobedience movement (CDM) was called to life by health workers across the country. Their strikes and street demonstrations were soon joined by workers and trade unionists from various sectors (Jordt et al., 2023). The leading role and participation of civil servants in the movement speak of the urgency of political action against a government and coup that are perceived as illegitimate (Shepherd, 2021). Protesting and striking was an act of responsibility to underline the severity of the coup's violation of the people's will and health, prioritizing the military's own political interests. In this sense, non-compliance towards COVID-19 regulations was not an act of ignorance towards possible infection with the COVID-19 virus; it was an act conscious of its risks and the urgency to act against a military that mobilizes crises to tighten its grip on power. The civil disobedience movement was an act in protest of the abuse of the military to reclaim power in an emergency perpetuated and aggravated by the military. Instead of staying at home in fear of the pandemic and the military, people were moving and mobilized to protect the little political empowerment they had won, demanding the military to respect the results of the democratic elections held in November 2020. Jordt et al. (2023, p. 12) describe the atmosphere of the early protests as "festival-like". The protests "create[d] a space for riotous performances of the silly, half-serious, transgressional and irreverent condemnation of the military takeover" (Jordt et al. 2023, p. 14). They showed not only ingenuity in employing cultural and religious references to scare and fight off the military but also in drawing on pop culture to create allegiances with regional democratic, anti-authoritarian movements. Many protest signs were written in English rather than Burmese, using democratic ideals and appealing to a global audience to understand their demands and dissatisfaction with the coup (Jordt et al., 2023). In a time of increased restrictions on human movements and border crossings, the Burmese peoples referred to connection beyond borders. In translating their struggle for political empowerment to audiences beyond Myanmar, they tried to evoke a sense of transregional and global solidarity. The Burmese peoples understood themselves as part of a common fight against repressive regimes that threaten peoples' desires for democracy and who need each other's support, especially in times of multiple crises.

### **MILITARY CRACKDOWN AND THE WEAPONIZATION OF COVID-19**

However, these peaceful protests were violently suppressed by the military. Civilians and protesters were arrested, imprisoned, and even shot on the streets. The Generation Z protester Ma Kyal Sin, or "Angel", became a symbol of the military's violence after she was shot in the head by an unidentified security force. As her image spread around the world raising outrage, the military tried to cover up its responsibility for her death ("Body of 'Everything will be OK'", 2021). According to Passeri (2022), in the first six months following the coup, more than 1,000 people died. Even online

activism did not provide a safe outlet to protest the coup. Although online activism and protest is often accused of being performative and secondary to offline engagement, this is not the case in Myanmar's latest opposition to the coup (Wood, 2021). Online activism has been central to the mobilization of the peoples and thus has not been safer for those providing and distributing critical information about the coup and its protests. To stop the political mobilization against the coup, the military has operated internet cuts, surveyed social media accounts, and targeted journalists. With the growing military violence and surveillance against peaceful protesters and journalists, an atmosphere of fear spread across the country. People felt increasingly insecure inside the country, risking their lives on the streets and on the job. They began to flee to the borderlands or across borders to seek safety from retaliation by the military government (Aung Zaw, 2021a, 2021b; Wood, 2021).

With the CDM unfolding, health care workers on strike were no less under risk of arrest and murder by the military and many had to flee and hide from the military. In their hide-outs, they were cut off from receiving and providing public (health) services while the military's actions deepened the crisis. The military shut numerous private healthcare clinics whose employees had participated in the CDM during the ongoing pandemic (Krishna & Howard, 2021). It further arrested the head of Myanmar's vaccination program, channelled medical resources towards military hospitals, closed pharmacies, blocked people from accessing oxygen donations, and disrupted non-governmental healthcare programs in ethnic areas, excluding minorities from the provision of public and private healthcare services (Bociaga, 2021; Khin Ohmar, 2021c; Passeri, 2022; Transnational Institute, 2021). Rather than letting their political opponents help the people in other health care facilities, the military willingly created greater (health) precarity for its people to hold on to its power. Yet, it was the military that accused striking healthcare workers of genocide. Krishna and Howard (2021, p. 1) quote military spokesperson Major General Zaw Min Tun: "They are killing people in cold blood. If this is not genocide, what shall I call it?" For years, the military had denied its act of genocide against the Rohingya people but now grabbed an abstruse and obscene opportunity to accuse its political opponents of such actions. Though, it was effectively the military that disabled striking civil servants to provide health services to the public, they shifted blame over the ensuing crisis, trying to weaponize the pandemic and claiming medical inaction by professionals as a genocidal act, whereas it was they who killed people in the streets, gave a belated and insufficient response to the pandemic, and actively disabled access to health care. Using the accusation of genocide on striking healthcare workers is based on a shallow pretence that the military cares and tries to protect the people all the while it continued to attack, kill, arrest, and imprison them.

The weaponization of the COVID-19 pandemic by the military went even further as conditions in Myanmar prisons have been far from abiding to public health measures in light of the pandemic. According to Stothard (2022), more political prisoners than ever have been incarcerated in the first year of the coup. In total, around 12,000 political prisoners were taken, whereby the military seemed to use imprisonment of political opponents to not only punish them, but also to potentially harm their health. Activists who have been imprisoned reported a lack of space, sanitation, and medical treatment among others (A. A. & Gaborit, 2021; Krishna & Howard, 2021). By



not providing adequate protection from infection and healthcare services in prisons, the military government increased the likelihood that imprisoned political opponents might fall sick and die. The spokesperson for Aung San Suu Kyi, Nyan Win, had contracted COVID-19 and died in prison in July 2021 after being arrested during the coup on 1 February 2021 (Peck, 2021). Nyan Win's death is but one indicator that the military instrumentalized the contagiousness of the COVID-19 virus not only to grab on power and suppress protests, but also to immobilize its political opponents indefinitely. The policy briefing by the Transnational Institute summarizes the effect of the coup on COVID-19 and Myanmar society as the following:

Myanmar's fragile health system collapsed following the SAC coup. Health workers were targeted for their role in the pro-democracy protests. Hospitals were raided, over 43,000 staff in the Ministry of Health and Sports joined the CDM, over 500 health workers and medical students have been detained or gone into hiding, and 29 killed. Civil society and non-governmental organisations running COVID-19 and other humanitarian programmes have also faced harassment, and in many of the conflict-zones the health care activities of local ethnic and community-based groups are severely disrupted. (Transnational Institute, 2021, p. 2)

This is not a government that expresses interest or care for its peoples' survival and protection amid a political and medical crisis. In contrast, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a backdrop for the military to roll out a "collective punishment scheme" (Khin Ohmar, 2021a) and continue its "politicide" (Thein-Lemelson, 2021, p. 3) by targeting and eliminating its political opponents systematically. While Thein-Lemelson (2021) seems to suggest that these opponents represented a somewhat unified community with distinct rituals and a shared and common identity (centered around the NLD), Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) argue that political opposition in Myanmar has always been and remains to be fluid and fragmented. As such, the military targeted in its politicide not a united community, but it fought and continues to do so against a multitude of oppositional fronts who have their own goals and interests in defying the military. As such, the COVID-19 pandemic represented itself as a convenient weapon for the military to target its different opponents collectively, and without distinction.

### ENSUING SOLIDARITY

Yet, despite the military's attempts of instrumentalizing the COVID-19 pandemic to immobilize the people and push its political ambitions of consolidating power, the military's opponents sought out solutions to fight back and provide healthcare services to the country's peoples outside the infrastructures and resources of the state. Deeply distrusting the military government, ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) had already established their own prevention campaigns to the COVID-19 pandemic before the coup (Passeri, 2022). This was only possible as EAOs and local NGOs had created a coalition in developing a parallel healthcare system that provisioned ethnic minorities, especially in the Southeast of Myanmar. Over the years, the development of this alternative healthcare system also received support from international donors,

and since 2011 and 2012 cooperation between governmental and EAOs healthcare systems ensued after the signing of ceasefire treaties (Davis & Jolliffe, 2016).

After the coup, the newly formed *National Unity Government* (NUG)<sup>3</sup> could build on these earlier efforts to initiate a COVID-19 taskforce in coordination with health organizations administered by ethnic minorities and their EAOs. With their joint effort, they hoped to vaccinate those people who so far rejected vaccination out of rebellion and mistrust towards the military-administered vaccination programs. The military supposedly conducted a secret vaccination program for its own personnel with Covaxin – a COVID-19 vaccine produced in and imported from India, which was yet to undergo clinical trials and approval for safe use. After the initial doses were given to military personnel, Covaxin was also administered to civilians in April 2021, according to an official of the Food and Drug Administration (“COVID-19 vaccine was tested”, 2021). Hence, rather than providing only vaccines that had undergone all required tests and trials, the military seemed to have adopted the stance to make use of any vaccine available to them. In contrast, the NLD had acquired and used the approved Covishield vaccine in its vaccination program before its suspension (“COVID-19 vaccine was tested”, 2021). Further, the NUG and ethnic minorities had acquired six million doses of vaccines, which were to be administered by EAOs and by UN agencies (Krishna & Howard, 2021).

Overall, the CDM operated on grassroots activism and underground communication structures, such as building neighbourhood watches and alarm systems and selecting their own representatives while ousting those aligned with the military (Jordt et al., 2023). This kind of grassroots activism and its structures were first established in 1988 when student protesters had to flee to ethnic minority areas for protection (Brooten, 2021). In 2021 protesters and civil servants participating in the CDM once again fled to ethnic minority areas to seek protection from the military (David et al., 2022). While previously dormant and somewhat forgotten, with a re-emergence of violence against Burmese people, centre-periphery relations and connections were remembered and revived. They were now utilized to build a more unified resistance against the military, laying the groundwork for a possible solidarity across ethnic and class differences (Loong, 2023; Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021).

This cross-ethnic, and to some extent cross-class, solidarity appeared as a new phenomenon in Myanmar. Not only was it a joint effort in combating the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup, but the protest movement as such appeared to have changed significantly – in distinction to the 1988 student protests and the 2007 Saffron Revolution<sup>4</sup>. As Jordt et al. (2023, p. 21) write, in the protests against the latest coup “[m]ore robust democratic political demands gathered broad support for abolishing the 2008 constitution and establishing a federal democratic polity”, drawing less on

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3 The NUG formed in opposition to the military coup on 16 April 2021 and claims legitimacy as the Burmese peoples’ government. Its members include many National League for Democracy (NLD) politicians, but it also includes representatives from ethnic nationalities (Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022).

4 The Saffron Revolution of 2007 was a series of protests against a sharp rise in the rice and oil price induced by the military. The protests are called the ‘saffron revolution’ because members of the *sangha* (Buddhist clergy/community) joined the protests and decided to excommunicate the military after the military’s violent retaliation against its members (Jordt et al., 2023).

Bamar Buddhist majority ideals and concepts but rather on global ideas of democracy and solidarity. Prasse-Freeman and Kabya (2021) also emphasize that demands for democracy are not limited to the reinstatement of the NLD government that had won the November 2020 elections, but include a reassessment of the past (Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021, p. 2). It partially addresses the exclusions, inequalities, and injustices perpetrated, also in times of Myanmar's so-called democratic transition. Rather than continuing a politics of centralization for the unionization of Myanmar, discussions about a federal future of Myanmar gained another momentum, in which ethnic armed groups appeared as a necessary force against the military and the foundation of a future federal army (David et al., 2022). The discussions also laid the groundwork for a potential bridging of cleavages between the former National League for Democracy, whose members now form a significant part of the new National Unity Government (NUG), and ethnic minorities and their EAOs (South, 2021).

However, while the opposition in the centre and the peripheries have the joint goal of superseding the State Administration Council (SAC) junta and have expressed intentions to solidarize, cleavages among the protesters and minorities over a future common government and administration of state persist. For example, despite a joint response to COVID-19 with EAOs and EAOs proving to possess quite some support from ethnic populations, these EAOs have not been sufficiently recognized as actors in a future government, whereas the NUG claims legitimate authority for leading the country (South, 2021). As Loong (2023) argues, this also explains the long silence of some ethnic minorities and their armed organizations at the beginning of the protests. The problem is that lasting centre-periphery (majority-minority) tensions may slow advances in consolidating solidarity and finding common solutions to fight the junta and establish a new government and possible political system. The relations between Bamar civilians and ethnic minorities will decide if their protest and fight against the coup will be successful and long-lasting (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Khun Noah, 2021; Loong, 2023).

Nevertheless, the aftermath of the coup forced some NLD members and protesters to rethink their attitude and statements towards ethnic minorities and their interests, most notably to the Rohingya. Suddenly, protesters and politicians issued apology statements for having looked the other way or supported the violent actions taken against the Rohingya in the past (Jordt et al., 2023; Prasse-Freeman & Kabya, 2021). Such apologies are a significant step, according to Debbie Stothard (2022), and may symbolize a paradigm shift in the treatment of the Rohingya in Myanmar. While the Rohingya's persecution was previously justified and legitimated as 'anti-terrorist' operations and an internal affair by the military, the NLD government, and large parts of the public, the violence of the military towards the coup protesters (of often Bamar ethnicity) has shifted their perspective. Acknowledging the past and current violence committed against the Rohingya through their apology statements, anti-coup protesters and members of the civilian government demonstrate that they are in dialogue with an international audience that has raised serious human rights abuses and genocide against the Rohingya during Myanmar's so-called democratic transition. Before the coup, this kind of concession would not have been possible. However, with the coup and the protests' violent suppression, some members of the former government and Bamar people suddenly learnt to understand the military's violence as overboard

and illegitimate, and no longer subject solely to internal political affairs. In contrast, it required international attention and intervention (David et al., 2022; Simpson, 2021).

Further expressions of solidarity with Rohingya were linked to creating the hashtag #Black4Rohingya used on social media and donning black clothes in solidarity with them, organising a women's march, and staging a silent protest on Rohingya Genocide Remembrance Day in 2021 (Khin Ohmar, 2021b; Simpson, 2021). However, it is yet to be assessed how far the newfound empathy and solidarity for the Rohingya is lasting and where it is leading (Ardeth Maung Thawngmung & Khun Noah 2021). Although the NUG has started to cooperate with the International Court of Justice on the Rohingya issue and finally acknowledges the atrocities committed against them (Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022), apologies towards the Rohingya and solidarity actions with them are mostly led and issued by the younger generation of Burmese peoples, whereas, the older generation largely remains silent (Khin Ohmar, 2021b). Further, many Burmese people still venerate Aung San Suu Kyi, who the Rohingya no longer can trust after her civilian government not only let their persecution happen but even defended it. As such, Aung San Suu Kyi's role after the coup as a leading politician might be essential in forwarding or holding back reconciliation with the Rohingya people. So far, despite emerging actions in solidarity with the Rohingya, the situation for Rohingya has not improved. From January 2020 to June 2021, 3,046 Rohingya tried to cross the Andaman Sea in search of better protection and died on their perilous journeys (UNHCR, 2021). Yet, neighbouring nation-states felt entitled to refuse newly arriving Rohingya and other refugees and migrants amidst fears of a spread of the COVID-19 virus (Fumagalli, 2022; Khanna, 2020). Rohingya have been turned away and left drifting at sea or outsourced to Bhasan Char – an island designated by the Bangladesh government to contain Rohingya refugees (Grundy-Warr & Lin, 2020; Khanna, 2020). Hence, if the military remains in power, the situation for the Rohingya is unlikely to improve and will prevent Rohingya abroad from returning to Myanmar (Khin Ohmar, 2021c).

But Rohingya have not been the only ones fleeing their homes and camps during the COVID-19 pandemic. Other ethnic minorities and Bamar protesters and political opponents also crossed borders, especially into India and Thailand, to seek refuge amidst continued and revived conflict in ethnic minority areas (Fumagalli, 2022; Loong, 2023). Many people live on the run, trying to escape the military's grip. On their flight to marginalized and rural areas or overcrowded refugee camps, they are exposed to a higher risk of infection with COVID-19 as they live with a notable lack of access to hygiene and public healthcare (Banik et al., 2020; Kobayashi et al., 2021). Yet, seeking refuge in ethnic minority areas has been noted by Brooten (2021), as well as Loong (2023), as an important phase and factor to the formation of solidarity on which to establish political transition and reconciliation between the different parties. While in the past, the military was to some extent able to claim working for the protection of the union of Myanmar in fighting ethnic minority armies, this claim becomes questionable if Bamar civilian protesters indeed find refuge in ethnic minority areas under the protection of their armed groups (Loong, 2023). Thus, in the wake of COVID-19 and the coup, it is flight that might solve divergences between the Bamar and ethnic minorities in the long term. Flight from the centre to the borderlands might appear as a necessary tool to not only free the borderlands' ethnic minorities

from their long-lasting political isolation since the establishment of a military government and throughout Myanmar's acclaimed transition towards democracy, but it might also become the centre from which to fight the military's attempts of permanently disempowering and politically isolating the country's population.

## CONCLUSION

While the world was caught in conflict over solving the COVID-19 issue by exercising social distancing, isolation, and immobility, the Burmese peoples were unable to adhere to some of these measures due to the falling together of the 3Cs – conflict, COVID-19, and coup. In a situation in which the military government weaponised the COVID-19 pandemic to re-establish its power monopoly, the Burmese peoples had no choice but to disobey specific protective health measures in defiance of the military's illegitimate grab on power. Adhering to all popular COVID-19 measures would have meant for the peoples to submit into an ensuing long-term political disempowerment of the people. In effect, Burmese peoples did not have a choice but to disregard some COVID-19 measures temporarily to protect their rights and mobilize in solidarity against a repressive military regime that made access to healthcare increasingly inefficient and unequal to control its peoples and eliminate its political opponents.

Yet, the Burmese population did not disregard the COVID-19 pandemic as a major health crisis. In contrast, in their protests, they criticised the military not only for the coup but also for the mismanagement of the COVID-19 crisis, and its instrumentalization to grab onto power rather than granting safe and equal access to healthcare services for all (such as proper vaccination). The civil disobedience movement served to protect the Burmese peoples, and not to harm them. Contrary to the military's claim, striking health care workers did not commit genocide on the people, but it was the military who tried to instrumentalize COVID-19 and public health resources to punish political opponents and force people into line with the military government, taking peoples' unnecessary death into consideration. Healthcare workers, however, did not stop providing help despite dropping out of government facilities and protesting on the streets. Instead, they shifted their attention to private and township hospitals to lead a two-front war: against the military and against the spread of the virus. Their protest and noncompliance were not in denial of COVID-19, but in respect and consideration of it. They risked their lives in facing the military and the coronavirus by doing their job despite an ongoing political crisis that was claiming their lives.

To conclude, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Myanmar remained a country on the move – politically, socially, and physically. The Burmese peoples marched on the streets as much as they moved their protests online to distribute the news of the coup, its protest, and repression, as far and wide as possible. They also moved ideologically towards solidarity with ostracized and marginalized communities and renewed discussions on a federal future of Myanmar. As such, in Myanmar, the triple crisis seems to have softened the antagonism between the Bamar people and ethnic minorities. Although ethnic minorities and EAOs appear to have reacted belatedly to the coup, they slowly began to forge ties of solidarity in fighting not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also the military's coup, providing refuge to those fleeing the military. In times of global immobility, the peoples of Myanmar moved more than

ever. At the time of writing, their movements in protest against an illegitimate and irresponsible military government have not dissipated.

However, the military's attempt of consolidating its coup is still lasting, leading the country and its people continuously back into a state of political isolation and disempowerment. While the Burmese peoples do not despair, their peaceful protests are increasingly accompanied by armed conflict led by EAOs but also newly formed People's Defence Forces (PDFs) of young Burmese to defend their and their family's lives (Khin Ohmar, 2021b; Moe Thuzar & Htet Myet Min Tun, 2022). Remembering Ma Kyal Sin lying on the floor to protect herself from the bullets of the military and wearing a t-shirt with the slogan "Everything will be OK" on the day she was shot, it can only be hoped that in the end, her wish will be fulfilled.



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Prof. Antje Missbach, who offered me the opportunity to contribute to this special issue, as well as everyone involved in the thorough review process (from the editors to the two anonymous reviewers) to improve this article.

## DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.