

Myanmar Update 2021

Abstracts

PANEL 1: THE COUP

UN, Please Ignore Us': Addressee-design in Myanmar's ongoing anti-coup uprising *Elliott Prasse-Freeman, National University Singapore*

In the massive Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) uprising against Myanmar's recent military coup, many of the protest messages appearing across the country seem to seek addressees beyond Myanmar's borders. Either in terms of substantive content (posters that ask foreign militaries to "save us") or formal structure (enormous messages – written on pavement, mountains, and plains, and often through human bodies constructing mass ornaments – that cannot be read by those constructing them), signs appear to appeal to transcendent figures: the UN, the USA, or a vague "international community." However, closer inspection of the way these signs are consumed, commented upon, and circulated – on Burmese Facebook by Burmese users – reveals additional dynamics regarding addressees and addressee design structure. I argue that these signs operate in a boomerang fashion, in the sense that for some Burmese protesters these signs do not actually require external mediators (no "international community" needs to confirm receipt; indeed, that "community's" refusal of uptake might progressively denude the images of their "demanding" capacity); instead the signs are taken up locally, where their reiteration conducts political work: they either symbolically assault Myanmar's generals (by appealing to other sovereigns), or produce a distance from the immediacy of struggle against street violence to inscribe on the coup itself summary statements about it ('Save Myanmar', 'Federal Democracy,' and, of course, 'Fuck the Coup'). This latter archive-in-formation project produces a field of joint attention in which Myanmar people talk to one another, foregrounding common enemies (generals and collaborators) but also introducing political dissonance that must be addressed: the sign 'We Want Democracy' posted on one hill is clarified and challenged by the demand for 'Self-Determination' inscribed on another, demanding: what kind of "democracy" will this be? After tracking how this tension has compelled a rapid evolution of the anti-coup movement's politics, the paper concludes by noting how the heterogeneity of addresses is mimicked by the heterogeneity of political claims and social identities embodied within the CDM itself.

The Contested State of Burma: Conflict, Coups, and the Federalism Promise *Nicola Williams, Australian National University*

Vicious cycles of protracted conflict, coups, and dictatorship by the Myanmar military have motivated democracy movements and armed rebellion. The military's wholesale production of a Bamar Buddhist ultra-nationalist ideology across decades of nation-building, state-building and warfare has driven opposing ethno-nationalism and alternative state-making processes which elevate the 'peace' promise of federalism. The latest incarnation of attempted military rule via the 2021 coup has augmented parallel processes of state-making, with elected officials seeking to gain support from ethnic groups in creating a government of 'national unity' and path towards democratic federalism. This paper navigates evidence and theory within the dynamic context of conflict and contemporary state formation in Burma/Myanmar, examining the continuum of contest for the state. It describes how coalescing dynamics from domestic nation-building, state-building, and warfare, have institutionalised fragmented identities and contest along cultural, territorial and ethnic lines, with more minority groups making statehood claims. It argues that divisions in ethno-nationalisms, existing on both national and local scales, create fault lines for ongoing federalism debates and design. A challenge for federalism proposals heavily reliant on ethnic-based federalism will be overcoming, and not recreating, the military's divisive legacy.

New friends, old enemies: Politics of Ethnic Armed Organisations after the Myanmar Coup
Salai Samuel Hmung, Australian National University

This research paper examines the stances of eighteen ethnic armed organizations (EAO) and their coalitions in Myanmar. Has the coup brought these groups closer together against their common enemy? Or has the coup deepened their disunity, and the likelihood of the formation of the federal army? In order to identify the post-coup stances of different EAOs, this paper analyses EAOs' statements, activities and engagement with the military through a framework based on two dimensions: political and military. Mapping of the EAOs' positions indicates that their positions can be broadly divided into four categories. There are: groups that are in open armed conflict with the military; groups that condemned the coup publicly but are reluctant to endorse military means; groups that want to take advantage of a military that is overstretched by domestic and international pressure; and groups that maintain the status quo by remaining silent. The two-dimensional analysis suggests that the coup has deepened the EAOs disunity despite the widespread public expectation that it would unite different forces facing a common enemy. EAOs responses toward the coup and post-coup stances no longer depend on their coalition, nor on whether or not they signed the NCA. The EAO's contradictory positions have also diverged from the prospect of a new armed alliance or a federal army, which the anti-coup protesters longed for at the beginning of the coup

Centering heterogeneity in Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement
Michael Dunford, Australian National University

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) here refers to participants in the vast array of strikes, street demonstrations, and other direct actions carried out in protest of Myanmar's 2021 coup d'état. Despite a decline in media coverage, these actions are ongoing. One of the most remarkable aspects of the CDM is its kaleidoscopic heterogeneity: in Yangon, Bamar nationalists have marched with Muslim activists; massive demonstrations have taken place in regional towns (and especially in Myanmar's "ethnic" States) on a scale unprecedented by the movements of 1988 and 2007. Drawing on Chen's (2010) "deimperialist" analysis of postcolonial Asian politics, this paper seeks to understand what precisely is at stake in the tension between the repressive postcolonial state—embodied by the Tatmadaw—and the heterogeneous anticolonial public(s) that form the CDM. The Tatmadaw's claim on Myanmar's political future is based on a "rickety yet repressive" (Callahan 2002) colonial model. CDM, by contrast, represents a vast array of contradictory claims, which range from liberal democracy to federalism to anarchism; some CDM participants even call for discipline, echoing Tatmadaw rhetoric. This paper will argue that the incredible diversity and apparent incoherence of the CDM's demands is exactly its strength: as long as its demands can never be precisely pinned down, it can never be absorbed into an apparently reformed (but still violent) version of the Tatmadaw. The question that remains unanswerable is whether the CDM will be able to continue striking long enough to support the emergence of an alternative state structure.

PANEL 2: FOREIGN RELATIONS, THE PANDEMIC & THE COUP

The nature, scope and limits of international responses to Myanmar's coup
Nicholas Coppel, Monash University

This paper considers the actions and reactions of nations, international organisations and businesses in the first six months after the coup. Many but not all of the early responses are examined to identify commonalities and differences. The paper assesses the utility of international condemnations of the coup and the calls for an end to violence and the release of detainees. It also considers the responses

of the international business community since the coup. The paper discusses pleas to recognise the National Unity Government and the handling of competing claims to represent Myanmar in international organisations. In the context of calls on the international community to “save Myanmar”, it considers whether the United Nations Responsibility to Protect doctrine could be invoked and discusses a mediation role for ASEAN. Finally, it weighs the arguments for engagement against the risks of contributing to the legitimisation of the military council.

The Pendulum of Neutralism: Myanmar’s Shifting Approach to Non-Alignment from 2010-2020
Hunter Marston, Australian National University and Andrea Passeri, University of Malaya

Since independence, Myanmar has shown a firm commitment to a neutral, non-aligned foreign policy, to prevent it from falling into the orbit of a great power or bloc of powers. The paramount goal for policymakers has historically been to preserve national independence and freedom of action abroad, leading various generations of leaders to avoid multilateral or bilateral security arrangements that could jeopardise its non-aligned stance. The dilemma facing Burmese leaders has revolved around the desire to implement a positive, proactive blend of non-alignment, aimed at expanding and diversifying international partnerships, and, on the other hand, the temptation of resorting to a more inward-looking, reactive ‘negative neutralism’, retrenching from international engagement and embracing isolationist policies. After tracing the historical origins of Myanmar’s neutralism, this paper compares and contrasts the foreign policies of Thein Sein (2011-2016) and Aung San Suu Kyi (2016-2021) by analysing each administration’s worldview and strategies. It utilises discourse analysis and foreign policy analysis to distinguish Myanmar’s recent return to negative neutralism from the relatively short-lived period of outward engagement and proactive positive neutralism from 2011-2016, and has major implications for the country’s ongoing political crisis since the military coup in February.

How are fashion workers in Myanmar surviving the Covid-19 pandemic? Initial empirical findings of struggles and resilience
Sara Tödt, RMIT University

Global garment production systematically exposes women to insecure employment, where both local and global events have an outsized effect on their lives and livelihoods. The Covid-19 pandemic has seen the rapid decline of fashion consumption globally, with billions of unpaid orders, and local lockdowns. At the start of 2020, 700,000 workers were employed in apparel production in Myanmar, in the first wave 60,000 workers lost their jobs. Most of these workers are women, having left their hometowns for work in the city. Feminist research has explored the gendered impacts of work in garment production and how local gender relations make women more vulnerable in unemployment (Anwary, 2017; Carswell, 2016; Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). The pandemic has seen Myanmar garment workers at greater risk of domestic violence and has forced some into sex work. This paper sets out to explore what informs women’s decisions as they determine how to survive the pandemic. The paper draws on initial empirical findings from 24 interviews with women garment workers in Myanmar on how Covid-19 has impacted their livelihood strategies. We apply feminist and collaborative empirical methods to collect timely data on how gendered global garment production intersects with local gender relations to shape women workers lives in times of crisis.

PANEL 3: POLITICS, ELECTIONS AND THE PANDEMIC

The Myanmar 2020 Elections and the Conditions of the COVID-19 Pandemic
Michael Lidauer and Gilles Saphy, independent consultants and elections experts

The 1 February coup d’état of 2021 has been justified by the Myanmar military with an underlying “electoral narrative”, claiming that the elections were manipulated in behalf of the NLD, while

election observers have testified that the election results represented the will of the voters. Like few other elections globally, the Myanmar 2020 elections took place under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic that shaped the process profoundly: The freedoms of movement and assembly were curtailed during the pre-electoral period while governmental aid and messaging around crisis management increased the advantages of incumbency. Political actors demanded to postpone the elections while the Union Election Commission (UEC) stood firm in its plans to hold elections on 8 November.

The Ministry of Public Health (MoHS) and the UEC adopted stringent rules to protect voters, candidates, and electoral personnel in an effort to avoid the elections becoming a major source of contagion. Stay-at-home orders for 72 townships and other safety regulations constituted obstacles for political parties to campaign freely, hindered civil society organisations in providing scrutiny as observers, and curtailed journalists' capacity to report first-hand. On election day, however, polling stations were equipped with protective material, and voters exercised their newly acquired "civic duty" with diligence, raising turnout despite the pandemic. All these factors combined shaped the elections like no other, as the paper will show.

Vanishing Network: USDP's Position in Myanmar's Democratic Consolidation (2015-2020)
Constant Courtin, University of British Columbia.

Myanmar's democratic transition was brutally suppressed on February, 1st, 2021. In 10 years, Myanmar organised two free and fair general elections (2015 and 2020), both times leading the NLD to secure a landslide victory. In comparison, little attention has been put into understanding the collapse of its main opponent and military-proxy party, the USDP. However, the performance of the USDP are crucial to unearth one of the many causes that might have lead the military to stage a coup rather than to continue committing to the democratic bargaining game. In this paper, I argue that the military coup can be understood through the poor electoral performance of the USDP. Those poor performances signaled by the Tatmadaw that their political position weakened.

More precisely, I develop a causal mechanism that links USDP's victories in areas where we would not expect the USDP to have won to its clientelist nature – compared with the relatively more programmatic nature of the NLD. The USDP victories can be explained by the level of state capacity of the constituency. State capacity does affect electoral outcome through the trust voters put in the local administration. Where voters' trust is low, the credibility of programmatic parties such as the NLD is lowered, and voters will tend to rely on clientelism for the provision of public goods. Where voters rely on clientelist practice for the provision of public goods, the probability of victory of clientelist parties is increased. In this context, elections signaled the Tatmadaw that their network (that of USDP in fact) vanished, illustrating their weakened political position, and participating to their decision to stage a coup.

Exploring Myanmar Prison Department's Responses to Covid-19 and the Implications of the Coup
Anonymous Scholars and Tomas Martin, DIGNITY

Since the military coup of 1st February 2021, the military-led State Administration Council (SAC) has arrested and detained thousands of people who have organized and participated in anti-junta protests, continuing a deep tradition of political imprisonment, torture and inhumane treatment. Even before the coup Myanmar prisons were characterized by deplorable conditions, climates of fear and harsh military discipline. Additionally, for over a year the prison system, burdened by a violent history and low capacity, has been struggling to respond adequately to the COVID-19 virus. This has involved various restrictions, pardons, ad hoc training and piecemeal protection efforts. This paper explores Myanmar Prison Department's (MPD) responses to Covid-19 including consideration of the way the

coup is making already difficult matters worse. Even though the SAC claims to follow the COVID precaution procedures and guidelines from the Health Department, our analysis indicates that the mass incarceration of members of the civil disobedience movement seriously aggravates staff's and prisoners' vulnerabilities and undercuts MPD's feeble COVID responses. Contextualised by field research on family visits, gender and imprisonment, and prison governance, careful consideration of the MPD's early responses to the pandemic, as well as more recent accounts of recently released detainees this paper raises important questions about the way the coup is affecting prison life and influencing the MPD's response to the pandemic. The paper identifies problems, challenges and dilemmas based on the lived experiences of prisoners and reflects more generally on the enhanced vulnerabilities of detainees in post-coup Myanmar.

PANEL 4: STRUGGLE AND RESILIENCE

The Myanmar Economy, COVID-19 and the current political context: Issues and prospects for recovery

Linda Calabrese, Max Mendez-Parra and Laetitia Pettinotti, Overseas Development Initiative

The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically impacted the Myanmar economy, with reduced domestic activity and disruptions in the main sources of foreign exchange, such as the tourism and garment exports, extractives sectors and remittances. Moreover, the pandemic has exposed the weaknesses of the current economic development model, based on potentially precarious sectors with limited domestic value addition and margins. This study reviews the impact of the pandemic on Myanmar's trade and investment. Relying on secondary data, we produce economic estimates of the impact of the pandemic, focussing in particular on exports and other international economic linkages. We then try to assess whether Myanmar's current economic model, based on extractives, unprocessed agricultural exports and low-wage manufacturing, fits the domestic needs for economic development and whether it can drive the country's economic recovery. We discuss how the current model needs to be revised for 'Building Back Better' the Myanmar economy, taking into account not only economic but also climate, social and gender considerations.

Socioeconomic Challenges of Local Fisherman, due to the Pandemic

Mie Mie Kyaw, independent expert

The measure taken by this research to contain socioeconomic challenges of local fishermen in Kyauk Myaung segment, Irrawaddy River (hereafter study area). In pandemic, during stay at home period, not allowed for going outside including fishing, handling, selling, and transporting from one area to others, it makes crisis on socioeconomic situation of local fishermen in the study area. According to discussions with local fishermen in this study area, there are declining incomes, firstly, declining the fishing rate due to Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing as electric fishing that makes all fish to increasing the death rate as the eradication of from the fingerling as death to large fishes as sterile. Secondly, it was not allowed to go outside at the highest rate of spreading Covid 19, the price of fish is very low because there is no export as well as the lowest demand from local markets, about 80 % of local fishermen are facing the socioeconomic challenges and the rests have the other jobs as well. Therefore, it is necessary to have stakeholder mapping to conserve fisheries resource as well as to uplift the socioeconomic situations of the local fishermen for the sake of all communities beyond Covid.

Human Rights and access to Access to Worship Places in Myanmar

Seng Rose, independent Expert

Myanmar has an obligation to ensure access to places of worship as part of its overall international obligation to guarantee freedom of religion or belief. Protecting these rights is crucial in a country as ethnically and religiously diverse in Myanmar. While the government allows these constitutionally recognized and other registered religious groups to worship and practice their religions as they choose. In practice, however, restrictions appear to be enforced primarily against religious minorities, and onerous bureaucratic processes make it difficult to establish new places of worship or renovate the existing worship places. This paper looks specifically at the current situation of the right of access to places of worship amidst ongoing COVID pandemic and military coup; the political, legal and administrative obstacles that prevent full enjoyment of this right; and how the legal framework, and its discriminatory or arbitrary enforcement have resulted in restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief – particularly for religious minorities in Myanmar.

Debt, Precarity and the Politicisation of State Aid: COVID-19 Impacts and Post-Coup Options
Gerard McCarthy, National University of Singapore, Anonymous Scholar, Andrea Smurra, University College London and Russel Toth, University of Sydney

On 1st February 2021 Myanmar military's seized power, nullified the November 2020 election and arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and democratic leaders. The subsequent political crisis has fractured pandemic response, including the roll out of a limited stimulus package drawn up by the civilian government to support companies and poor households. This paper provides a snapshot of livelihoods pressures and the politicization of limited government social support prior to the coup, and then considers options for non-state social aid in the wake of the military take-over. Informed by survey data collected amid Myanmar's second COVID-19 wave, supplemented by interviews with a range of stakeholders before and after Myanmar's 1st February coup, we find: pre-coup government aid was insufficient to meet even the most basic needs of many vulnerable households and business owners for more than a few days; and yet distribution of social aid in the months before the November 2020 election was viewed by minority party supporters as partisan campaigning by the National League for Democracy government. Despite the politicisation of aid, as government support was limited in scope and local welfare groups faced a shortage of donations many households and entrepreneurs were forced to take new loans - often at predatory rates from informal providers - to survive the pandemic. As a result even before the coup and paralysis of Myanmar's economic and political crisis many had already accrued heavy debts that would take years to pay off without substantive government action and relief. In the wake of governmental social aid ceasing due to the post-coup implosion of governance, we conclude by: surveying immediate options for providing relief to households via non-state networks including microfinance institutions; and arguing for rapid investment in state-led safety nets and debt forgiveness once civilians return to power.

PANEL 5: POVERTY, FOOD INSECURITY & SOCIAL PROTECTION UNDER COVID-19 & THE COUP IN MYANMAR

Poverty, food insecurity, and social protection during COVID-19 and the Coup in Myanmar: Combined evidence from household phone surveys and micro-simulations
Afke Jager, Innovations for Poverty Action-Myanmar

To assess the welfare impacts of COVID-19 we combined recent high-frequency phone survey evidence on incomes, coping strategies and food security for two rural and urban geographies in Myanmar with national-level survey-based simulations designed to assess ex-ante impacts on poverty with differing amounts of targeted cash transfers. Income-based poverty rose at an alarming rate between August and September 2020. Food insecurity and inadequate maternal dietary diversity are also rising sharply in the urban sample, raising serious concerns for the nutritional status of mothers

and young children. The poor continue to mainly cope with declining incomes by resorting to loans/credit, while better off households draw down on savings. Around half of all surveyed households received government cash assistance of 20,000 Myanmar Kyat in September but targeting of these transfers remains a problem. Simulation evidence shows that even with perfect targeting, 20,000 Myanmar Kyat transfers have only moderate impacts on food- poverty during lockdowns, suggesting larger transfers during lockdowns are advisable, which may also improve compliance to stay-at-home orders. Smaller or more tightly targeted transfers during post-lockdown recovery periods, such as cash-for-work schemes, could reduce the fiscal burden of social protection.

How could COVID-19 affect maternal and child nutrition? An exploration of impact pathways in Yangon, Myanmar

Sophie Gaudet, independent expert

COVID-19 could affect maternal and child nutrition through dietary and disease pathways, including income shocks to household food and nutrition-related health expenditures, as well as disruptions to the demand or provision of nutrition services such as antenatal care. Using a unique panel of over 1000 mothers who were pregnant in January 2020 (prior to COVID-related disruptions) and surveyed monthly between June and November 2020, we investigate these different nutritional impact pathways. We find that although there were some disruptions to nutrition-related health services, these were modest in scale and short lived, with services normalizing reasonably quickly. However, the economic impacts of COVID-19 under prolonged and stringent prevention measures were severe and appear to explain a significant deterioration in maternal diets. However, we also document poor nutritional knowledge among mothers with regard to diets, with the majority of mothers avoiding nutrient-dense foods in the first few months after childbirth. The results therefore emphasize the need to offer stronger and more sustained nutrition-sensitive social protection – such as maternal and child cash transfers – as well as behavioral change communications to counter nutritionally harmful cultural norms around healthy eating practices.

Myanmar's Microfinance Sector, Agriculture, under COVID 19 and the coup: Emerging Insights and New Challenges

Russell Toth, University of Sydney

We take stock of the impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural finance in Myanmar from March through the end of 2020. We review policy responses to the crisis and insights from other analyses. We then present new quantitative analysis based on extensive phone surveys in the months after the crisis emerged. Overall, we find that while there were clear disruptions to formal agricultural financing, particularly in the microfinance sector, to a first approximation the sector was relatively resilient. Smaller borrowers tended to turn more towards informal than formal sources of financing. The major government response was through the Myanmar Agricultural Development Bank, which provided critical injections of financing with relatively minor delays in disbursements. Large agri-businesses tend to be a net source of capital in Myanmar, which also likely reduced some of the dependency on formal financial sources. There was particular concern about disruptions to the primary monsoon growing season from May to October, however much of the agricultural sector carried out production at a level that wasn't drastically out of step with a more typical year. We provide further reflections based on discussions with leaders in the microfinance sector. We conclude with policy recommendations for the next phases of recovery.

