

CHAPTER II

MYANMAR'S STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

In the wake of the February 2021 military coup, thousands of Myanmar citizens took to the streets to express their disagreement. Pro-democracy activists across Asia rallied with the demonstrators under the transnational network of MTA. They amplified the demonstrator's voices in online spaces, demanded the international community act, and demonstrated in their respective countries. By June 2021, 4,700 anti-coup demonstrations were recorded in Myanmar (Bynum, 2021). When the military retaliated with violence, the number of demonstrators who participated in street demonstrations decreased and activists are forced to go underground (Bynum, 2021). In exchange, they adopted 'guerilla strike' tactics learned from Hong Kong protests and took their protests online in hopes to gain international attention and pressure the military to return power to a democratic government.

To better understand Myanmar's long history of military rule and its struggle to achieve democracy, this chapter would be split into five subchapters: first, the development and decline of Myanmar's democracy; second, the human rights abuses committed by the military; third, the international community's response; fourth, pro-democracy movements in Myanmar; and fifth, a conclusion of the chapter's discussions.

2.1. The Development and Decline of Myanmar's Democracy

2.1.1. The Military Rule of 1962-2010

Throughout Myanmar's history, the military attempted a total of four coups: the near-coup of 1958, the Burmese coup of 1962, the SLORC coup of 1988, and the 2021 coup. The result was Myanmar's military dictatorship, which lasted for decades, starting from General Ne Win's coup in 1962 and briefly ending in 2010 with the NLD's victory in the general elections. There are several reasons behind the military's multiple coups and why it could maintain a stronghold for decades: first, the military's belief that it was Myanmar's independence hero and the main force holding the country together against waves of rebellion post-independence (Bünthe, 2011); and second, the institution has a massive scope of power within Myanmar.

The Burma National Army (BNA) was Myanmar's earliest form of military. Led by Aung San and backed by the Japanese who promised independence to Myanmar, the revolutionary army sought to end British rule in the country. However, after Japan failed to grant full independence, the army switched sides and assisted the British army in driving the Japanese out of Myanmar instead. After defeating the Japanese, Aung San brought together ethnic group leaders in Panglong to discuss Myanmar's future. The result of this discussion was the Panglong Agreement, which contained foundational principles for a Burma federation, revenue sharing, and the basis for a Supreme Executive Council of the United Hill Peoples. This strong desire to achieve independence and unity was the foundation of Aung San and the military's popularity among the general public.

Upon recognizing Aung San's influence over the military and the general public, the British government allowed Aung San and his party, Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL), to form their government. However, Aung San was assassinated by his political rival, U Saw, on July 9, 1947. After his assassination, the AFPFL established a government under U Nu's leadership and promptly dismissed the Panglong Agreement. The dismissal meant that Myanmar's ethnic minorities were directly put under the Burman majority rule, without protection (Zeiner-Morrish, 2022). This triggered the emergence of separatist movements; in 1949, these movements gained control over 75 percent of Myanmar's towns (Zeiner-Morrish, 2022). Even worse, the AFPFL was faced with increasing factionalism, which impacted the party's unity and nearly provoked a coup by field officers in 1958 (Bünthe, 2011). This was the military's first attempt to seize power from Myanmar's ruling government. These issues, combined with the mismanagement and corruption within the government, made it difficult for U Nu to maintain Myanmar's unity (Bünthe, 2011); Zeiner-Morrish, 2022).

To handle the situation, General Ne Win urged U Nu to allow the military to form a caretaker government. U Nu agreed and a caretaker government was created in 1958. After the transfer of power, Ne Win's government managed to reduce corruption, increase the efficiency of bureaucracy, and deal with separatist movements. It was during this period that the military adopted a new ideology that put it as the one responsible for establishing Myanmar's "peace and the rule of law", "democracy", and a "socialist economy" (Steinberg, 2021). The ideology was

rooted in the belief that military officers were more competent and effective than their civilian counterparts (Steinberg, 2021).

Although General Ne Win handed back power in 1960, the military was still dissatisfied with how U Nu ran the government. This dissatisfaction stemmed from the fact that U Nu attempted to resolve the minorities' grievances, which Ne Win saw as the first stage of a federal government and thus secession (Steinberg, 2021). U Nu also announced a new state corporation which would gradually relieve the military of its hold on economic activities (Trager, 1963). These actions worried the military and would later become General Ne Win's excuse for the 1962 coup.

Immediately after the 1962 coup, General Ne Win sought to establish the military's complete control over Myanmar. This goal was justified under the principle of the preservation of the state and protecting the state from internal and external threats (Steinberg, 2021). To achieve his goal, Ne Win formed the Revolutionary Council, which consisted of seventeen senior military personnel. The general and his council then abolished the 1947 Burmese Constitution, dissolved the parliament and all civilian institutions associated with the previous administration, censored the media and suppressed student protests, banned all political parties except for the military-led Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), expelled foreigners, and nationalized all of Myanmar's industries under the "Burmese Way to Socialism" system.

The Revolutionary Council's policies allowed for complete control. The abolishment of the 1947 constitution meant that Myanmar's ethnic groups, such as the Shan and Kayah, would never be able to hold a referendum and break free from

Myanmar (Steinberg, 2021). The dismissal of the parliament and senior administration members meant that the military would rule the government without a civilian counterpart, while the banning of political activity including opposing parties and student protests ensured that Myanmar citizens could not fight back against the changes. And lastly, the nationalization of Myanmar's industries meant that the military held power over integral sectors, such as banking, construction and fishing, and oil, thus making it the most powerful business organization in the country (Bünthe et al., 2020; Rieffel, 2015).

The 1980s witnessed the military's declining influence and the following decades saw the Myanmar public's interest in democracy. In the late 1980s, unrest started due to an economic crisis that stemmed from Ne Win's "Burmese Ways to Socialism" system; the crisis triggered decade-long protests which peaked in the summer of 1988. In response to the protests, the military reorganized under the leadership of General Saw Maung and cracked down on the demonstrators, killing at least three thousand unarmed civilians and displacing thousands more (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In September, General Saw Maung staged a coup and seized the government, imposed martial law over most of the country, replaced the constitutional government with a new military institution called the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), and took the position of SLORC chairman as well as prime minister (Bünthe, 2011).

After its formation, the SLORC proceeded to abandon state socialism and promised multi-party elections. The elections were held in 1990 and resulted in the National League for Democracy's victory, further proving the people's

dissatisfaction with the military government and favor of democracy (Steinberg, 2021). However, the military ignored the 1990 election results and instead inaugurated Thein Sein under the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which was part of a military-controlled civil society group. The military's dismissal of the election results was the reason why it was able to hold the highest authority in Myanmar until the 2010 elections, although it was also the reason behind the public's increasing frustrations towards the military (Bünthe et al., 2020).

2.1.2. The “Disciplined Democracy” Period of 2011-2021

In an attempt to appease Myanmar's public, then-Prime Minister Khun Nyut promised a transition to democracy through his seven-point “Road Map to Democracy in Myanmar”. The road map was drafted in 2003. It included the drafting of a new constitution, a national referendum, “free and fair elections” for the Pyithu Hluttaw or legislative bodies, and the formation of a democratic nation by Hluttaw-elected state leaders (Government of Myanmar, 2003). Even after Khin Nyunt was ousted from the government, his road map was still adopted in an attempt to create a democratic Myanmar and to pacify pro-democracy supporters in the country and the international community (Kundu, 2012).

However, the road map has its problems. Since the road map was based on the concept of “disciplined democracy”, this means that the military would still hold significant sway over Myanmar's democratically-elected government (Bünthe et al., 2020). This shows in the parliamentary elections: only 75 percent of the parliament is elected, while the remaining 25 percent is appointed by the Commander-in-Chief of the military. The military also retains the right to administer its affairs

independently, and the Commander-in-Chief is allowed to assume control of the state in times of emergency. Moreover, even with the road map, efforts to realize the transition to democracy were insignificant and slow, proving the military government's reluctance to change (Kundu, 2012).

In response to the military's reluctance to change, Myanmar pro-democracy youth movements and volunteers took their dissatisfaction to the streets with the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) suppressed the revolution brutally; the suppression received heavy criticism and scrutiny from the international community. It was only to appease the international community that the military launched the road map into actual action.

The military initiated five steps, all of which were based on the road map, to reform Myanmar into a democracy. The National Convention which was held on September 3, 2007, was the first and second steps. The next step was the establishment of a 54-member drafting committee for Myanmar's new constitution. The committee released the draft of the new constitution in April 2008. However, the convention was considered problematic as it still cemented the military's leading role and restricted the public's political participation (Bünthe, 2020). The draft was also released when a large number of the population was suffering from the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis, and the Myanmar citizens were only given one month to study the draft as the referendum for the new constitution was held in May 2008. This resulted in low voter turnout, especially in the cyclone-affected areas. However, the USDP claimed that almost 98 percent of Myanmar citizens took part

in the referendum and a total of 92,48 percent voted in favor of the draft constitution (Kundu, 2012). As the referendum was the fourth step to the democratic reformation, all left was the fifth and the last step: the 2010 elections.

A total of 37 parties participated in the 2010 elections, including the USDP, National Unity Party (NUP), National Democratic Force which was a fraction of NLD, and Shan Nationalities Democratic Party (SNDP). The USDP registered 1112 candidates or the highest among all parties, the NUP nominated 995 candidates, and the NDF submitted 162 candidates. Throughout the elections, the Myanmar government refused to accept international observers, allowed only minimal media coverage, and imposed restrictions on the candidates' movement except for USDP members (Kudo, 2011). Parties were also not allowed to file any complaint related to voting; the election committee charged as much as US\$ 1000 or equal to one million Kyat, which was unaffordable for many parties (Kundu, 2012).

The results of the election saw the USDP's overwhelming win. The party won 883 out of the 1154 parliamentary seats, or 76,5 percent of the seats. Due to a lack of transparency, the USDP was accused of vote-rigging and manipulation (Thawngmung, 2016). In the House of Representatives, the USDP won 259 out of 325 seats; in the House of Nationalities, 129 out of 168; in the regional and state parliaments, 495 out of 661 seats (Kundu, 2012). Following the election of the parliamentary, former Prime Minister Thein Sein was selected as the President of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar. Military personnel also held important ministries, such as the border, home, defense, and external affairs.

The election results were met with mixed responses. Western countries rejected the election, citing that the military government's approach was wrong and urging the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners (Kundu, 2012). On the other hand, Asian countries such as China and India saw the election as an important step towards democracy, with China congratulating Myanmar for holding its first election in the past 20 years and India wanting Myanmar to hold negotiations between the government and pro-democratic supporters "to develop an understanding" (Kundu, 2012).

Regardless of how the international community reacted to Myanmar's new civilian government, there is no denying that President U Thein Sein had taken steps toward democratization. On the domestic level, the very first change was the decentralization of authority (Kundu, 2012). A total of fourteen states established their own legislatures and created a local government headed by chief ministers. The National Human Rights Commission was formed on September 5, 2011, to promote and safeguard the fundamental rights of all Myanmar citizens (Kipgen, 2016). The human rights body welcomed the US secretary of state's visit and the decision of the 19th ASEAN Summit to appoint Myanmar as its 2014 chair; the commission also urged President Thein Sein to release political prisoners. What followed was the amnesty and release of more than 6000 prisoners, although it was not specified how many political prisoners were included in the list (Kipgen, 2016).

The new government did not just focus on the legislatures and the human rights body. The democratic reforms also included the easing of media censorship, which was done in several stages (Kipgen, 2016). In June 2011, the government

announced that the sports journals, entertainment magazines, fairy tales, and the winning lottery numbers no longer needed the Ministry of Information's approval for publication. On December 9, authorities also announced that it was no longer necessary for a total of 54 journals, magazines, and books, including business publications to submit their contents to the censorship board. On 15 September, the authorities pulled the ban on several foreign websites and news organizations, such as Youtube, Reuters, Bangkok Post, The Straits Times, and the Myanmar-language services of VOA, BBC, and DVB.

The last significant domestic reform was the improvement of relations between the government and the opposition (Kipgen, 2016). One major example was the NLD, which was initially disbanded under the 2008 Constitution and declared illegal by the government for its failure to register for the 2010 general elections. On August 12, Information Minister Kyaw Hsan announced that “... *the government is offering it [the NLD] opportunities to serve the national interest in cohesion ... if the NLD wants to get involved in politics, it should set up a legal party through formal procedures*” and that “*the government is doing its best to invite NLD to its national reconciliation process*” (BBC, 2011 in Kipgen, 2016). The party unanimously decided to re-register as a legal party in August and Myanmar’s Election Commission approved the application in December 2011.

The hope that Myanmar would continue its transition into a full-fledged democracy continued with the 2015 elections. Due to expanded political space and economic incentives, there was a significant increase in the number of political parties and candidates participating in the elections (Thawngmung, 2016). This

resulted in a high number of political candidates and a diversity of candidates. A total of 6189 candidates contested the 1171 legislative seats for the next 5-year term, with 5866 candidates representing 92 political parties and 323 registering independently (Thawngmung, 2016). The 2015 candidates were also much more diverse in terms of occupation, age, and gender; almost fifteen percent of the candidates were women and 734 candidates were under the age of 36 (Thawngmung, 2016).

The 2015 elections ended with the NLD winning a landslide victory. The party won 77,9 percent of the 327 seats in the Lower House and 80 percent of the 168 seats in the Upper House (Thawngmung, 2016). In comparison, the USDP won nine percent of the Lower House seats and seven percent of the Upper House. Following the NLD's victory, Aung San Suu Kyi was named the State Counselor instead of the president, as she had been prohibited by the 2008 constitution from holding the position. Another member of the NLD, Win Myint, succeeded Sein as Myanmar's president.

According to Thawngmung (2016), there are several reasons behind the NLD's victory. The first and perhaps the biggest reason is Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity, which allowed the public to recognize and vote for her and the members of the NLD. The second reason is because of the opposition party's ability to move more freely and mobilize its supporters. After the legalization of the NLD, the party channeled its resources to reconnect with grassroots communities; Suu Kyi and the other NLD candidates also actively campaigned across the country after Suu Kyi's travel ban was lifted. Third, the NLD also benefited from the many ethnic

communities which joined forces or voted for the NLD rather than their own parties. The fourth reason is that many who voted for the NLD still associate the USDP with the military, regardless of the progress and reforms it made; therefore, voting for the NLD was viewed as voting against the military which they despise.

The NLD's victory marked the first time a democratic party ruled the government since Myanmar's independence. Under the NLD administration, Myanmar citizens enjoyed more civic freedoms, political rights, and stable democratic institutions (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022). This showed in the developments that the NLD administration accomplished, such as the provision of infrastructure and important services even to remote ethnic rural areas, educational and healthcare support, the promotion of anti-corruption campaigns, the removal of unpopular laws and several repressive regulations, the application of people-centered management, and a competent response to the first waves of the Covid-19 pandemic even for citizens living abroad (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022).

2.1.3. The 2021 Military Coup and Democratic Decline

The November 2020 elections marked the start of what would later be the 2021 military coup d'état. In a repeat of the previous election, the NLD won a clear majority of seats in the Lower House and Upper House of the legislative chambers. The party won 920 seats or 82 percent out of the total 1117 seats available; this number showed an increase of 61 seats compared to the 2015 election. On the other hand, the USDP won only 71 seats or 6,4 percent of the total seats, which was a sharp decrease compared to the 117 seats it won in 2015.

Three days after the election, the USDP refused the results, insisting that there had been fraud and irregularities during the voting process. The party's accusation included issues such as poor quality ballot boxes, advance voting problems, and government cash assistance or bribery for the voters by the NLD party (Kipgen, 2021). The USDP then demanded a rerun of the election, a demand which was backed by the military. However, international and local observers denounced the USDP's claims and reported that there had been no issue; the US-based Carter Center stated that voters were able to choose their representatives freely and that the use of indelible ink to mark the voters' fingers prevented the casting of multiple ballots (Kipgen, 2021). The Union Election Commission (UEC) also announced on November 11 that it would not conduct any reruns of the elections as the results were final.

Regardless of statements from international observers and the UEC, the USDP still continued with its accusations. On November 30, they formed the "State Administration Council" (SAC) to investigate the election process and results, especially in 218 townships where military personnel and their families cast their votes (Kipgen, 2021). In December, the military announced that it had found a total of 74,306 irregularities, such as multiple appearances for individuals, and the inclusion of underage citizens and people who did not hold a National Regional Card (NRC) (Kipgen, 2021). The townships' election committees clarified the accusations and pointed out that the military's findings were exaggerated. The USDP's efforts continued; in January, 160 military lawmakers signed a proposal that called for the parliament's speaker to hold a special session to hold the issue of

“mass fraud”; the proposal was co-signed by 36 lawmakers from the USDP, four from the ANP, two independents, and one from the NUDP (Kipgen, 2021). Not only did the USDP sign the proposal, but it also approached the Supreme Court to issue a writ over the UEC chairman and commissioners over electoral fraud. The USDP also requested the delay of the parliament’s opening, which was denied by the government. The military also warned that it could not deny the possibility of a coup, stating that “the 2008 constitution could be revoked if laws weren’t being respected or followed”.

The USDP and the military acted on their threats on February 1, 2021. Hours before the newly elected parliament convened, the military detained NLD leaders, including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint; members of the new parliament were also confined in their own homes. Following these arrests, the military assigned Myint Swe, the military-appointed vice president, as the acting president. Myint Swe went to invoke articles 417 and 418 of the constitution. As per the articles, he declared a state of national emergency for a year, a period which was later extended to two years and another six months to prepare for the new elections, and handed control of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to the military’s commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The military then removed 24 ministers and replaced 11, including ministers of finance, defense, and foreign and home affairs (Kipgen, 2021).

Senior General Min stated that the military takeover was justified based on the constitution, which allows the military to take control in any situation that could cause “the disintegration of the Union, disintegration of national security, and loss

of sovereign power” (Maizland & Kurlantzick, 2021). The military considered the issues over the elections, such as the alleged unresolved electoral irregularities, the refusal to postpone the new parliament session, and the protests from people who were unhappy with the electoral results, in line with the constitution (Kipgen, 2021). According to the military, the national emergency was necessary to resolve the electoral issues and that failure to resolve them would only hinder the path to democracy.

However, Myanmar’s citizens, the democratically elected parliament, and even the country’s many ethnic armed groups (EAGs) disagreed with the military’s decision and reasoning. Domestic democracy activists and citizens of Myanmar showed their condemnation of the coup by holding large, peaceful protests and engaging in acts of civil disobedience. These protests were the largest the country had witnessed since the 2007 Saffron Revolution (Cuddy, 2021). The citizens also employed other means to voice their anger, from nationwide strikes and boycott campaigns to social media-coordinated protests and consolidation with pro-democracy regional networks (Passeri, 2021). The country’s democratically elected parliament formed a shadow government and committed armed resistance. The shadow government, called the National Unity Government (NUG), was established in April by ousted NLD lawmakers, protest leaders, and activists from several minority groups. The NUG’s main goal is to bring opposition groups, foster unity among ethnic groups, create an agenda for a post-junta Myanmar, and gather support from foreign movements (Maizland & Kurlantzick, 2022). It also declared war on the junta and formed a loosely organized armed resistance group known as

the People's Defense Force in September. Since the declaration of war, clashes between the military and the People's Defense Force have been occurring in most of the country, even in major cities such as Mandalay and Yangon, and townships that have not been involved in armed conflict since Myanmar's independence (Maizland & Kurlantzick, 2022). Various EAGs, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Karen National Union (KNU), have vowed to defend civilians, which caused many to flee to areas controlled by EAGs (Sullivan, 2021).

2.2. The Military's Human Rights Abuses Post-Coup

In Myanmar, the military heads two ministries that are responsible for the country's security: the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Defense. The Ministry of Home Affairs commands the Myanmar Police Force, which is responsible for internal security, and the Border Guard Police. On the other hand, the Ministry of Defense controls the armed forces responsible for external security, although these forces are mainly used for internal matters such as combat against ethnic armed groups. It is widely known that members of the regime's armed forces have and still continue to commit human rights violations (US Department of State, 2022). This subchapter will specifically detail the armed forces' human rights abuses against Myanmar civilians after the coup.

Immediately after the coup, the military responded to Myanmar citizens' peaceful demonstrations with increasingly violent means and lethal weapons. So far, the military has arbitrarily detained and tortured thousands who opposed the military takeover, killed more than 1,000 people, attacked civilians and civilian

objects, displaced tens of thousands of people and denied humanitarian aid delivery in some areas (Amnesty International, 2022). These violent acts have affected most of Myanmar's citizens, including the country's most vulnerable groups: ethnic minorities, women, and children.

One of the first the military did post-coup was to discourage opposition and limit freedom of expression by attacking civil society (Amnesty International, 2022; Andrews, 2022). In the aftermath of the coup, the military detained prominent civil society leaders and more than 100 senior NLD; they were the first wave of the military's political prisoners. Throughout 2021, the military would continue to arrest hundreds of activists, journalists, protest leaders, and human rights defenders. Four political prisoners were executed in July 2022; there were also reports of the military torturing other prisoners (Andrews, 2022). Not only does the military target individuals, but it also cracks down on organizations: surveillance and "systematic scrutinization" of civil society organizations increased, offices of media and civil society organizations were raided, five independent news publications were forcibly closed, and eight media outlets had their licenses revoked. These actions have forced civil society members and organizations to adapt their structure, operations, and security protocols; journalists, activists, and human rights defenders have left Myanmar; and many organizations have taken on new roles to address the impact of the military's violence and human rights abuses (Andrews, 2022).

When the military realized its preemptive actions weren't enough, it turned to violent methods to repress Myanmar civilians' opposition to the military takeover. It started by violently cracking down on protesters, using rubber bullets,

tear gas, water cannons, live rounds of ammunition, and, in northern Kachin State, even grenades. Afterward, the military began targeting civilians with airstrikes, heavy artillery, light weaponry, executions, landmines, and arson. The military also began training and supplying pro-military vigilante groups with weapons. These groups have participated in civilian attacks and enjoyed impunity for their crimes due to their association with the military (Andrews, 2022). By November 2022, the military has reportedly killed 1,300 civilians, while the vigilante groups associated with it have wounded 129 people and killed 18 (Amnesty International, 2022; Andrews, 2022).

The military's airstrikes also caused heavy infrastructure damage and displaced Myanmar civilians. The military has launched offensives in Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and other regions, with Sagaing and Magway regions being the worst affected. The targeted areas are often those thought to be aligned with and could provide a base of support for opposition armed groups (Andrews, 2022). These attacks have destroyed more than 28,000 homes and other civilian structures, including educational facilities and hospitals. The United Nations reports that nearly 1 million persons have been displaced since the coup; however, local human rights and humanitarian organizations that work closely with displaced persons often give much higher estimates (Andrews, 2022). The largest number of displaced persons have fled Kayah and Kachin states near the Thailand borders, where EAGs that vowed to protect Myanmar civilians have clashed with the military (Sullivan, 2021).

The coup has also led to a nationwide humanitarian crisis. The destruction of civilian structures, displacement, and continued attacks have deprived millions of food and shelter and cut people off from their livelihoods. Roughly 13.2 million people are facing food insecurity, and children are facing the risk of malnutrition and have limited access to medical care (Andrews, 2022). Moreover, the destruction of health facilities meant that efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and administer treatments couldn't be fully implemented. However, the military has been actively preventing humanitarian aid to those in need. There were reports of the military burning staples such as rice and cooking oil, imposing additional requirements on humanitarian workers to restrict travel, blocking access to convoys, and destroying nonmilitary supplies (Amnesty International, 2022; US Department of State, 2022). Health workers also reported that the military has destroyed medical supplies including testing kits and oxygen tanks, attacked workers, and raided facilities (Sullivan, 2021).

The military coup and the nationwide conflict it triggered have impacted multiple aspects of Myanmar citizens' life, including political rights, the economy, and healthcare. The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly strained Myanmar's economy, and the military takeover of the government has only further collapsed the country's economy. Moreover, the fact that the coup took place during the COVID-19 pandemic means that the correct treatment and safety measures couldn't be implemented. The economic and health crises, coupled with displacement and humanitarian crises caused by the military's violent actions, have put Myanmar at risk of becoming a failed state (Kurlantzick, 2021).

2.3. International Response to the Military Coup and Post-Coup Violence

2.3.1. The United Nations

In the beginning, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) President condemned the coup and called for the immediate release of all political leaders. In June 2021, the assembly released a resolution to condemn the coup and call for an embargo against Myanmar's military. Although the resolution wasn't approved unanimously and it wasn't legally binding, the fact that 119 assembly members voted "yes" showed international condemnation of the military and massive support for the restoration of democracy (Lederer, 2021). To further show the international community's determination to assist the Myanmar crisis, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could approve a resolution and impose an embargo on the military's weapons supply, recommend member states impose targeted sanctions on individuals and entities, call for the release of prisoners and the reinstatement of the democratically-elected government, and as last resort, consider the suspension of Myanmar's membership and the use of force (Barber, 2021). However, due to threats of a veto from China and Russia, both of whom argued against "strong action", the council could not approve a stronger resolution (UN News, 2022).

It was almost two years later that the UNSC finally adopted a resolution; released in December 2022, the resolution expresses concern at the "ongoing state of emergency imposed by the military [...] and its grave impact on the people of Myanmar". It also references the five-point consensus adopted by ASEAN in

response to the coup, supporting the consensus and calling for “concrete and immediate actions” (United Nations Security Council, 2022). The resolution was voted by 12 members of the council, while China, India, and Russia chose to abstain.

However, many have criticized the resolution. This includes the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Thomas Andrews. While he acknowledges the resolution’s demands, it fails to include “*consequences for the failure to meet them and the imposition of sanctions and accountability for crimes the military has committed to date*”; he also states that “*what is required is action*” (UN News, 2022). The UN has also been criticized for deferring responsibility to ASEAN, which has been “an unreliable partner and has failed to implement its Five-Point Consensus to address the crisis” (Lilly, 2022).

2.3.2. ASEAN

Although ASEAN has been called to action, its response has been lacking. ASEAN released its first statement regarding the coup on February 1st, 2021, reinstating the importance of regional stability and pushing for dialogue and reconciliation of all parties (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021a). However, members’ stance on the Myanmar coup is split (Mahaseth & Tulsyan, 2022). Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore condemned the coup and called for the restoration of democracy; Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines declared that the coup is an “internal matter”; Laos and Vietnam did not make an official statement on the matter; and Brunei, the presiding ASEAN Chair at the time of the coup, called for “dialogue, reconciliation, and the return to normalcy in accordance

to the will and interests of the people of Myanmar”. ASEAN also received heavy criticism for allowing military Min Aung Hlaing to join official virtual meetings, as it implies the organization’s recognition of the military’s legitimacy (Dunst, 2021).

In April 2021, ASEAN invited Min Aung Hlaing to a high-level summit to discuss Myanmar’s crisis. The summit concluded with the adoption of the Five-Point Consensus: an immediate end to violence in the country, dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and the special envoy’s visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2021b). However, the military has failed to meet each point: it continues to commit violence against people who oppose the military rule and has always refused to allow the ASEAN special envoy to meet Aung San Suu Kyi and other detained civilian leaders. In response, ASEAN barred Min Aung Hlaing from attending the organization’s biannual summit and only invited a non-political representative; in the end, the military declined to attend.

After its first statement in February 2021, ASEAN followed up with a second official statement that condemns the increase in violent actions and demands the military commit to the Five-Point Consensus and the US-ASEAN high-level summit, which reiterated the same points. Although these statements show “more steel in the spine”, the organization’s efforts are still lacking (Thuzar & Seah, 2022). ASEAN’s conflict avoidance, combined with a lack of a clear timeline for the consensus and the acknowledgment of political prisoners such as Aung San, has prevented the organization from dealing with the crisis efficiently (Mahaseth &

Tulshyan, 2022; Rasyid & Rijal, 2023; Thuzar & Seah, 2022). This is partly due to the ASEAN Way or the non-intervention principle, where the organization would prioritize informal dialogue, extensive consultation, and consensus building rather than direct action to build regional security (Mahaseth & Tulshyan, 2022).

2.4. Pro-Democracy Movements in Myanmar

2.4.1. Civil Disobedience Movement

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) plays a major role in Myanmar civilians' resistance. The movement has been organizing strikes, demonstrations, and boycotts almost immediately after the military coup. Multiple layers of civilians have participated in the movement: workers, youth, and Myanmar's ethnic minority groups. Even after the military implemented violent measures and forced the movement underground, it has helped unify the civilians' intergenerational struggles against the military, connected the country's issue with international audiences, and nearly brought Myanmar to a halt as millions of workers abandoned their jobs (Jordt et al., 2021; King, 2022).

On February 2, Min Ko Naing, one of the leaders of the 1988 uprising took to social media and called for a 'no recognition and no participation campaign'. A group of medical doctors answered the call by posting an online statement condemning the coup. On the same day, government healthcare workers launched a boycott of state-run hospitals, medical institutes, and COVID-19 testing sites, and led the first street protests against the military. This movement was initially called the 'white coat revolution'. Following the boycott, they created a CDM Facebook

campaign group to organize further resistance. The Facebook group and the CDM's other social media accounts would later become the movement's primary method of organizing and sharing information with its participants (Rao & Atmakuri, 2021). According to Rao and Atmakuri (2021), the CDM also used social media as a site of resistance and solidarity. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram are used to upload and circulate images and videos of protests, including the military's actions against protesters. These sites are also used as forums of debate and discussions to gain international attention and support. Not only are these sites useful to amplify local voices but they also serve as a source of information and resources to aid protesters during protests and maintain their personal safety.

Information regarding the Facebook group quickly spread and within 24 hours, the group had attracted 150,000 followers. On February 3, government healthcare workers in 110 hospitals and health departments in 50 townships launched a nationwide strike to further cripple the military. Several local news media cited that nearly 90% of the total number of Myanmar's healthcare workers had joined the CDM within the first month after the coup (Anonymous, 2021). Later on, these civil servants, public sector employees, the banking and medical profession, railroad and harbor workers, and academics and teachers would join and participate in carrying out waves of strikes and street demonstrations (Drechsler, 2021). The Myanmar Teachers' Foundation estimated that 60% of 35,000 tertiary education staff and 27% of 450,000 primary and secondary education workers have joined the CDM. Civil servants from the Ministry of Transport and Communications, Ministry of Electricity and Energy, Ministry of Social Welfare,

Ministry of Planning and Finance, and private and public bank employees also participated in the CDM. On February 7, thousands of workers who participated in the CDM protested in the streets of major cities such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Naypyidaw. They employed nonviolent tactics such as mass protests, street performances, barricades, sit-downs, candlelit vigils, and silent strikes, using women's sarongs as flags, painting murals, and sharing banners, leaflets, and posters (King, 2022).

The CDM also spearheaded a boycott against state-owned enterprises. Titled the 'Stop Buying Junta Business', the campaign called for the boycott of military-owned and military-linked businesses, products, and services. In Myanmar, the military controls two major businesses and various subsidiaries, joint ventures, and smaller companies (Ebbighausen, 2021). In their report, Justice for Myanmar detailed how off-budget revenues from these companies have funded the military; the companies themselves, such as the telecoms firm Mytel, have been used to spy on activists and suppress democratic movements in Myanmar (Myanmar Now, 2020). The strike and boycott caused the shutdown of military-controlled Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, Myanmar National Airlines, and mines (Jordt et al., 2021).

2.4.2. Gen Z Movement

Myanmar's workers are not the only participants of the CDM. The country's youth, who have labeled themselves as "Gen Z", have also been actively participating in the civil movement. Myanmar's Gen Z is the first generation to have grown up outside of military leadership and with the privilege of liberalization and access to the internet and social media. Their unique forms of protest thus

reflect the values that they grew up with as they put themselves as the “voice of society” who called for the international society to support their plight and intervene against the military (Jordt et al, 2021). More importantly, the younger members of ethnic minority groups also helped enlarge the movement outside of major cities and persuaded their elderly members to pressure their communities to join the resistance.

The first weeks of Gen Z’s protests had a “festival-like atmosphere” similar to Myanmar New Year’s Festival (Jordt et al., 2021). Myanmar youth who participated in street demonstrations carried signs which were mostly written in English, which reflected Gen Z’s desire to communicate with global audiences. The youth called for a temporary halt of everyday life, performed in the streets, committed themselves to sit-ins and sleepover protests in pajamas, and walked in parades. Pictures of parade participants cosplaying as weebes, femboys, Marvel and Disney characters, and dinosaurs walking alongside a parade of drag queens, LGBTQ protesters, cartoon artists, and pet owners circulated widely. The inclusivity and diverse range of Gen Z’s protests showed the myriad of individuals within society who wanted democracy and the freedom it gave these diverse groups back (Jordt et al., 2021).

Although the protests grew more somber as time went on, Gen Z’s unique characteristics remained. Theatrical street performances and banners mocking Min Aung Hlaing began to appear in protests. Protesters began to paste the general’s image on the streets so that people could insult him by stepping on the head, which was culturally considered the most sacred body part (Jordt et al., 2021). This slowed

down soldiers as they had to respect the general and remove the posters before chasing the protesters.

Weeks into the protests, Gen Z's connections continued to grow, domestically and internationally. Min Ko Naing spoke up once more, this time expressing solidarity between veteran activists and novice Gen Z activists in fighting against the military dictatorship. The declaration incentivized veteran activists to add their tactics and strategies, and to share songs written during the 1988 protest period, such as *Thway Thitsar* or *Blood Oath* and *Kabar Makyay Bu* or *We Shall Not Forgive*. The youth movement also drew tactical understanding from strategies they encountered on the internet and connected with other anti-authoritarian movements and alliances, one of which was the MTA.