

Young Revolutionaries from Past and Present

Virtual Federal University Research Program¹

Abstract

Students have played key roles in Myanmar's pro-democracy struggles, and the current Spring Revolution is no exception. This article summarizes the process and findings of research on student activism by the Virtual Federal University's research program. We assess the impact of student and worker movements during the National League for Democracy period on post-coup mobilization; compare student armed struggles after 1988 and 2021; and analyze the tactics and strategies of contemporary student revolutionaries. Drawing on interviews and informed by our own experiences, our findings highlight the challenges, strategies, and strengths of Myanmar's young revolutionaries.

Introduction

After the 1 February 2021 military coup, the people of Myanmar were forced to endure another instance of their country's long history of suffering and survival, with movements resisting military rule taking root countrywide. The 2021 coup was hardly the first to occur in the country, and was even expected by some people, but most were stunned by it. They started joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)² and banged pots and pans

¹ The Virtual Federal University is a free education platform and community committed to critical education for federal democracy in Myanmar. Within this collective alias, the individual authors' names are: Pai Cheimt Khaung, Haymarn Soe Nyunt, and Ohn Nyo (group 1); Costa, Yay Chan, and Marla May (group 2); Tshin, Gaea, and Kat (group 3). Kay Zak served as research coach and Hilary Faxon and Elizabeth Rhoads as research advisors.

² Participating in the CDM can include banging pots and pans, street protests, refusing to pay bills and taxes, boycotting state-sponsored lotteries and

on the streets to express their refusal of the coup. On 6 February, led by workers and in cooperation with student unions, the first mass protest movement in Yangon occurred. Waves of protests across the country immediately followed, increasing in intensity, and acts of civil disobedience became commonplace. The military began shooting and detaining protesters. These violent actions did not stop the anti-coup resistance movement, but changed it, pushing many to take up arms in order to protect themselves and achieve their revolutionary goals. This has come to be known as the Spring Revolution.

As other articles in this special issue show, Myanmar students have participated in social and political movements since the colonial era, including during the recent period of democratic change. Due to the military's brutal suppression of peaceful protests in 1988, students moved to border areas, and to southern and northern Burma, in order to pursue armed struggle. Some went on to form the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) in November 1988.

Later, students took part in other movements, including those in 1996 and 2007. Under the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government from 2016-2021, many students and workers continued calling for rights and justice for the vulnerable in Myanmar, including, controversially, by protesting against Aung San Suu Kyi and the incumbent party.³

Given Myanmar's history and ongoing social and political crises, understanding student activism is vital. This article summarizes three different research projects on this theme, conducted by student activists from different student unions who are actively taking part in the Spring Revolution. The authors conducted their research with support from the Virtual Federal University (VFU) that was envisioned and established in May

military-affiliated businesses, and civil servants refusing to work under the military.

³ For an example of student protests against the NLD, see ဒေါ်အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ကို၊ ၂၀၁၉။

2021.⁴ The three projects explore the vital role of students' participation in the current revolution, the patterns of their movements, their commitments, their cooperation and networking with different communities, as well as the opportunities and challenges they face in comparison to student revolutionaries from 1988.

Group one's research, titled "The Impact of Students and Workers' Movements During 2016-2021 on the Early Period of the Spring Revolution" aims to understand how the movements during the NLD period impacted on the Spring Revolution during February and March 2021, when mass movements on the streets were at their peak, and before military violence prompted a tactical shift towards guerrilla protests and armed resistance. While movements led by workers and students in the NLD period were often criticized, especially on social media,⁵ this research aims to assess their value for the revolution, and therefore, for the greater good of the country.

Group two's research, titled "A Comparison of Students' Armed Struggles in 1988 and 2021", asks "How did students' participation in armed struggle affect the 1988 revolution and what lessons can current student revolutionaries learn from 1988?". This research compares the experiences of the ABSDF formed in 1988, and the student armed forces formed since 2021, to answer this question.

Group three's research, titled "An Analysis of Students' Participation in the 2021 Spring Revolution in Myanmar: Probing the Peculiarities" is a work of applied research that was initially aimed at analyzing other countries' student movements' strategies, tactics and techniques to better understand Myanmar's situation as it was in early 2022. However, the revolution has since intensified and become primarily one of armed struggle, a

⁴ The VFU is a free education platform and community of students and educators committed to the values of critical education for a multi-ethnic federal democracy.

⁵ For an example of public criticism of worker and student movements, see the public comments on this Facebook post: Myanmar Now, 2020.

method referred to by successful revolutionary Mao Zedong as “the highest form of revolution”.⁶ Therefore, group three instead came to investigate the ways that students and youths envision and enact vibrant and diverse alternatives to shape the future of Myanmar: the reasons why they joined the revolution and the ways in which they contribute to it, including the means with which they do so and the challenges they face. This work is intended to inform a broader history of how students have shaped Myanmar and its future.

Together, we believe that the Spring Revolution is not only about fighting with arms but also about changing the corrupt existing system. To change the system, people must understand the system. VFU’s research program is a space where we, CDM university students, can continue our education, and conduct research that is aligned with our revolutionary goals, and create and distribute important fact-based papers to the public.

Methodology

Our research was designed and carried out by three teams of three researchers each, all of whom are CDM university students. Several of us are now in different liberated areas, some are participating in the armed struggle. Our backgrounds and experiences within the revolution motivated our questions and informed our approach. Throughout the research process, we worked closely with a VFU research coach, who provided methodological training and guidance on each stage of the process via online group meetings, and with VFU academic advisers with experience conducting research in Myanmar.

All three research teams used qualitative methods. In addition to reviewing secondary literature, social media and having informal conversations with stakeholders, each group conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs), using a purposive sampling strategy. In total,

⁶ Mao Tse-Tung writes in *Problems of War and Strategy* (1938): “The seizure of power by armed force, the settlement of the issue by war, is the central task and the highest form of revolution”.

the research teams conducted 26 key informant interviews (KIIs) and six FGDs with a total of 51 participants. An overview of respondents is provided in table 1.

Table 1

Summary of data collection.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Interview Type</u>	<u>Number of Participants</u>	<u>Participant Type</u>	<u>Gender</u>
1	FGD 1	4	Members of workers' unions	3 females 1 male
	FGD 2	3	Members of student unions	3 males
	7 KIIs	7	Students' and workers' movement leaders	2 females 5 males
2	FGD 1	4	Student armed groups	4 males
	FGD 2	3	Members of student unions	3 males
	7 KIIs	7	Members of ABSDF, members of the Anti- Dictatorship Revolution People's Army and members of the Student Armed Force (SAF)	7 males
3	FGD 1	5	Student participants in the 2021 revolution	2 females 2 males 1 LGBTQ+

	FGD 2	6	Student participants in the 2021 revolution	1 female 5 males
	12 KIIs	12	Student participants from Myanmar, key informants and former activists from Hong Kong and Indonesia	1 prefer not to say 1 female 10 males

We faced several challenges while conducting this research. Asking about the internal dynamics and cooperation within and between movements can be sensitive, and we had to work through close personal networks, learn to introduce ourselves and our study, and build trust. Scheduling and conducting interviews was challenged by security concerns, which limited in-person meetings, made it difficult to interview frontline fighters, and necessitated greater precautions throughout the research process, as well as by poor internet connectivity, which made communication and facilitation more challenging. We had to balance our desire for diverse perspectives with the need to go through secure and trusted channels. We learned new interview techniques—for example, combining preplanned questionnaires with spontaneous questions to informants—and report writing skills. Due to security concerns, we took particular care to anonymize or remove sensitive information and specific details while still drawing well evidenced conclusions. Despite its limitations, we believe that this article offers valuable insights about students’ motivations, experiences, and tactics regarding their activism in Myanmar.

Findings

Group 1: The Impact of Students and Workers’ Movements During 2016-2021 on the Early Period of the Spring Revolution

During the NLD government period, the demands and public movements of workers and students were often criticized, but we discovered that the connections, tactics and trust built within and among these movements during this period before the coup were critical to post-coup mobilization in February and March 2021.

The workers' strikes from 2016 until the 2021 coup can be categorized by three central demands: adjusting the minimum wage, amending labor laws, and stopping labor rights violations. The student movements in the same period can likewise be sorted into three categories: political movements, such as demonstrations against the Rohingya genocide and the remembrance of 7 July, 1962; demonstrations related to ethnic affairs, such as those against internet blackouts in parts of Rakhine State; and demonstrations related to students' rights and corruption on campuses, such as the strike against the corruption of the Rector of the University of Mandalay, the push to amend regulations of student hostels, and the movements against sexual harassment at the University of Yangon. The main challenges for both workers and students pursuing these causes were negative public opinion and oppression by the government. A member of the Solidarity Trade Union of Myanmar (STUM) said when interviewed: "The public is alienated from the workers' movements. Since they are alienated, the public did not know what the workers were facing".⁷

After the coup, workers and students joined hands together and with the general public against the military junta, working together closely as part of a broader movement. We categorize the anti-dictatorial movement as a whole into four categories based on the methods used. First is strikes and demonstrations, including mass street demonstrations and the CDM affecting state and military institutions; second is boycotts, including of products made by military corporations or cronies; third is armed movements, and fourth is other types of mobilization

⁷ STUM President, personal communication, August 25, 2022.

such as building and expanding organizational networks and underground activities.

In the following section we discuss the main impacts of the 2016-2021 worker and student movements on the early post-coup mass movements, based on our interviews and analysis.

Increased Trust Among Different Organizations

By collaborating and supporting each others' causes during the earlier movements in question, the organizations and people who participated in them became closer and mutual trust and networks were formed. This in turn helped the movements after the coup. A representative of STUM said:

We can never be sure whether someone is an actual protester or a spy from the military junta. We had to demonstrate on the streets with this kind of mistrust and concern. At that time, the mutual trust gained from previous movements helped us. Based on their past participation, we could be certain that these people were not traitors, and they would never betray their causes and the revolution. This drove the fear away.⁸

The fact that students protested in solidarity with ethnic minorities against oppression, such as the internet blackouts and Rohingya genocide in Rakhine State, helped strengthen relations between the students and ethnic revolutionary organizations. One movement leader talked about this as follows:

As we stood alongside the ethnic revolutionary forces before, we showed that they can trust we students as true allies. This is very helpful. If we had simply reconciled with the authorities and ignored their misguided policies at that time, I believe the support of the ethnic revolutionary forces would not have reached the level seen in

⁸ STUM President, personal communication, August 25, 2022.

*today's revolution. I have personally seen and experienced these benefits with gratitude.*⁹

Increased Trust Among Respective Masses and Unions

The movements also helped build a closer relationship between unions and those they seek to represent. According to our interviews, the actions of the unions during the movements showed what they stand for and whether they can be trusted. A member of a workers' movement said in one FGD:

*I believe that the workers' decision to protest on 6 February was motivated by their previous experiences with strikes. They had confidence in their leaders and trusted them to guide them through any challenges they might encounter during the demonstration. This trust was built on a belief that their leaders are dependable and responsible, as demonstrated by their past actions. Because of this, the workers had full confidence that even if something went wrong, their leaders would be able to handle it. I think this played a significant role in their decision to take to the streets on 6 February.*¹⁰

Support for the Formation of Mass Movements and Alliance Organizations

The previous movements also helped the formation of mass movements such as the early mass demonstration against the junta on 6 February. One participant said:

After the coup, it was important to mobilize a mass movement, and we realized that we could do this more effectively if we worked together in larger numbers. We

⁹ EYUSU (ABFSU) President, personal communication, May 12, 2022.

¹⁰ FGWM CEC Member, personal communication, August 4, 2022.

*needed to cooperate closely, so we reached out to organizations and individuals that we had worked with before the coup. Having these preexisting connections made it easier to collaborate and organize more movements.*¹¹

The networks and trust gained from the movements in question also helped the formation of alliance organizations such as the General Strike Committee. A member of the University of Yangon Student's Union (UYSU) said:

*We have a robust network of connections. As strong trust was built between these organizations from the very beginning, there is not much need for discussion. For example, this was how we were able to establish the GSC.*¹²

Our interviews showed that preestablished trust among student and labor unions contributed substantially to the formation of mass movements after the coup. The patterns of connections were similar among the two groups. Student unions usually formed alliances based on their identifiable stances on regional issues, ethnic issues and issues about educational rights. The student movements that occurred in individual universities were surrounded by other allied student unions, and student unions with the same policies worked together in ethnic affairs and political activities. Similarly, labor unions established close relations with other unions. Their mutual support can be seen in cases of demanding labor rights and increased wages.

These unionized workers and students, interestingly, did not focus solely on their own respective issues. Rather, close alliances were made between them during the 2016-2021 era. Prominent cases in point include the Fu Yuan factory strike, when students supported workers demanding their rights. A STUM member involved told us:

¹¹ EYUSU (ABFSU), personal communication, May 12, 2022.

¹² UYSU President, personal communication, May 2, 2022.

*We immediately felt the same way. We realized that regardless of which government is in power, workers will always need to respond in the same way if their rights are threatened. I think all the people who went out together were able to build more understanding of one other.*¹³

This quote reveals how preexisting cooperation and mutual understandings between and among labor and student unions contributed to the formation of mass protest against the military coup. According to UYSU, the connections and discussions between labor and student unions about participating in mass protests were made just two days after the coup, further showing their close collaboration. Furthermore, their cooperation and collaboration during the mass movement was effective for further political processes. The mass movement increased understanding among organizations and this strengthened ties and led to more consistent political responses and methods during the early stages of the anti-military dictatorship resistance movement.

In addition to dealing with the violent oppression enacted by the military, a challenge for both students' and workers' movements after the coup was a leadership crisis sparked by differing political stands and populist tendencies. A workers' movement member said, "I think it creates more distance when someone takes advantage of their popularity in politics".¹⁴ Regarding connections among labor and student unions, we can say that organizations that share interests and stances can build stronger connections for mass movements. Furthermore, collaborations during mass movements strengthen ties and make organizations closer, impacting their future anti-oppression activities.

¹³ STUM President, personal communication, August 25, 2022.

¹⁴ STUM President, personal communication, August 25, 2022.

Our interviews showed that oppression after the military coup is severe and challenging for both labor and student unions. Due to the economic decline after the coup, funding further movements has become a problem. Furthermore, due to the oppression of the military, student and worker unionists are experiencing security crises. The unions have lost the ability to mobilize participants widely on the ground, which leads to a lack of close communication between supporters and unionists. Even after the coup, such differences exist among revolutionary forces. Collaborations between organizations with different political stances and methods have weakened while those forces with closer political beliefs to one another strengthened their connections.

Group 2: A Comparison of Students' Armed Struggles in 1988 and 2021

Just like in 1988, students in 2021 took up arms against the violent Myanmar military. Our research has found that while contemporary student armed forces received greater initial public support than the ABSDF did, they still face similar challenges in internal organization, external coordination, and maintaining momentum as the struggle continues over time.

Why did students take up arms after the 2021 military coup? The main reason was because there was no capacity for those in the anti-coup resistance movement to counterattack the Myanmar military, which brutally suppressed peaceful protesters. One student who has been working on the ground said to us:

We already protested peacefully. But the people have gradually come to know that they need to respond with force as the military chose to crack down brutally [by] killing its own citizens.¹⁵

¹⁵ DRPA Member, personal communication, May 5, 2022.

The Myanmar military is a well-organized institution and non-violent revolution alone is not sufficient. Every possible means must be applied to revolt against the junta. The post-coup situation was not the first time in recent years that peaceful protesters considered violent revolution. During the military-civilian power sharing governments of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (2011-16) and NLD (2016-21), peacefully demonstrating students were already being detained, leading many people interested in politics and revolution to desire taking up arms. An armed organization's spokesperson said to us, "They already considered toppling the military and dismantling it and related institutions by revolution due to the oppression of successive governments".¹⁶

Differing Conditions Between the ABSDF and the Current Armed Students

Students' armed participation in the Spring Revolution follows in the footsteps of other such struggles in Burma/Myanmar, perhaps most famously, the 1988 uprising and concomitant forming of the ABSDF, from clusters of students, farmers and workers who headed into border areas to take up arms after the 1988 uprising, when the military killed hundreds of unarmed protesters. The ABSDF was founded on 1 November 1988 and executed battles against the Burmese military by coordinating with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), with moderate success. However, the ABSDF split up due to disagreements on policy in 1991 when their third conference was convened. Although they signed a ceasefire agreement with the military government in 2010 and were quiet for nearly a year after the 2021 coup, the ABSDF now sides with the people in the Spring Revolution.

While their motivations were similar, a key difference between the 1988 and 2021 armed student movements is their levels and types of support. The only support that the ABSDF

¹⁶ SAF CEC Member, personal communication, June 18, 2022.

received from the people was political. Only from its allies did ABSDF receive material support and international help was secondary. Also, people choosing to participate in the 1990 general election over armed revolution was a significant factor hindering the ABSDF's capacity to make larger attacks. During that era, the ABSDF was not welcomed tumultuously by the people, by EAOs or by politicians like armed students are welcomed today. Today, armed students are warmly welcomed and supported in EAO-controlled liberated areas. One member of the ABSDF said to us:

Because the ABSDF was formed as an organization which built its representation based on the whole country since its inception, it achieved a certain degree of success in mediating with EAOs.¹⁷

Today students are better able to empathize with the situations of ethnic people, and EAOs are more welcoming of students participating in the Spring Revolution than they were of those participating in the 1988 uprising, due to the new armed student organizations' more transparent structural stages, political standards and openness. Although the ABSDF received political support only from the people involved in the 1988 uprising, today student fronts gain extra financial support from elsewhere. During the foundational days of the ABSDF, social media did not exist, so the organization's ability to directly inform the public what they were doing was limited. Today however social media is widespread and student revolutionaries are using it as a platform to keep up to date with people and to solicit and receive direct support.

Strong and Weak Points of the ABSDF

With the help of the National Democratic Force, those who participated in the armed struggle after the 1988 uprising and coup

¹⁷ Principal of Federal Law Academy, personal communication, June 14, 2022.

organized centrally under the ABSDF. One key strength of the ABSDF was this centralization, which avoided the scattering into many organizations seen in today's revolution. The ABSDF could take actions quickly by organizing systematic constitutions and building trust with EAOs. The ABSDF also participated in public service and politically important cases like constitution-writing processes together with EAOs.

The ABSDF, however, also struggled with unclear policy priorities, said one former ABSDF member: "The ABSDF prioritized matters relating to armed forces, which made them lack action in political movements".¹⁸

Among ABSDF members, there were disagreements between those who wanted to prioritize armed struggles and those who preferred politics. Internal weaknesses, as well as external causes like the effects of the 1990 general election, ceasefires, and the junta's divide and conquer strategies, brought failures on and beyond the battlefield.

In cooperating with EAOs, misunderstandings and lack of trust among the soldiers were key challenges. While cooperating in matters of armed struggle, the EAOs also doubted the abilities of the ABSDF. The collapse of the Burmese Communist Party and conflicts in Karen National Union areas also militarily and politically affected ABSDF.

The Current Political Environment of Student Armed Forces

Today, student armed forces use the identity of students in their names but are not comprised exclusively of students. They consist of many different classes of people. While students have cooperated with, and been supported by, many groups of people since the coup, differences remain. During the period of NLD government before the coup, there were clashes between students and NLD supporters due to students demonstrating

¹⁸ Principal of Federal Law Academy, personal communication, June 14, 2022.

against the military and against human rights violations and genocide. After the 2021 coup, ideological differences remain between people who strongly and singularly support particular organizations or political parties and students who openly criticize the exile National Unity Government (NUG), which was formed mostly by NLD members, for not going far enough in trying to build an inclusive federal democracy.

For today's student armed forces, which were organized mostly by student union members, recruitment is a major challenge. Two years after the military coup, the decrease in people's support is a bitter reality. Consequently, there is a limit to persuading more members to join and start new battles. In addition, since the students still have to stay in EAO-controlled liberated areas, finances and social relations with different ethnic people is a challenge. One ABSDF member said, "Students have history but no geography".¹⁹ Today, like in 1988, the biggest difficulty that student armed forces face is lacking a region to reside in permanently.

Advice of ABSDF Members to Today's Student Armed Forces

Former members of the ABSDF advise student armed forces to organize systematically and yet stay adaptable to cooperate with EAOs, a challenge the ABSDF also had to face. Although current student armed forces receive more support from people than the ABSDF did, it has been over two years since the coup, and revolutionaries and their supporters are becoming fatigued. ABSDF also faced these realities, causing financial difficulties and challenges in supplying provisions, as well as in cooperation. Current student armed forces face similar challenges.

Group 3: An Analysis of Students' Participation in the 2021 Spring Revolution in Myanmar: Probing the Peculiarities

¹⁹ ABSDF Member, personal communication, May 22, 2022

Our research highlights some of the ways in which students' creativity and determination have enabled novel contributions to the broader revolutionary struggle.

Fluidity, Adaptability, and Creativity of Students Throughout the Revolution

At the beginning of the Spring Revolution, peaceful young protesters were highly visible. They raised their voices and attracted international attention by using modern trends such as cosplaying as popular characters, showing the three finger salute adopted from the Hunger Games film as a symbol of supporting democracy, and using music and arts to amplify the voices of youths. After facing brutal crackdowns, they changed tactics to guerilla protests, flash mob protests, digital strikes and silent strikes, making silence the loudest voice one can hear in a country facing the brutal and inhumane actions of their own military. When the military froze the assets of some pro-democracy fundraisers (all banks in Myanmar are controlled or influenced by the military) the movement faced huge losses. In response, students and youths came up with new ways to get funding from digital platforms such as YouTube channels, websites, unplugged live music, and even created NUG Pay, a first ever blockchain-based Central Bank Digital Currency platform in Myanmar, backed by the Ministry of Planning and Finance of NUG, as an alternative to support the revolution financially.

Cooperation and Communication Towards More Streamlined and Effective Results

Resistance forces led or driven by students cooperate not only with those in their community circles but also with those from prior generations who experienced past military coups and oppression. They also formed transnational alliances. For example, the HK 19 Manual from the Hong Kong protests was commonly redistributed and adapted to the Myanmar situation with the

help and coordination of #MilkTeaAlliance. Students also leveraged connections with Myanmar's diaspora community to achieve goals they could not accomplish themselves from within the country.

A student representative from the Alliance of Students' Unions described how the revolution is shaped, its different aspects and coordinative actions, in this way:

We have created respective formations for the armed revolution, shared responsibilities, planned for who would stay on the ground, who would go underground completely, and who would go to the jungles, as such. Frankly speaking, we have made such arrangements for the distribution of roles and responsibilities, departing from Yangon, since March. From that moment on, we have continued fulfilling our responsibilities.²⁰

On the other hand, the student fundraisers we interviewed told us they tend to deliver support directly to the places most in need. They use close connections and try to avoid channels and destinations that could lead to undesirable delays and losses.

Overcoming Challenges Despite Difficulties

Students have to face many challenges, ranging from pressure from parents to stop them doing what they believe is right, to the concern that the military might detain their families for no reason. Students even had to struggle with the pro-democracy bloc, with its politicians clinging to *Suu, Yway, Hloot*—the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the recognition of the election, and the convening of parliament in accordance with the 2008 Constitution. But they paved their own way, and now through checks and balances and political corrections, the pro-democracy bloc has changed to accept the abolition of the 2008 Constitution and strive for the eradication of the dictatorship from its

²⁰ ASUY Spokesperson, personal communication, August 29, 2022.

roots. Before the coup, students were criticized when standing up to Aung San Suu Kyi's government. Today, they still face criticism when they express something against the agendas of the NUG and National Unity Consultative Council, for example the recent statement by the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) on CDM policy,²¹ which disagreed with the NUG's policy of taking action against people who do not participate in the CDM. Critics said that student unions are being manipulated by civil society actors. Students spoke about the need of doing what they believe is right for the people and that they would prove themselves over time with their actions.

Learning From Mistakes and Apologizing

After the coup, many students publicly apologized to the Rohingya for their prior negligence. Students participated in the #Black4Rohingya campaign on 13 June 2021, expressed their solidarity with the Rohingya and apologized on social media platforms. Contemporary students are research-oriented in finding solutions and try to take policies or actions after thoroughly exploring the background and context first. One key informant, a representative from an alliance of over 20 youth-led fundraising teams, explained how they usually do research before making decisions, including doing background checks on unknown so-called pro-democracy activists before letting them into the inner circle. When bank accounts are frozen by the military junta, they try to learn the root cause and successfully sort out solutions. On one occasion they offered apologies as some donated money was confiscated and unretrievable due to security concerns. They used the incident as a case study to avoid further complications. Analysis of our data revealed that most students prioritize making things right over doing things quickly. They answer questions with data and facts, rarely discuss uncertain

²¹ ဗမာနိုင်ငံလုံးဆိုင်ရာကျောင်းသားသမဂ္ဂများအဖွဲ့ချုပ်၊ ၂၀၂၃။

information, but if they do so, they provide a disclosure beforehand.

Students' Determination and Prospects for the Future

Today's student movements are determined not only to end the military dictatorship in the country, but also to take further steps towards federalism with clear programs for disarmament and governance. One student leader noted that the struggle should not just end with the term "federal", but rather should open up new ways forward for all the diverse people in Myanmar who desire to confederate. A student leader representing 23 student unions in Yangon, who also performs ideological training to Student Armed Force (SAF) put it this way:

We believe we have to look way further than the Federal Union. The root cause of all these political conflicts is our failure to find a solution in how to constitute our nation. Regarding federalism, we don't want to constrain ourselves to going only that way, to a federation. If everyone accepts, if every entity, that is the citizens of every class, armed forces, revolutionary forces, ethnic nationalities, agree, we have to build a federal state. If not, and these entities need to secure further rights, for their own provisions, and self-determination, then we should go with that (confederation) together. We must not confine ourselves within a federal framework.²²

A common desire that arose after the military coup is "the eradication of the military dictatorship from its roots". However, a representative from the ABFSU stated it aims for more than just the end of dictatorship and expressed it in this way:

The eradication of the military dictatorship means not only the end of this military. It means wiping

²² ASUY Spokesperson, personal communication, August 29, 2022.

out any forces that have roots in fascism and any bloc with such an ethos, such that a situation like this, where we must defend ourselves from an oppressive coup, can never occur again. We must stand up and revolt until those times come.²³

As for fundraisers, despite constant oppression putting their lives at risk, they continue supporting the cause in their own ways, adapting according to the situation—and for some, to resettlement and rehabilitation.

Conclusion

Together, these three research projects explored the influences, challenges and trajectories of student participation in the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

First, our findings show how tactics and connections from earlier worker and student movements enabled mobilization. Preestablished connections, trust and shared political stances and values helped drive the quick emergence of a mass movement immediately following the military coup. However, we also found that some factors hold back the full potential of the revolution. These include variety in political views by revolutionaries, a weakening of solidarity and mutual trust, and poor coordination hindering cooperation. We also observed a lack of inclusive and effective leadership and identify this as an ongoing challenge for the revolution.

Second, our findings also show some of the key differences and similarities between the 2021 and 1988 armed student movements and their contexts. Overall, the 2021 student armed forces gained much more support from the people politically, physically and materially than the ABSDF did. This could be due to the political interests of people, strong communications and connections between the revolutionary forces and the people,

²³ EYUSU (ABFSU) President, personal communication, June 17, 2022.

and political transparency among the people. The other significant difference is that there was collective leadership for all the revolutionary forces under the ABSDF umbrella.

Another is that the students who joined the armed struggle in 1988 under the ABSDF, and other armed forces, were under EAO control, whereas the current student armed forces are scattered with far less collective leadership, with no leader or organization capable of uniting them. This also highlights a lack of leadership and coordination. The case of the ABSDF in 1988 provides important lessons for the current student armed forces to strategically prepare for current and future challenges, which include the importance of having strong physical supply chains, and the new challenges that arise as the duration of the revolution passes two years. These challenges are faced by all revolutionary armed forces and will require strategies to overcome.

Finally, our findings highlight the ongoing struggles and persistence of student revolutionaries. As students ourselves, when beginning our research project we expected to find that youths were the changemakers and sought to document how they are striving to achieve their goals of democracy and human rights. Our study underscored how students' decisiveness, determination and persistence in policy was established throughout their fight for democracy. Students and student unions in Burma/Myanmar have always stood up for what they believe is right, with their beliefs proven correct after the passage of time.

An example is when the UYSU protested against war crimes committed by Myanmar's military during a visiting lecture by Professor William Schabas, and international lawyer who defended Myanmar against genocide charges at the International Court of Justice, at the convocation hall of the University of Yangon on 5 March 2020. They published a strong critique of atrocities committed against Rohingya and ongoing injustice.²⁴ The protest's central statement "Hellhounds still at large" (referring to military impunity) sparked critique and controversy on- and offline. However, after time passed and the coup occurred, most

²⁴ University of Yangon Students' Union, 2020.

critics took their words back and deleted their negative comments from social media.

Myanmar's student unions have long unwaveringly proven their honesty to the people and country while withstanding criticism in fighting for what they believe is right and best for the people and country.

As this research article takes three approaches to understanding a variety of student revolutionary organizations and groups, we hope it provides broad perspectives and food for thought about the different parties in the Spring Revolution to those studying and participating in current and future revolutions. Our research can inform broader revolutionary struggles by considering the nature of Myanmar's democracy movements, successful revolutionary strategies and recurrent challenges, and the ongoing work of building networks and mutual trust. While our motivations for doing this research come from our participation in the revolutionary struggle, throughout our experience conducting this research, we tried to be open-minded, to pay attention to the perspectives of our informants, and to build respect, trust, and mutual understanding in order to achieve valuable insights and reasonable conclusions. This approach enabled us to learn about the movements in detail, such as how they cooperate and what their demands are. In order to successfully conclude research projects like this during this difficult time, we suggest other researchers research topics about which they already have contextual knowledge. They can work closely with respective organizations or communities to not only improve their study, but also to build trust and networks.

It is an honor to conduct this research about student activism and revolutionary participation in Myanmar, which is sometimes overlooked. After doing this research, we not only better understand the strategic importance of students but have a clearer understanding of the disposition and fighting spirit of young revolutionaries.

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