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Introduction

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MYANMAR IN 'CRISIS'

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On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that COVID-19 was a global pandemic. Neighbouring the world's two most populous countries, many feared the potential impacts to people in Myanmar with its limited public resources, health infrastructure and hospitals. Initially, there was some cautious optimism, as the country was able to avoid the high case-positive loads seen in nearby India, Indonesia and the Philippines. However, with its high levels of poverty and associated inequality, concerns about the economic repercussions of the global pandemic, as well as the impact of lockdown restrictions on ordinary people's livelihoods, soon became a more paramount concern.

Amidst the global health and economic crisis, Myanmar's people were gearing up for a general election, the second held since 2011 when the military junta begun to make space for a period of social and political change (Cheesman et al. 2014; Egreteau & Robinne 2015). While the country's State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi campaigned on her unique ability to see the country through the pandemic as the 'mother of the nation', many people did not view the election or the government as playing a significant role in influencing their survival of the pandemic. The government's COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan (CERP) was widely criticised for its inability to reach

the most vulnerable households, especially those in rural areas and the large number of people who work in the informal sector (see Mi Chan 2020). And yet, despite these criticisms and ongoing concerns about the difficulties of holding an election in the midst of a global pandemic, more than seventy per cent of the population came out to vote. While more than ninety parties competed in the election, people overwhelmingly endorsed Suu Kyi and the NLD in a landslide victory that was even greater than 2015 (Lidauer & Saphy 2021).

Less than three months later, on the day that Suu Kyi and other parliamentarians were to take their seats for a second term of government, Myanmar's democratic process and era of reform was brought to an abrupt end by a military coup d'etat. In the early dawn hours, security sector personnel arrested the State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, as well as other incoming Members of Parliament, civil society activists and other critical voices. Citing unfounded allegations of voter fraud in the November elections, an official military statement declared a one-year state of emergency, transferring authority to the commander-in chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, and establishing a "caretaker government", the State Administration Council (SAC).

Despite their shallow attempts to convince people in the country that this was a legitimate constitutional takeover and promises to a return to representative rule after elections (Crouch 2021), resistance to the coup was spontaneous and erupted across all corners of Myanmar. As people across the country woke to the news in the early hours of 1 February 2021, some rushed to the morning market to stock up on basic goods in fear of the unknown, while others stayed at home, in a deep sense of shock. But within a matter of days, people came out en masse, growing by the tens of thousands every day, demanding the restoration of democracy and the release of elected leaders and political activists. Led by healthcare workers, educators and labour unionists, a powerful Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) soon emerged, effectively shutting down most government services, including from education, transportation and healthcare. A series of sham charges aimed to discredit and delegitimise Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD showed how the military's leaders saw her removal from public office as the death of the pro-democracy movement.[1] However, led by the tech-savvy Generation Z, women activists, ethnic civil society leaders and labour unionists, protestors soon galvanised around more revolutionary goals: including calls to abolish the 2008 Constitution, to create a constitution

for a genuine federal democracy and to end all kinds of authoritarianism, including discrimination against women and other marginalised groups (see Jordt et al. 2021).

Building off a deep history of creative acts of resistance including both "old and new repertoires of contention" (Egreteau 2022), the initial days of the protests had a hopeful, carnival-like atmosphere. From the busy streets of Yangon and Mandalay, to the distant hills of Naga and Shan state and down the coast line of Mon and Tanintharyi, live coverage from citizen journalists showed tens of thousands of young men and women coming out in various kinds of costumes and dress to represent different identities. From symbolic gestures like the coordinated beating of cooking pots at 8pm every night to ward off evil spirits,[2] to the three fingered salute of the dystopian Hunger Games movies, to the htamein protest on International Women's Day in symbolic defiance of the patriarchal values of the military establishment (Malar, Chambers & Elena 2023), social creativity flourished in ways which aimed to "ridicule and expose the weakness of the regime" (Egreteau 2022, 5). While 1988 revolutionary slogans and songs and Gandhian-inspired 'silent strikes' persisted, access to digital and social media also allowed for the diffusion of new and more global forms of contentious collective action, both documenting #whatshappeninginMyanmar and declaring the people's collective desire for a 'Federal Democracy' and 'Self-Determination' (Egreteau 2022; Ryan & Tran 2022).

What began as peaceful, popular demonstrations soon shifted, as the military began to mobilise age-old tactics of violence to quell the peaceful demonstrations. On 9 February 2021, Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, a nineteen-year-old university student, was shot dead at a protest in Naypyidaw when a bullet pierced her motorcycle helmet. Violence against protestors soon escalated with the security sector opening fire on mass demonstrations, leading to a series of massacres in hot spots of the resistance. A State of Emergency was imposed — cellular service and the Internet were shut down intermittently to prevent community mobilisation, night curfews imposed and licenses for independent media revoked. Reports of night-time raids by security forces increased and disturbing videos started to circulate online too of mounting violence and torture (Cheesman 2021), providing snapshots into war crimes and crimes against humanity (see Fortify Rights 2021; HRW 2021). Houses were burnt down, people shot at point blank range, and hundreds of Generation Z protest leaders, long-

time civil society and democracy activists, journalists and CDMers were arrested and detained, dragged out into the streets and beaten in front of onlookers livestreaming to the outside world.

Despite the escalating violence, the anti-coup movement responded by mobilising themselves with body armour, sling shots, improvised airguns and Molotov cocktails as well as knowledge of how to clean tear gas, build barricades and tend to gunshot wounds. As the number of anti-junta resistance actors were killed, some started to flee to the countryside to take up arms — joining small, local armed resistance groups, with support from long-established ethnic resistance organisations (EROs) (Fishbein et al. 2021). The Karen National Union, the Kachin Independence Organisation, the Karenni National Progressive Party and the Chin National Front (CNF), groups who have long fought for ethnic autonomy and federalism amidst decades of state violence, soon came to shelter tens of thousands of young resistance fighters, providing them with logistical, operational and political support. Urban warfare broke out in Yangon and other cities with bombings, arson and targeted killings, mostly on police, administrative offices and other facilities or informants connected to the regime. Beginning with guerrilla-style acts of resistance, by May these self-styled People's Defense Forces (PDF) grew in number and sophistication, bringing the country's brutal civil wars to encompass large parts of the central Bamar heartland and areas which hadn't seen conflict in decades, including Sagaing and Magwe Regions.

Coalescing around the military as 'common enemy' (in Burmese, *bone yan thu*), a groundswell of solidarity helped to unite different communities across the country. New revolutionary political groups and movements flourished as part of what became popularly referred to as the "Spring Revolution". Shortly after the coup, NLD MPs-elect from the 2020 election formed the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). In addition to the powerful CDM movement which helped to bring the functioning of basic state administration functions to a halt, more radical groups emerged such as the General Strike Committee (GSC) and the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSC-N), calling for a more radical restructuring of Myanmar's politics. In March, representatives from EROs, strike committees, labour unions, activist networks and civil society groups formed the National Unity Consultative Committee (NUCC). This began to build a consensus-based platform for dialogue on the design of a Federal Democracy Charter and a political roadmap towards a genuine

federal democracy, with a high degree of decentralisation and recognition of collective ethnic rights, customs and ownership of resources (Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung and Khun Noah 2021).[3] In April the cabinet of the National Unity Government (NUG) was constituted by the CRPH, made up primarily of deposed members of the ruling NLD party, but also a more revolutionary set of ethnic and civil society actors, with aims to overthrow the junta through both dialogue and, importantly, armed resistance. With the growth in armed PDF movements across the country, in September 2021 the NUG declared a 'defensive war', breaking with Aung San Suu Kyi's age-old principle of non-violent struggle against military authoritarianism (Selth 2021).

More than two years after the coup, the military is yet to consolidate power and it lacks control over much of the country. On the one year anniversary of their 'defensive war' in September 2022, the Acting President of the NUG, Duwa Lashi La, claimed that the resistance has effective control over more than half of the country, including those areas controlled by EROs (Irrawaddy 2022). An analysis from the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar (SAC-M), a group of independent human rights experts, also echoed claims from the NUG that they have "effective control" over more than fifty percent of the country (SAC-M 2022). While these claims are based on unreliable estimates, even the military itself admits it has lost control in large parts of the country, with its planned 2023 election postponed due to issues regarding voter registration and a surge in 'subversive activities' by the resistance. Even though the military is far-better equipped with modern weapons and aircraft from Russia and China, recruitment is falling and soldiers continue to defect (Kyed & Ah Lynn 2021; Thinzar Shunlei Yi 2022). Access to drone technology has also enabled the growing number of local PDF groups to step up resistance against the military (Kyi Sin 2023) and alliances with EROs are expanding and deepening.[4]

Even in areas where the military maintains a modicum of control, members of the resistance continue to carry out random, creative, guerilla-style protests in the streets, as well as other creative acts of protest (see Frontier 2022a). Despite efforts from the regime to censor and block acts of protest on the Internet, artists, graphic designers, writers, poets, cartoonists, musicians and filmmakers also continue to use their work to express dissent to the coup and highlight the injustices of the brutal security personnel, with social media abound with illustrations, poetry and protest music (PEN 2021). Despite a lack of money, equipment and training, the armed

resistance too is still strong and expanding its control, withstanding some of the most ruthless counterinsurgency campaigns ever conducted by the military (Nachemson 2022). However, as part of the military's response to the resistance, civilians are bearing the brunt of atrocities in both rural and urban areas.

As of February 2023, regime forces have killed more than 2900 anti-coup activists, including at least 377 children (AAPP 2023). Nearly 18,000 people have been arbitrarily arrested, with more than 13,000 still in prison, and many subject to torture (Ibid.). Drawing on age-old scorched-earth tactics used against ethnic nationality communities, more than 55,000 homes have been destroyed in arson attacks by junta forces since the coup (Irrawaddy 2023; see also Kelly et al. 2021). Large areas of paddy have also been occupied and destroyed by the military as part of their counter-insurgency missions in traditional rice-growing regions like Sagaing (Frontier 2022b). With military support from Russia and China, air strikes too have become one of the deadliest weapons of the military, targeting both resistance strongholds and civilian areas including an elementary school, hospitals, churches and a music concert in Kachin State.

Analysis of satellite imagery, eyewitness accounts and military planning documents reveal the devastation inflicted on communities, with hundreds of thousands forced to flee to neighbouring India and Thailand amid raids, air strikes, arson, massacres and countless other atrocities (Kelly et al. 2021). Ethnic communities living in resource-rich frontier states are further made vulnerable by a growth in armed groups and resource extraction activities. Following historical processes of "dispossession, enrichment and violence" (Sarma et al. 2022: 3), the violent reimposition of military rule has drastically undermined the civic space for environmental and climate justice actors (Chambers & Kyed 2023), which during the 2011–2020 reform period provided some degree of protection to customary lands and the environment (CAT 2022; Sekine 2021). In the absence of oversight mechanisms, civil society organisations report a rapid increase in unregulated mining, which is polluting waterways, decimating forests, destroying mountains, and causing landslides and changes to fragile ecosystems (ABIPA 2023). In addition to threatening local land rights and livelihoods, junta-led plans to revive controversial hydropower dams and palm oil plantations will heavily disturb important riverine ecosystems and destroy natural forests (Ibid.; see also Suhardiman et al. 2017).

Like former military leaders, the junta has also "armed itself with new

repressive laws", including removing "basic protections of freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and privacy" (Strangio 2021). For those that remain in areas controlled by the SAC, it remains extremely dangerous to speak out for fear of imprisonment, torture, or death. As Penny Edwards, Kenneth Wong and Ko Ko Thet (2022: 179) write in the introduction to a recent literary collection:

> In Myanmar today, the simplest utterance is punishable as the defamation of the state. A song, a poem, a music video, an elegy are all open invitations to a cowardly regime to pursue their authors with impunity.

Official retribution for political and expressive acts builds off British-era codes and laws, including imprisonment without trial, torture and unlawful detention as part of a historical tradition of what they describe as maintaining 'rule of law' (see Cheesman 2016). Many of those who have stood trial have been denied access to lawyers and relatives and the death toll of people in custody is also rising, with at least 300 people killed in formal detention settings. In a move that shocked the world, the application of the death penalty has also been invoked for the first time in decades. In July 2022, long-time political activists and former parliamentarians, Ko Jimmy and Ko Phyo Zeya Thaw, were executed, alongside two others for their participation in the revolution and also denied funeral rites (Seinenu M. Thein-Lemelson 2022).

On the two year anniversary of the coup, more than one million people are internally displaced and an additional one million refugees and asylum seekers are living in neighbouring countries (UNHCR 2022), the majority of which remain in a precarious legal limbo often at risk of arrest, detention and deportation, and unable to return home, access services or resettle to other countries. As highlighted by the new Yangon Stories website, violence also takes other forms, including through forced evictions and arson both as a form of collective punishment, but also (re) territorialisation.[5] The humanitarian crisis is also compounded by the ongoing economic impacts of COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. Myanmar's currency continues to depreciate and prices for food, fuel, fertilisers and basic household goods have skyrocketed, forcing many into poverty (Soe Nandar Linn 2023).[6] In this context, where more than seventy per cent of people rely on the agricultural sector for their livelihoods, farmers are taking on more debt and reducing the amount of spending on food consumption and other everyday living costs, including education and health (Aung

Tun 2022; Griffiths 2022). Wealthy cronies and medium-sized businesses are transferring their assets outside of the country and people are leaving the country in droves, desperate to find jobs elsewhere.

Despite the escalating and intersecting forms of crisis, the international response to the coup has been disappointing, focused primarily on repeated condemnations of violence and calls for a return to democracy. As the political and humanitarian crisis deepens and atrocities against civilians increase, in December 2022, the United Nations Security Council adopted its first resolution on Myanmar in 74 years, denouncing the military's ongoing use of violence and rights violations and urging for the release of political prisoners. In the same month, President Biden signed the US government's National Defense Act (NDAA), which allows for non-lethal American assistance and technologies to be delivered to ERO, PDFs and the NUG. In February 2023, a new round of sanctions targeting members of the junta and its economic entities was imposed by the United States, the European Union, Canada and the United Kingdom. Australia too, announced its first round of sanctions, targeting sixteen members of the SAC and the military conglomerates Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited and the Myanmar Economic Cooperation. Despite the significance of these symbolic gestures, they remain largely that — symbolic and performative, with little effect on the military. Indeed, despite the courage shown by the revolutionary actors in Myanmar, they receive little support from foreign governments (in stark contrast to the well-funded Ukranian resistance). Instead, the international community is relying on the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to push forward with dialogue with the regime and calls for a 'return to democracy'.

While it appears that the military has not changed much over the last decade, the country and its people certainly have. The opening of political space afforded by Myanmar's changes over the 2010's saw a blossoming of civil society networks around various issues, which have become core causes of the pro-democracy movement — including the need for gender equality, labour rights, environmental protections and better representation for ethnic nationalities and indigenous communities. Indeed, for many people now guiding the discussions on the federal charter there is no returning to the 'status quo'. Spearheaded by strike groups, ethnic activists, EROs and other known critics of the NLD, one of the more interesting dynamics to emerge out of the coup is that the fight against the military has become a revolutionary struggle for a more democratic, united and inclusive

Myanmar — establishing a genuine federal democratic union where all people, regardless of their ethnicity or religion, are treated equally. Not only has the coup highlighted the fragile nature of the previous power-sharing arrangement between the civilian government and the military, but it has brought to the fore the work of the many activists that the NLD government also tried to silence and ignore.

In the midst of the current political crisis, it is sometimes easy to look at the ten years prior to 2021 with rose-tinted glasses. However, scholarship written in the period immediately before the pandemic and the coup already began to identify and analyse political and social problems that endured through the so-called "transition" years. While there were many things changing in Myanmar over this period, the legacies of military rule and their ongoing role in politics continued to stymy reforms in multiple and complex ways. As explored in our previous volume, *Living with Myanmar* (Chambers et al. 2020), ordinary people faced significant challenges in their everyday lives, and reform in key sectors, such as around land rights, education and gender equality, faced an uphill battle (see e.g. Khin Khin Mra and Livingstone 2020). While much of the former censorship regime was lifted, allowing for an era of critical journalism and literary creativity, both the military and the NLD government continued to use colonial-era laws to silence activism and dissent. The economy did indeed open up and change life for many. However, Myanmar remained one of the poorest countries in the world and the majority of people continued to rely on everyday "survival tactics" in order to get by (Thawnghmung 2019: xvii). As access to mobile, phones, electricity, and clean water steadily increased, there was also greater inequality and debt remained a significant issue for many households. In this way, the potential to enact aspirations and ideals continued to be determined by unequal access to resources, the claims and actions of "moral authorities" (Chambers & Cheesman 2019), the consequences of intersectional inequalities, as well as different histories of personal and community struggle.

Other important scholarly works that have been released since the coup also document the trends outlined above. Underpinning the structural changes occurring in Myanmar, there remained deeply entrenched structural inequalities, especially for women and girls (Hedström & Olivius 2023). After decades of brutal civil wars, the peace process too, was also falling apart, hampered by the military-designed 2008 Constitution, which effectively preserved a strong central state and provided very limited

powers to ethnic states, leaders or their goals of federalism (Bertrand et al. 2022, 2). Indifferent to the plight of ethnic nationality communities and the ongoing violence inflicted on them by the military, after getting into power Suu Kyi and her party failed to promote and consolidate a common national identity. In Kachin and Shan states, armed conflict intensified, and in Rakhine state, decades of state-based persecution against Muslims and the Rohingya culminated in a genocide (O'Brien & Hoffstaedter 2020). Even in areas where ceasefires were in place, resource rich frontier areas experienced "increased militarisation and new forms of depletion and dispossession" (Hedström, Olivius & Zin Mar Phyo 2023, 180; see also Sarma et al. 2022), showing how Myanmar's transitionary era was "never uniform or entirely progressive" (Frydenlud & Wai Wai Nu 2023, 118). And yet, there is no denying that the effects of both COVID-19 and the coup have been profound, unleashing new forms of instability and crisis in all aspects of life.

MYANMAR IN CRISIS: VOLUME CONTENTS

This volume is centered around the theme of crisis. Each chapter focuses on one of three interrelated themes: on the concept of crisis, a state in crisis, an economic crisis and international relations in crisis. In Chapter Two, Khin Zaw Win reflects on the language of crisis and what it means to live in Myanmar within what outside political analysts often refer to as a 'post-coup crisis'. He helps to bring to light both the tragedy of the situation and its possibilities. He also situates what he refers to as a "state of flux" within an historical arc of ongoing crises and a failed nation-state building process. From Khin Zaw Win's view, this process goes back to the colonial era, was entrenched under decades of military rule and continued under the NLD. He reflects on 'what went wrong?' in the lead up to the coup and argues that in light of both the violence inflicted on Myanmar by the military junta and the revolutionary movement itself, "the country will never go back to the pre-coup state of affairs" and that we must instead prepare "for an entirely new landscape".

In Chapter Three, Morten Pederson examines Myanmar's post-coup crisis in politics, including the face of the new junta, the response from the people, the displacement of the NLD from the political field and the resurgence of EROs. Pederson argues that the armed radicalisation of the grassroots resistance, coupled with a growing alliance between

younger leaders and EROs fundamentally decenters Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD, towards a more revolutionary politics with "potentially far-reaching consequences for the future of the Burmese state", including a more inclusive, just and tolerant society. He also reflects on the causes of the coup and prospects for a resistance victory, arguing that while the military has a range of tactical advantages, including superior weapons technology, the widespread popular support for PDFs and EROs allows for a more hopeful analysis. Indeed, in the absence of support from the international community, the resistance continues to operate largely with material support from various diasporic communities and a vast network of underground sources of funding from people within the country.

Reflections on the longue-duree of crisis in Myanmar continue in Chapter Four by Tomas Martin & U Win, who argue that the multiple crises affecting the country are "neither unique nor exceptional". Through an examination of prison life under COVID-19 and the coup, they argue that "the experience of crisis is not aberrational, but rather a condition of everyday life for prison actors" that has been ongoing for many decades. Drawing on Henrik Vigh (2008), who argues that scholars should understand the countless struggles that structurally vulnerable people faces as "crisis in context", Martin & U Win's focus on prisoners during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the immense brutality of the Myanmar state justice system which has always used tactics of violence to inflict fear and rule the population.

Section II focuses on the theme of a 'state in crisis', examining the impacts of the coup and the diverse set of revolutionary stakeholders that have come out of the Spring Revolution. In Chapter Five, Nicola Williams examines the contested nature of state authority in the post-coup context and ongoing deliberations and tensions around nation building amongst the pro-democracy movement. Williams argues that revolutionary groups' ongoing efforts to design a federal democratic system have potential to set the stage for a more inclusive Myanmar. However, born off the back of decades of centralised military rule, civil conflicts and long-running divisions between Bamar elites and ethnic nationality communities and leaders, she suggests that the current conversations led by the NUG, NUCC, EROs and other revolutionary groups, also run the risk of further entrenching "identities and relational dynamics shaped during military rule". She suggests that while the military may be capable of winning tactical-level battles and has consolidated control over the central state

apparatus, subnational and local authority has become more complex and contested than ever before, including in the Bamar heartland.

In Chapter Six, Kim Jolliffe takes a deep dive into some of these emerging governance dynamics as different revolutionary groups secure control over newly-won territories. Jolliffe shows that where the SAC has lost control in large parts of the country, old and new revolutionary groups are not only focused on armed resistance, but also expanding and establishing critical governance functions, including education, healthcare, police, municipal and justice services. He contends that in the context of long-running civil wars and a military state that has always treated services and inclusion "as an afterthought", the implementation of non-state administration systems and social services has the potential to "address the root causes of Myanmar's protracted conflicts and human rights crises". Further, in putting a model of decentralised governance into practice he argues that these emerging governance dynamics from below could be the "seeds" of a more "peaceful and democratic future".

In Chapter Seven, Michael Dunford looks at the heterogenous nature of the revolutionary movement, examining the enormous repertoire of non-violent resistance tactics embedded within the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). In addition to examining well-known CDM actors like teachers which have helped to bring the functioning of basic state administration functions to a halt, Dunford draws attention to the 'tactical creativity' of the CDM and how, in the early weeks after the coup, this helped to allow a space for less radical anti-coup actors to "operate and contribute to the resistance". While much of the political commentary and analysis of Myanmar's current political crisis focuses on the armed resistance and their ability to compete with the junta, Dunford highlights the important role played by the CDM as part of a 'three-part strategy' to defeat the military. Drawing on the concept of "the politics of domination" (Chakrabarty 2007; Foucault and Ewald 2003), Dunford argues that the heterogeneous nature of the CDM movement "has helped to solidify an anticolonial public politics of resistance" which ultimately has the potential to displace the military, and its enduring "politics of violent domination".

Section III is focused on the theme of 'economic crisis' and looks at the role played by both the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup in wreaking havoc on people's lives and their ability to make a living. In Chapter Eight, Linda Calabrese, Maximiliano Mendez-Parra and Laetitia Pettinotti

from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) examine the 'issues and prospects for recovery' in Myanmar, as a result of the impacts of the global pandemic and the coup. Providing an overview of how Myanmar's economy changed over the course of the 2010's, they give a detailed analysis of how the pandemic, affected formal and illicit trade, foreign investment, migration and remittances and development assistance and finance, as a result of travel bans and border controls, supply chain disruptions and other factors. Exploring Myanmar's potential for 'Building Back Better' in the wake of the global economic slowdown, they argue while the former NLD government's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan (CERP) had the potential to "kickstart the economy", it fundamentally lacked an explicit environmental and gender-sensitive approach, which undermined its goals for inclusive growth. The authors argue that in the context of the military takeover, "the potential for recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic is now severely limited", ultimately leaving Myanmar's people extremely vulnerable.

In Chapter Nine, Mie Mie Kyaw gives an intimate portrayal of the impacts of the global pandemic through the lives of fishing communities, exploring the negative effects of various lockdown orders to try and curb the spread of COVID-19. Building off in-depth qualitative and survey-based research in Kyauk Myaung, a fishing community on the Irrawaddy river on the border of Sagaing and Mandalay Regions, she highlights the devastating impacts of restrictive measures, which "effectively cut off the incomes of local fishermen overnight". She shows that the COVID-19 control measures in these communities led to significant food shortages in the majority of households, with female-headed households disproportionately affected. She argues that the growing livelihoods crisis also resulted in an increase in Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) fishing, which have much longer-term consequences for the fragile ecosystem of the Irrawaddy river and therefore, the future of local fishing communities country-wide.

In Chapter Ten, Htwe Htwe Thein and Michael Gillan take a closer look at the impacts of the coup on Myanmar's economy and the response of international investors and the business community. From tourism to foreign investment and agricultural production, they show how the violent imposition of military rule has impacted all sectors of the economy and effectively ensured the "rapid disintegration" of reforms put into place in the 2010s. Given the degradation of the business and investment environment under the SAC and the fact that military still fails to maintain

control over much of the country, they argue that foreign investment is only likely to decrease in the coming years, with increasing reliance on China. They suggest that while widespread calls for international economic and trade sanctions are important and do put pressure on the regime, ultimately Myanmar's economic prospects will be shaped by the conflict between the military and the people, and their demands to finally rid the country of the barbarous leaders and their hold over the economy.

Section IV is devoted to 'international relations in crisis', exploring the interaction between the Myanmar military, foreign governments and regional and international bodies. In Chapter Eleven, Andrea Passeri and Hunter Marston, provide an in-depth historical examination of the Myanmar's military and civilian leaders commitment to a "neutral and non-aligned foreign policy" since independence and how this shaped the country's international relations over the course of the 2010's and now since the coup. They argue that under President Thein Sein (2011–2016) there was a definite shift in foreign policy, which sought a progressive reintegration in the international community through emphasis on regional and global multilateralism and a diversification of economic partnerships. By contrast, in the wake of the military's brutal 'clearance operations' against the Rohingya in 2017, the resultant actions of the NLD government, Suu Kyi and the military, helped to fuel a "siege mentality", effectively bringing an end to "this proactive era of global diplomacy". They argue that the international response to the brutal military coup has only further entrenched the general's resolve towards a reactive and inward-looking form of negative neutralism as they "prioritise efforts to eradicate domestic unrest".

In Chapter Twelve, Nicholas Coppel examines the diverse range of responses from foreign governments and international and regional bodies in response to the coup. Coppel draws on his long-term experience working for the Australian government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), including as Ambassador to Myanmar from 2015–2018, highlighting the challenges for foreign ministries in navigating the deteriorating political situation and the "tensions between contact and legitimation". Coppel argues that despite repeated calls from the resistance movement to 'save Myanmar' and for more targeted support such as seen in Ukraine, foreign ministries and international institutions outside of ASEAN do not realistically expect to "produce change within Myanmar". Rather, most foreign governments and international bodies

are deeply constrained by the international system, and ultimately unable to do much beyond issuing statements, targeted sanctions and providing humanitarian assistance. He further agues that "channels of communication with the military council are necessary" and that, despite concerns that it confers legitimacy on the regime, the international community will likely continue to call for dialogue with the regime, especially through ASEAN.

ON CRISIS

I want to conclude this introduction by reflecting on language and the implications of using certain kinds of terminology. Language is important and the way we describe things matters. As noted by political analyst Matthew Arnold (2022), in comments on the junta's ongoing preparation for what they call an 'election': "this isn't just about semantics. It is about establishing the factual basis for what is transpiring in reality". And indeed, as Arnold argues, if we use the term 'election' to describe the military's sham political event through which they are planning to try and legitimise their actions, then we allow them to co-opt the language of democracy and to undermine the revolutionary goals of the Myanmar people. The chapters in this volume also reflect changes in language, such as the use of 'ethnic resistance organisations' by most authors over the use of 'ethnic armed organisations' — a term which fundamentally ignores both the history, governance mechanisms and institutionalisation of many of these politically armed ethnic groups, mobilised around the protection of ethnic nationality peoples' rights. Some of the authors have also chosen to use the term 'Sit Tat' to refer to the military, rather than 'Tatmadaw' which directly translates as 'royal armed forces' (Aung Kaung Myat 2022) — a term which neither reflects ordinary civilians' views of the military, nor how they are refer to it in common parlance (see also Desmond 2022).

We have titled this volume *Myanmar in Crisis* to reflect the various and intersecting forms of crisis that have come out of both the global COVID-19 pandemic and the coup. In 2022, Collins Dictionary declared 'permacrisis' word of the year — "An extended period of instability and insecurity, especially one resulting from a series of catastrophic events" (Bushby 2022). Given the scale of human tragedy, this term seems relevant to Myanmar. Indeed, since the coup, headlines about Myanmar often use the language of crisis to convey the serious of the situation and to compel a response. In an attempt to put pressure on regional and international

leaders to do more while efforts are focused on the war in Ukraine, opinion pieces often reflect on Myanmar as a "neglected" or "forgotten" crisis (Jones 2023; Kamal et al. 2023). In the context of the ongoing violent campaigns of terror targeting civilian areas there is also a "healthcare and humanitarian crisis" (Nora 2023; Su Myat Han et al. 2021) and a growing "mental health crisis" (Artingstoll 2023).

Myanmar people too, use the language of crisis. As one of my friends commented on Facebook in August 2022:

> Pandemic
> Coup d'etat
> Civil Wars
> Economic collapse
> Natural disasters
> Food shortage and the coming of famine
> …
> Any more crisis??
> You name it, we've got it…[7]

This reflection captures the sentiment of many people both from and living in Myanmar. Environmental activists talk of the four kinds of 'C crises' facing Myanmar's people — COVID, Coup, Conflict and Climate Change. For Generation Z, there is also a crisis in the education system and a crisis of opportunities. As Michael Dunford and Dinith Adikari capture in the concluding chapter, there is a deep sense of sadness and disappointment for the lives of young people and for what has been lost in the last two years as a result of the multiple and extensive crises that are now plaguing the country.

A crisis is also reflected in Myanmar's academic community and in the contents of this volume. In my work as a co-convenor of three Myanmar Update conferences at ANU and as an editor of its resulting series since 2017, I have fundamentally seen the volume as a way to celebrate and support the voices of Myanmar's academic and scholarly community. This mission is also reflected in the growth in contributions from Myanmar scholars over time and in the diversity of subject matter since its inception in 1990 (see Chambers et al. 2018, 2020; Cheesmen et al. 2012, 2014; Cheesman and Farrelly 2016; Skidmore and Wilson 2007, 2008). Such a change was especially pronounced from 2011 onwards, where after decades of censorship and heavy restrictions, research partnerships and outputs flourished, "contributing to the development of a vibrant and

resilient research sector" (Chambers & Galloway 2020, 18).

In these circumstances, I want to acknowledge the limited number of Myanmar voices in this volume, as a reflection of this crisis. In the wake of the brutal violence inflicted on Myanmar's scholarly and activist community, many of the researchers who had initially signed up to participate in the 2021 Myanmar Update had to pull out of the conference. University lecturers and students joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, while other scholar activists became involved in armed resistance and/or went into hiding. While some were unreachable and in danger, many became engaged in revolutionary politics, for which an academic conference was not a priority. To make matters more difficult, the conference was held in July 2021, right when a deadly wave of COVID-19 hit Myanmar households country-wide, leaving many people caring for loved ones, as the military continued to hold back on supplies to oxygen. Of those who were able to participate in the conference, many did not have the time, energy or capacity to focus on an academic piece of writing, as they concentrated on other more pressing demands, with one contributor forced to pull out as she went underground and sought a way out of the country. However, the language of crisis, while helps to convey the devastation inflicted on different communities in Myanmar, does not solely capture the diversity of people's experiences. As Dunford and Adikari relate in their concluding reflections, "amidst the chaos and despair caused by the coup", there is also "generative potential", including within the Myanmar-focused academic community.

The terminology of 'crisis' is contentious, and scholars have critiqued how and when crisis narratives are deployed, by whom, and with what effects (Roitman 2013). Labels such as 'political crisis' and 'economic crisis' both highlight the urgency of the situation and can expose the internal dynamics and contradictions of social formations (Watts 1983: 33). The language of crisis, however, also flattens the plurality of people's experiences and the multiple set of crises that people have experienced historically and over the course of their lifetimes, as well as in the current period. What, does it mean to experience a crisis in Myanmar, when crisis is not a state of exception, but rather a permanent reality? The crisis narrative embedded in this current moment of Myanmar's history conjures up an oppositional state of normality. And yet, this is not the first coup in Myanmar, and cycles of repression and protest have been at the centre of local politics since time immemorial.

While social and political reforms over the 2010s resulted in significant and tangible changes for some, the legacies of colonialism, military violence, territorialisation and civil conflict remained a constant feature of many people's lives. Indeed, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coup cannot be viewed as a bounded period of instability, which can be contrasted with 'normal life'. As anthropologist Megnaa Mehtta (2020) argues in an article on quotidian care in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh, states of crisis are never objective, but are intimately shaped by one's social emplacement and the intersection of multiple identities. In Myanmar, deeply rooted systems of structural and symbolic violence mean that for many people, different forms of crisis have always been an everyday state of reality — a position which is only amplified by one's ethnic and religious identity, gender and class.

But what does it do to a people and a country when their lives are reduced to crisis and a constant narrative of crisis — what anthropologist Joel Robbins (2013) refers to as "the suffering subject"? What does it mean to live amidst a crisis or multiple crises? What kind of life is possible? Is any kind of life possible? Is there still room for hope, for joy, for laughter and light? Or does crisis, as the term implies, reduce life to merely a state of survival?

This edited volume helps to capture some of the dynamics of crisis affecting people in and from Myanmar, particularly in the wake of the military coup. But with many of our authors writing from safe and privileged positions outside the country, we cannot even begin to imagine nor capture what it means to *live with* these crises, as we pose by the title of this volume. For some people, this current state of crisis is interpreted through a Buddhist cosmological lens and calls for a return to the foundations of living through the dharma, to counter the natural consequences of having an immoral leader in charge of the country (see Frydenlund et al. 2021). For Pentecostal communities, there is also talk of the coming Christ amidst the rapture (Edwards 2022). For many, the multiple crises facing the country also hold revolutionary potential. The storm before the calm of a more hopeful, aspirational and, most importantly, equitable future.

In the conclusion chapter, Dunford and Adikari reflect on the direction that Myanmar-focused scholarship might take out of this conjuncture of crises. They consider how disappointment can lead to hope — not as an abstract affect or emotion, but a means to guiding action and practice.

They also emphasise the growing importance of the decolonial turn in Myanmar research (Chu May Paing and Than Toe Aung 2021; Tharaphi Than 2021). Indeed, even though the military is trying to instil a permanent sense of crisis to justify its own existence and rule, Myanmar's people and its academic community continue to resist in a multitude of ways. As documented in the chapters of this volume, opposition to the junta across the country remains strong, with many civilians, including women and other marginalised groups, vowing to keep fighting the military "until the bitter end" (HI Burma 2022). Amongst the Burma studies academic community too, a revolution has taken root, forcing conversations on power dynamics, positionality and attention to ethical and methodological risks. In the words of one Burmese poet, Pandora, people's ability to survive and adapt also gives cause for hope:

> I get delicate / Each time I shed my skin / Don't you dare think / I am soft / If I change colors / I only want to adapt / To the shifting sand / To the strange waters" (Pandora (translated by Ko Ko Thett) 2022).

Indeed, Myanmar and its people might be living amidst crisis — but it does not define them, nor determine their lives or the revolutionary potential of this particular moment.

Notes

1 At the time of writing in February 2023, Aung San Suu Kyi is facing a thirty-three year prison sentence after a series of closed-court trials including for sedition, corruption, breaching COVID-19 restrictions and breaches of the Official Secrets Act.

2 For a longer discussion on the symbolism and significance of the pots and pans protests see Phyu Phyu Oo (2021).

3 Members of the NUCC have made significant progress, constructing the most democratic and equitable roadmap in Myanmar's history for a future federal democratic state. However, building a shared vision of the future has faced significant obstacles, as historical grievances and ideological fissures re-emerge. Notably absent from these negotiations has been the United Wa State Army (UWSA) and the Arakan Army (AA), two of the strongest armed groups in Myanmar, who have instead sought to unilaterally expand their territorial control and administrative autonomy. Indeed, despite the front of unity amongst divergent stakeholders of the Spring Revolution against the junta, there are still serious questions about the commitment of political Bamar elites to the equality and unity of all peoples in Myanmar.

4 In February 2023, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) announced that they were providing training and weapons support to PDFs, as they seek to recover lost territory and build up their own systems of administrative control (Frontier 2023).
5 See https://www.yangonstories.com/ (accessed 10 February 2023).
6 The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs estimates that at least 17.6 million people are in need of dire humanitarian assistance (UNOCHA 2023).
7 Credit Khin Zarchi Latt, August 2022.

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