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THE SPRING REVOLUTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The Spring Revolution is often described as ‘unprecedented’. Yet, it springs from, is shaped by, and undoubtedly will further reshape a long tradition of popular resistance against repressive rulers. Indeed, to paraphrase Martin Smith (1999, p. 88), resistance is a way of life in Myanmar. This chapter briefly reviews the history of popular resistance since the Independence struggle in the 1940s; it then analyses what is different this time and seeks to explain why. Finally, it considers how the current conflict may change the future politics of Myanmar.

A TRADITION OF POPULAR RESISTANCE

When Aung San and the “Thirty Comrades” left Burma in 1941 to undertake military training in Japan and subsequently founded the Burma Independence Army to fight the British colonial regime, they unwittingly started a tradition of popular resistance against unjust and illegitimate rulers, which has decisively shaped Burma/Myanmar’s modern political

history to the present day.

Historians might argue that Aung San and his 'comrades' themselves drew inspiration from earlier anti-colonial uprisings, such as the Saya San rebellion in the 1930s. However, Aung San's journey to Japan provides a particularly poignant starting point for our story because it links the independence struggle across time to the post-1988 democracy movement, led by his daughter Aung San Suu Kyi, which lives on in the Spring Revolution. That Aung San founded an army and his daughter a democracy party only underscores the central role played by popular resistance in Burmese politics.

The history of popular resistance deserves fuller treatment than we can provide here. However, a few examples of how uprisings, revolts, and rebellions, have defined critical junctures in Myanmar's political development will serve to both substantiate the main thesis of the chapter and map out the analytical terrain that the volume seeks to address as a whole.

The Burma Independence Army first fought with the Japanese Imperial Army against the British colonial forces and later switched sides to help expel the Japanese, before Aung San negotiated with London to secure Burma's independence. The founder of modern Burma/Myanmar and father of the Myanmar Armed Forces, the Tatmadaw, which has ruled the country for much of the post-Independence period, was thus a rebel by any other name.

If modern Burma rose from rebellion, it was soon engulfed by it as well. The first post-independence government, led by the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, was barely seated in Rangoon before it faced a plethora of armed challenges from ideological and ethnic rebels. The Communist Party of Burma was the first group to go underground within a few months of Independence, claiming that the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League had sold out to the British, and fought a four-decade-long insurgency in the countryside before it was effectively defeated in 1989 following a major mutiny within its ranks. The Communist Party was followed closely by the Karen, the Karenni, the Pa-O, and a rapidly growing list of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs)², which fought for autonomy in their traditional ethnic homelands (Smith 1999).

The 1962 military coup, which brought the Revolutionary Council to power, was justified by Ne Win as necessary to prevent the disintegration of the Union in the face of ethnic rebellion and growing demands for

federalism (Smith 1999, p. 196). Yet rather than extinguish the ethnic rebellions in the borderlands, military rule prompted a series of non-violent, popular protests in central Burma, which culminated in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising.

Early student-led protests in 1962 and 1974 had limited goals and were quickly suppressed. However, the much larger 1988 Uprising became the catalyst for a sustained campaign for democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD), which eventually brought the NLD to power after their landslide victory in Myanmar's general election in 2015. The 2007 monk-led Saffron Revolution also delivered a major blow to the military regime, which had long claimed legitimacy as the patron and defender of Buddhism, and may have prompted the State Peace and Development Council to speed up the transition to a post-military government in 2011.

Myanmar, of course, is not unique in having a history shaped by popular resistance. However, it is notable that nearly all major contemporary political organisations in the country were founded as resistance organisations. This includes the Myanmar Armed Forces, which traces its roots to the Burma Independence Army, as well as the NLD, which was founded to carry forward the aspirations of the 1988 protesters, and EAOs, such as the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Organisation, which continue to fight for ethnic autonomy by both military and political means. Even major social organisations like the Sangha and the student movement, have a long and deep history of anti-government political activism.

HOW IS THE SPRING REVOLUTION DIFFERENT?

The Myanmar people may have been revolting against successive repressive rulers for most of the country's modern history—but never quite like this. While the Spring Revolution remains connected to past claims, authorities, and struggles (see Chambers and Cheesman 2024), it represents both a quantitative and qualitative shift in the nature of popular revolt and has come closer to success than at any time since Burma won its independence from Britain in 1948. Not only is the scale of mobilisation and participation unprecedented; so, too, is its social composition and the vision of alternative social and political relations and new forms of

governance legitimacy expressed at both the national and local levels. At the same time, a unique dimension of crisis shapes the Spring Revolution as the 2021 coup and ensuing civil war have triggered extreme economic, social, and humanitarian pressures. Drawing primarily on the insights presented in the present volume, this section illustrates how the Spring Revolution differs from earlier uprisings both in the nature of popular revolt and against the backdrop of these extreme crises.

Quantitative Shifts

The Spring Revolution is the first uprising in Myanmar to truly qualify as a “revolutionary situation”, which Tilly (1978, p. 200) defines as one in which coalitions of contenders advance alternative claims to state authority with broad popular support, which the ruling power cannot suppress. The anti-coup resistance to the post-2021 military junta, formally the State Administration Council (SAC)—later re-branded as the State Security and Peace Commission—comprises a dynamic coalition of political actors. Led by the National Unity Government (NUG) and the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), this coalition seeks to remove the military from politics, abolish the 2008 constitution, and form a federal democratic union. Crucially, it involves military cooperation between some of the longstanding EAOs that have resisted Myanmar’s military regimes for decades and newly formed People’s Defence Forces/Local Defence Forces (PDFs/LDFs). The Spring Revolution also has unprecedented popular support. Unlike previous uprisings, which were often localised or episodic, millions of participants across urban and rural areas, including in the ethnic states, have engaged in protests. Following the coup, more than 400,000 civil servants out of a total of one million refused to return to work. Over two thousand soldiers and police officers also left their duties and joined the disobedience campaign across the country (The Irrawaddy 2021; Kyed 2022; Samuel Hmung, Chapter 3). Led by healthcare workers, educators and labour unionists, this Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) effectively shut down many basic government functions. Within two months of the coup, tens of thousands of protesters fled to the countryside to escape the brutal suppression of the non-violent uprising. Many took up arms, either as self-defence teams or with support from EAOs that have aligned with the Spring Revolution, locally referred to as ‘ethnic revolutionary organisations’ (EROs). In May 2021, the NUG officially labelled the armed

groups operating under its command as PDFs while LDFs continued to operate independently and/or jointly with established EROs. The NUG's later declaration of a "defensive war" in September 2021 marked a decisive break from the non-violent opposition to military authoritarianism championed by NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi (see Selth 2021) as armed conflict spread out across the country. More than five years after the coup, the military has still not consolidated its rule and remains unable to assert control over large parts of the country. Coordination between EROs and PDFs/LDFs has led to major successes, particularly during "Operation 1027" in 2023–24 (see Ye Myo Hein, Chapter 2) with some estimates indicating that the resistance forces now control over half of Myanmar's territory (SAC Myanmar 2024).

The extent of the violence is historic, as full-scale civil war has spread to previously untouched military strongholds in the Bamar heartland. In Chapter 2, Ye Myo Hein argues that the post-coup conflict represents "the most intense and geographically extensive conflict in Myanmar's history since its founding in 1948." His chapter provides a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics among key conflict actors. In addition to tracing the waning influence of the military and the pivotal role of EROs—despite their divergent interests—it highlights the challenges facing the newly-formed resistance forces. Although the unprecedented armed resistance has severely weakened the military and forced the junta into survival mode, it has also created a fragmented and fluid battlefield, with numerous armed groups operating under loose command structures and pursuing sometimes conflicting goals. Despite battlefield and resourcing pressures, resistance forces have maintained momentum. However, Ye Myo Hein warns that sustaining broad and resilient popular support will remain a major challenge. Setbacks in 2025—driven in part by China's exploitation of divisions among resistance forces and its sustained support for the junta—have deepened the prospect of a protracted cycle of violence that, according to Ye Myo Hein, is likely to intensify in the coming years.

Qualitative Shifts

The qualitative transformation of the movement is equally significant. Echoing El-Ghobashy's application of Tilly's concept of a "revolutionary situation" to the Arab Spring in Egypt (2021, p. 30), the Spring Revolution illustrates a fundamental shift in power relations even without a fully

consolidated new political order. This shift is evident when we look at the actors driving the revolution and the ambitions they embody. The formation of the NUG and NUCC represents an organisational innovation that reflects qualitative changes in political coordination. In March 2021, elected NLD parliamentarians, EROs, political parties, civil society groups, labour unions, and ethnic nationality councils came together to form the NUCC. This consensus-based platform represents a unique attempt to develop a common political vision for the country through dialogue, which was formalised in the drafting and adoption of the Federal Democracy Charter (Su Mon Thazin Aung 2022; Ardeth Maung Thawngnhmung and Khun Noah 2021). Established in April 2021 by elected National League for Democracy (NLD) representatives ousted by the coup, the NUG provides an internationally recognised and legitimate leadership for the revolution even if it has limited authority on the ground (see Moe Thuzar, Moe and Htet Myet Min Tun 2022; Renshaw, Takeda and Yamahata 2023). Its inclusion of ethnic nationality groups and its alignment with long-standing ethnic demands for autonomy are reflected in the composition of the cabinet and its commitment to establishing a federal democratic system. This is a marked departure from the NLD's traditional position of pursuing democracy before federalism.

The leadership capacity of both institutions has been questioned, however. Internal disagreements in the NUCC have weakened its political influence (see Aung Ko Ko 2024; Desmond 2024) and delayed the promised transitional constitution. Similarly, although the NUG remains widely popular according to an online survey (Jap and Liu 2024), it has been criticised for being dominated by Bamar NLD members and a tendency to instrumentalise minority interests (Medail and Saw Chit Thet Tun 2024). While some criticisms are personal or politically motivated, others point to a structural issue: the limited pool of experienced political professionals (Nyi Nyi Kyaw 2024).

The most innovative qualitative shift is, arguably, the emergence of a distinct bottom-up, grassroots-driven movement. This echoes Graeber's (2011) idea of a "revolutionary moment" as a lived, collective prefigurative experience of political possibility where people challenge hierarchy from below and begin to enact the world they want through new social relations. While students and young adults formed the backbone of the early resistance, labour unions, women, and ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities were also at the forefront of the protests (Jordt et al. 2021). The

formation of radical, leaderless groups such as the General Strike Committee and the General Strike Committee of Nationalities provides a vivid example of Graeber's idea of a revolutionary moment. Emerging from grassroots networks, they coordinated nationwide strikes and sustained the CDM through horizontal and collective forms of decision-making independent of existing political hierarchies. They created new social relations in real time—the General Strike Committee across class, and the General Strike Committee of Nationalities across ethnic lines—by modelling their egalitarian and inclusive aspirations for a future Myanmar. This briefly created a space in which alternative social and political possibilities were enacted rather than simply imagined.

The CDM itself was also a spontaneous, leaderless (yet leader-rich) outpouring of defiance. In Chapter 3, Samuel Hmung situates the CDM in relation to classic examples of nonviolent struggles, highlighting how it both draws and departs from classic Gandhian civil disobedience actions. Drawing on interviews with CDM participants and supporters, Hmung argues that it is unique in its nature—with a combination of civil resistance and civil disobedience; in its strategies—with a primary repertoire of non-cooperation; and in its leadership—with a grassroots-led decentralised movement structure. He also highlights key debates and tensions, however. While the absence of a unified leadership has made repression more difficult, it has also contributed to fragmentation with numerous grassroots groups pursuing different aims. Engaging in a valuable discussion of who can be considered as a 'CDMer', his chapter shows how these dynamics have generated contention within the movement, with key debates over inclusion and exclusion and the treatment of non-participants.

The CDM has nonetheless been instrumental not only as a tool for hindering the junta-led state but also in sustaining the revolution—from providing essential skills for weapon production (see Kyed and Ah Lyn 2024) to delivering health and education in conflict-affected areas. This has significantly contributed to the legitimacy of local administration initiatives that have emerged organically to fill the state vacuum in resistance-controlled areas. In Chapter 4, Tay Zar Myo Win offers a compelling illustration of the experiential dimension of new political possibilities through an assessment of local governance legitimacy in central Myanmar. He examines the Anyar area, especially Sagaing and Magway regions, which has historically been shielded from the levels of military violence experienced by ethnic states. Following its devastation by junta

attacks since the coup, local groups now play a vital role in meeting public needs in administration and justice beyond armed resistance. Drawing on extensive interviews, Tay Zar Win analyses the evolving multilayered local governance arrangements—formal and informal—in Anyar and explores how resistance groups and communities negotiate authority and legitimacy in this new context. He contends that effective support for state-building in post-conflict Myanmar requires a clear understanding of emerging governance structures, their capacities, and how they interact with local communities.

In Chapter 5, Kyle Nyana and Gerard McCarthy present a detailed analysis of the diverse governance roles of non-state actors, drawing on moral economy and insurgent governance approaches, with a focus on Chin State and Sagaing Region. Based on over 100 interviews conducted by a six-researcher team embedded in local villages and wards between March 2022 and April 2023, it shows how ordinary people navigate authorities and counter-narratives of a “failed state”. Nyana and McCarthy highlight the functional absence of the SAC in these areas, the expansive social role of non-state governance actors, and dynamics of resource mobilisation which underscore the balance between legitimacy, reciprocity and wartime necessity. They conclude by highlighting the need for social and humanitarian aid partners to value existing local mechanisms over centralising governance structures like the NUG.

The Spring Revolution’s qualitative shift is perhaps especially clear in the bottom-up push for profound social transformation, an ambition that directly confronts entrenched hierarchies and discriminatory practices. Applied to revolutions, Badiou’s (2008) concept of the “Event” as an ontological rupture to the existing order highlights how revolutionary actors seek to inaugurate new political truths and forms of collective life that cannot be derived from the existing order. The transformative aspirations of Myanmar’s revolution indicate that such a revolutionary “Event” is occurring in Myanmar. Grassroots activists are pursuing “root and branch” regime change, aiming to dismantle military dominance, abolish the 2008 constitution, and establish a federal democratic union (Prasse-Freeman and Ko Kabyah 2021). Beyond political restructuring, the movement seeks to reconstitute the social and political foundations of the state itself. Recognition of historical injustices against ethnic and religious minorities and calls for advancing social justice and ending patriarchy reflect this qualitative shift (Su Mon Thant 2021; Marlar et al. 2023). Two

chapters assess the transformative character of these aspirations.

In Chapter 6, Aye Lei Tun examines whether the Spring Revolution is meaningfully reshaping gender norms within armed resistance organisations. Through a historically grounded analysis of women's agency in armed struggles, she explores how societal attitudes toward female soldiers differ from those in earlier armed movements in Myanmar. Women's participation has increased on both the military and resistance sides, but under very different conditions. The SAC has drawn women in through forced recruitment and largely assigned them passive roles. In contrast, widespread injustices and oppression have motivated many women to join the ranks of the revolutionary forces, which increasingly place them in active combat positions. Shifts in the gendered division of labour are reflected in women taking on essential roles—from defending communities to weapons production and drone operations. However, despite these advances, male-biased norms, gender stereotypes, and social pressures continue to constrain women's full participation.

In Chapter 7, Lukas Nagel examines the apparent shift in perceptions of ethnic minorities among many in the Bamar majority. Drawing on interviews with eight young pro-democracy Bamar activists and applying a psychological theoretical approach, he shows that some Bamar youth are developing more inclusive out-group perceptions and reimagining national identity in post-coup Myanmar. Nagel uses cognitive dissonance to explain shifts in awareness of Bamar-Buddhist privilege, regret over past indifference to minority grievances and stronger commitments to equality, self-determination, and anti-authoritarian values. He concludes that the coup forced young activists to reconcile long-held narratives about minorities with their new political convictions. This prompted them to reconsider the 'national races' framework (see Cheesman 2015) and to envision a "pan-Myanmar identity based on inclusive citizenship and equality."

The Dimension of Crisis

Beyond the quantitative and qualitative shifts in popular resistance, this volume highlights a dimension of severe crisis which characterises the Spring Revolution (see Chambers and Dunford 2023). Five years after the 2021 coup, extreme economic, social and humanitarian pressures is straining young people's mental health to the point that some see "living

[as] harder than dying” (Myanmar Now 2025), and youth suicide rates are rising at a troubling pace. Two chapters provide context for this crisis.

In Chapter 8, Jared Bissinger presents a snapshot of Myanmar’s post-coup economy. He argues that the economic decline since the coup “marks one of the most rapid and catastrophic periods of economic change in the country’s history,” with an 18% drop in GDP in just one year following the coup. Bissinger examines trends in investment, trade, inflation, exchange rates, public finance, employment, wages and the illicit economy. The effect of the junta’s official exchange rate policy has been particularly disastrous for the economy and a key driver of a year-over-year inflation rate of 32%, which is “one of the most important sources of hardship for people.” Bissinger also reviews post-coup structural changes in the economy, notably major shifts in the nature and capacity of economic institutions and in the “rule of the game”, as Myanmar has moved away from a market-oriented economy towards one increasingly shaped by the military-controlled state.

In chapter 9, Thomas Kean reflects on the impact of the economic collapse on everyday life and how it constrains the choices of people who oppose the regime. While most people support the resistance’s goals, the armed conflict, regime policies, declining community support services, and rising criminality have constrained economic opportunities and, in turn, the resistance’s ability to act. He argues that daily survival has become highly politicised and that decisions that might be seen by others as acceptance of military rule often reflect the tension between people’s political beliefs and their financial capacity to resist. Yet, Kean also shows how many people continue to oppose military rule beyond a simple pro-con narrative. Some engage in what James Scott termed acts of “everyday resistance” (Scott 1985). Even village administrators who are not supporting the resistance, may protect families, just “to avoid unnecessary conflict and suffering”. Many businesses also circumvent the regime’s restrictions, for example, by using the *hundi* informal remittance system to access foreign currencies. As Kean concludes, “None of this should be surprising: these are rational responses to a dysfunctional policy environment.”

Despite the severity of Myanmar’s multiple, intersecting crises, other chapters show that in the humanitarian and education sectors, the revolution has brought forth new opportunities as well. In Chapter 10, Pyae Phyo Maung, Tamas Wells and Anne Décobert examine the “conflict paradox” (Barter and Sumlut 2023) that Myanmar’s extreme humanitarian crisis has

created for local organisations. Drawing on interviews with humanitarian actors, they argue that the coup and the ensuing revolution have both challenged and expanded the agenda of aid localisation—in which local and national actors take an increasingly central role in humanitarian responses (see European Commission 2023). On the one hand, both the regime and the compliance demands and risk aversion of international aid agencies have deeply hampered local aid organisations in their work. Yet on the other hand, they are able to operate more autonomously than international agencies, which often have more restricted access within the country. As a result, large Myanmar humanitarian agencies are increasingly acting as intermediaries between international aid agencies and local groups. This helps shield smaller actors from complex compliance demands while directly challenging international aid systems.

The crisis has also deeply impacted the education sector, with severe impacts on coordination, safety and security, and resources. In Chapter 11, Khaing Phyu Htut and Cecile Medail examine how education aid in the ethnic education sector contributes to peace and social justice in post-coup Myanmar using a justice-oriented analytical lens, the “4Rs framework” (Novelli et al. 2017). This framework highlights the need to address both the “drivers” and the “legacies” of conflict in and through education, using four analytical dimensions: Recognition, Redistribution, Representation and Reconciliation. The case of the Myanmar Education Consortium shows that while more efforts are needed to address the legacies of conflict, education aid can help support peace by building the foundations of a future federal system. Unfortunately, reliance on unstable international aid undermines its transformative potential.

As is often the case with revolutions, the Spring Revolution has generated a paradoxical mix of hope and despair. While unfolding against a backdrop of extreme human suffering, it has at times seemed tantalisingly close to success. In Chapter 12, Ardeth Maung Thawngmung concludes the volume with a discussion of nine hypothetical outcomes of the Spring Revolution, assessing the most likely scenarios in light of the developments following the 2025–26 election. After years of setbacks since the 2021 military coup, the junta was able to regain some strategic momentum in 2025, in part thanks to China’s support, and proceeded with its long-delayed plan to hold nationwide elections. The elections took place in a context of widespread conflict excluding large parts of the country from voting and amid international boycott. Yet, in January 2026,

the military proxy Union Solidarity and Development Party claimed an overwhelming victory. Thawngmung argues that the elections reflect an attempt to consolidate a post-election order that echoes the 2015-led system but retains core features of military rule. As such, she sees little hope for progressive change, although new ceasefire deals may bring some relief in parts of the country.

WHAT MADE THE SPRING REVOLUTION DIFFERENT?

The Spring Revolution shares important continuities with earlier episodes of popular resistance in the country; yet it also departs from them in fundamental respects. This distinctiveness is not incidental but rather stems from cumulative structural transformations that have unfolded over decades. While multiple factors have shaped the characteristics of the present uprising, this section focuses on four key dimensions: the large expansion of civic space, new technology, the growing expectations of the youth in particular, and a cognitive break among the majority Bamar population, which led them to join up with their ethnic cousins to an unprecedented degree.

The rapid inception and widespread mobilisation of both civil and armed resistance in a very short period was made possible by the large expansion of civic spaces before the coup. Unlike previous resistance movements, which were mainly concentrated in the major cities, the current one operates through a highly decentralised grassroots network across the country (see Samuel Hmung, Chapter 3). Although the decade of reform from 2011–2020 had its limitations and failures, Myanmar saw a massive proliferation of civil society organisations, voluntary groups, trade unions, and professional associations, along with political liberalisation, stable growth, and a digital economy. The expansion of civic spaces enabled the creation of networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust—what Robert Putnam (2000, p. 16) called “social capital”—among previously divided communities. These pre-existing networks became a strong “infrastructure for dissent” that helped the population mobilise, sustain, and resist the military junta (Sears 2014). This was perhaps most evident in the many nonviolent groups that were formed during the CDM campaign, street protests, and other forms of demonstrations. The General Strike Committee of Nationalities, for example, was formed and led mostly by Yangon-based ethnic youths and artists who were involved in the youth

policy development process and peace advocacy campaigns for conflicts in Kachin and Rakhine states. Similarly, the General Strike Committee and General Strike Coordination Body were formed with activists from previous uprisings, including the 88-Generation, student unions, and members of political parties, notably the NLD and the Democratic Party for a New Society.

Like many other revolutions and civil resistance movements in the 21st century, the Spring Revolution has also been defined by technological innovation and digital communication (Thurein Lwin et al. 2025; Putra 2024; Kim and Kim 2025). Unlike the 1988 or 2007 uprisings, which relied on physical flyers, radio channels, and word-of-mouth communication, the 2021 anti-coup movement emerged during a time of high-speed internet, social media, and the rise of digital activism. The explosion of mobile connectivity and the popularity of social media like Facebook among the Myanmar population over the decade of reform created a 'public square' that the military could not easily control. Despite strict internet censorship and repression since the early days of the coup, digital tools and social media platforms have been instrumental in shaping and sustaining the revolution through the building of a horizontal movement structure, decentralised financial networks, and engaging with the diaspora and the international community. Not only did social media and secure messaging applications serve as tools for movement organisations, fundraising, and countering the military's propaganda campaigns, but they also enabled the general public to express their shared grievances and fears, facilitating an "insurgent consciousness" that McAdam identifies as necessary for revolt (McAdam 1982, p. 40).

Looking beyond structural conditions, the agency of Generation Z has been a critical factor as well, pushing the revolution to a different level where it is fought over technology and information warfare, countering the military's propaganda campaigns and undermining its usual 'four cuts' strategies: food, funds, intelligence, and recruits. Millions of Generation Z grew up and lived their teenage years during a decade of expanded civic space and economic growth. As their civic space was both physical and virtual (digital), they enjoyed civic liberty, high-speed internet, a sense of global connectivity, and a taste of modern socioeconomic development. This generation viewed the coup not only as unjust but also as an existential theft of their future, which led to widespread fear and anger. James Davies' (1962) "J-curve" explains that when the gap between what the population

expect and what they actually get becomes intolerable, it triggers revolt and resistance. This “J-curve” effect was most visible among Gen Z, who saw the coup as a sudden, sharp reversal after a period of significant progress. Tellingly, the protests slogans “Give us back our future” (in Burmese, *ngā-doh a-nā-gat, ngā-doh pyan-pāy*) and , “You can’t do it in 2021 as you did in 1988” (in Burmese, *88 ka a-cho-dway, 2021 mhā lar-ma-loat-ne*) have become popular among young protestors and resistance fighters. When their peaceful demands and protests were met with brutal repression, they adopted a ‘zero-sum’ mentality and committed to defending their future and settling for nothing by declaring: “No room for negotiation for the blood debt” (in Burmese, *thawy-kyway-mhā sway-nway-sa-yā-ma-shi*). While the military’s brutal campaigns against nonviolent protesters may have radicalised many young people, this psychological shift was the primary catalyst for the transition from civil to armed resistance across the country in a very short period of time.

Crucially, this massive cognitive shift among the younger generations, especially among Bamar youths, led to the breakdown of ‘Bamar chauvinism’ and greatly weakened the military’s long-standing claim to be the sole protector of the Bamar-Buddhist heartland against ethnic insurgents. In the early months of the revolution, many Bamar politicians and protestors publicly apologised to ethnic minorities over social media for their past silence regarding the military atrocities in ethnic areas and indirect and direct complicity with Bamar-centric nationalism (Medail and Saw Chit Thet Tun 2024). This unprecedented psychological shift within the Bamar majority led to their widespread support and participation in both nonviolent and violent movements. This has not only redefined inter-ethnic relations in the post-coup era but also hit the military where it is most vulnerable by undermining its traditional recruiting ground, moral legitimacy, and control over the country’s vast territories.

The massive mobilisation and participation of civil servants have been another distinctive feature of the Spring Revolution. Historically, civil servants have been largely apolitical and inactive in political and social affairs. Yet, this time, civil servants initiated and led the CDM, which emerged as the very first major anti-coup action and helped pave the way for the wider Spring Revolution. The explanation of why civil servants became first-movers at the centre of the high-stakes anti-coup campaign may lie in the bureaucratic reforms that came along with political liberalisation in the 2010s. Both the Union Solidarity and Development Party and the

NLD governments took significant steps to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of the country's one-million-strong bureaucracy, which had long been known primarily for corruption and incompetence. A significant increase in salary, staff benefits, and capacity building attracted many young graduates from the middle class. Unlike their seniors who served under previous military regimes, these new recruits had been exposed to constitutional and democratic rights, economic growth, and functioning governance. As for Generation Z at large, the coup came as a shock that not only disrupted their professional careers and dreams for the future but also threatened to exploit their labour and profession as a pillar of the military dictatorship.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SPRING REVOLUTION FOR THE FUTURE OF MYANMAR POLITICS?

The struggle for Myanmar's future continues. Yet the past five years have fundamentally changed politics in the country with lasting consequences. Much of this is positive, but there will be new challenges too.

The Spring Revolution has blown up Myanmar's otherwise long relatively static political landscape: numerous new organisations have emerged, and the balance of power among them has shifted. It is hard to predict how the pieces fall after the war ends and normal politics returns. However, three things seem fairly clear. First, the Myanmar Armed Forces has been greatly diminished as a political institution and is unlikely to be able to dominate future post-war politics to the extent that it has in the past. The spread of armed resistance in the Bamar heartland has greatly weakened the claim of the military to be holding the country together, and thus the ideological glue that has long kept the institution itself united. Although it can be difficult to see from the outside, there are bound to be fissures within the officer corps, which will make it harder for them to agree on a way forward in peacetime, when the imperative of survival no longer forces them to stay together behind their leader.

The centre of civilian politics has fractured too. Without its leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, and facing a very different political environment, the NLD has faded into the background and is now just one voice among many opposed to military rule. With numerous new claimants to political

leadership and public legitimacy, the future political landscape will be more pluralistic.

Third, the balance of power between the centre and the periphery has shifted dramatically. Most of the EAOs are stronger today than they were at the time of the 2021 coup and will be in a better position in the future to effectively push their long-standing demands for ethnic autonomy. There are also new stirrings of regionalism in central Myanmar—particularly in Sagaing and Magway regions.

The weakening of the centre has facilitated experimentation with new forms of governance in many parts of the country. Whereas both military and civilian politics have long been characterised by an over-centralisation of power in the hands of a few top leaders, emerging political authorities, such as the Interim Executive Council of Karenni State, the Sagaing Federal Unit Interim Government, and the Kawthoolei Governing Council, are all calling for bottom-up federalism and working to mobilise and include local communities in governance to an unprecedented degree. This shift toward a bottom-up, more inclusive and participatory governance model is arguably the most revolutionary element of the Spring Revolution.

While the future of Myanmar politics looks promising, there will be new challenges as well. The Spring Revolution has radicalised both sides of the conflict. Many resistance leaders insist that the decade of post-military government from 2011–20 proved the impossibility of compromise and power-sharing. Thus, they demand the banishment of the military from politics as a condition for any peace deal. The generals are equally unyielding. Even when the situation looked the worst for them during “Operation 1027” in 2023–24, they refused negotiations and instead escalated the violence. The blatant manipulation of the 2025–26 elections sent the same message. With neither side willing to contemplate anything other than victory and subjugation of the enemy, the prospects of ending the war are poor.

Equally worrying, the persistent efforts by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD since 1988 to remove violence from Myanmar politics have suffered a major setback. The next generation of political leaders is likely to emerge from armed resistance organisations, having been schooled in the use of violence for political goals. The normalisation of assassinations of political opponents over the past five years is of particular concern. With the country now awash with weapons, the violence risks carrying over into peacetime.

The resurgence of several major ethnonationalist projects led by powerful armed organisations—most notably in Rakhine and Shan State—is likely to leave a mixed legacy. On the one hand, it improves the chances that future central governments will make genuine concessions to long-standing ethnic demands for greater equality and autonomy. On the other hand, it increases the risk that steps towards formalising a new federal system—which would divide land and power more permanently—could unleash new local armed conflicts.

Finally, the Spring Revolution has dramatically re-oriented Myanmar's international relations. The shift to armed resistance has marginalised Western governments and international organisations like the UN, which have struggled to find principled ways to engage in Myanmar under war conditions. By contrast, China's more pragmatic engagement has greatly strengthened its leverage over both sides in the war. The balance between liberal and illiberal international influences in Myanmar has thus shifted decisively in favour of the latter, to the benefit of the military regime and the detriment of the resistance. While China may be the only international actor with the power to bring the different sides to the negotiation table, the results so far are not encouraging for the prospects of sustainable peace, never mind democracy and human rights.

Notes

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- 2 The term 'ethnic armed organisations' (EAOs) refers to ethnic armed groups that have historically resisted Myanmar's military regimes, whereas 'ethnic revolutionary organisations' (EROs) denote those currently aligned with the Spring Revolution. Given this chapter's historical perspective, we use both terms depending on the context.

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